Dependent leaders
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This dissertation addresses challenges that middle managers may face due to their unique position in organizations as homo universalis (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994; Osterman, 2008; Tinline & Cooper, 2016). A middle manager can be defined as an individual who operates at an intermediate level of management (Anderson, 2014) and hence as an individual who both gives and receives leadership (Harding, Lee, & Ford, 2014; Osterman, 2008; Stoker, 2006; Wooldridge, Schmid, & Floyd, 2008). In particular, middle managers are defined as linking pins between top management and frontline employees. According to Mintzberg, “what organizations really have are the outer people, connected to the world, and the inner ones, disconnected from it, as well as many so-called middle managers, who are desperately trying to connect the inner and outer people to each other” (Mintzberg, 1996, p. 61). In the US, an estimated 10.8 million middle managers accounted for around 7.6% of the workforce in 2012 (Korn, 2013).

The rise of middle managers started in the early 20th century in the US, when industrialized production became increasingly efficient (Aitken, 1960; Wilkinson, Marchington, Goodman, & Ackers, 1992). These managers were deemed necessary to effectively coordinate distribution and production processes to leverage the possibilities new technology could offer (Osterman, 2008). In doing so, middle managers boosted the post-war growth of large organizations such as Kodak, GE, and IBM (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994). In such organizations, middle manager positions were traditionally typified by stability and predictability (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994). Yet, the role of middle managers has dramatically changed over the last decades (Hales, 2006; Shi, Markoczy, & Dess, 2009; Tinline & Cooper, 2016) and has been disrupted by several technological, demographic, and organizational developments. Technological developments have made it possible to replace many of the jobs previously supervised by these managers, such as store clerks and tellers, by machines (Finkelstein, 2015; Gratton, 2011; Millman & Hartwick, 1987). With these jobs disappearing, so has the need for their managers, resulting in an estimated 20% drop in the number of middle managers in the 1980s (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994, 1997; Wooldridge et al., 2008).
Furthermore, not only the number of jobs, but also the nature of the traditional middle manager’s position has changed (Gratton, 2011; Stoker, 2006). By the end of the 20th century, management scholars had already predicted what now seems to be reality (Dopson & Stewart, 1990, 1993; Herzig & Jimmieson, 2006; Millman & Hartwick, 1987; Simon, 1985), namely that the decision-making and process monitoring traditionally conducted by middle managers are increasingly being replaced by algorithms and computers (Bersin, 2016; Davenport, Harris, & Shapiro, 2010; Finkelstein, 2015; Gratton, 2011; Lawler III, Levenson, & Boudreau, 2004). In addition, new ways of working have radically transformed traditional organizational structures. For example, Zappos, Dutch ING bank, and Spotify have removed managerial layers and introduced small, flexible teams instead to cope with multiple functional demands (e.g., HR, Marketing, and Finance; Kniberg & Ivarsson, 2012). Similarly, many organizations have introduced self-managing teams (SMTs) that operate entirely without a middle manager (Stoker, 2008).

These developments have further changed the need for middle managers and redefined their roles and position. For example, Google’s leadership went so far as to argue that middle managers merely add levels of bureaucracy, proudly announcing that it would cut a considerable amount of the company’s respective management positions (Gavin, 2013). Middle managers’ public appreciation has also changed. Fueled by criticism of corporate culture and related hierarchical structures in famous publications such as Whyte’s “The Organization Man” (Whyte, 1956), middle managers’ positions are oftentimes perceived to resemble bureaucracy and hamper organizational productivity in the popular press (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1994; Gavin, 2013; Gratton, 2011). Thus, middle managers are sometimes perceived as a burden, as “wasteful overhead” that promotes inefficiency (Osterman, 2008, p. 2).

At the same time, however, research shows that middle managers have unique and pivotal capabilities that may spark innovation and increase organizational performance (Huy, 2001; Kanter, 1982). The aforementioned decision of Google founders Page and Brin to cut middle management positions quickly proved to be less effective than
they had hoped: “That experiment lasted only a few months: They relented when too many people went directly to Page with questions about expense reports, interpersonal conflicts, and other nitty-gritty issues” (Gavin, 2013, p. 75). Moreover, “as the company grew, the founders soon realized that managers contributed in many other, important ways—for instance, by communicating strategy, helping employees prioritize projects, facilitating collaboration, supporting career development, and ensuring that processes and systems aligned with company goals” (Gavin, 2013, p. 75). Accordingly, scholars investigating the position of middle managers from this perspective have emphasized the valuable contributions middle managers can make to organizations (Balogun & Johnson, 2004; Huy, 2011; Rouleau & Balogun, 2011).

A Special Breed: Middle Managers as Leaders with Multiple Dependencies

When considering these developments in organizations and the research into the (changing) position of middle managers, two findings are particularly relevant for this thesis. First, research into the specific characteristics and dilemmas of middle managers and their specific roles in organizations is scarce (Caughron & Mumford, 2011; Huy, 2002; Tinline & Cooper, 2016). For example, DeChurch et al. (2010) conclude that in leadership research, middle managers are the least studied and empirically understood level of management (representing 7.25% of all leadership studies). This is remarkable, since middle managers comprise a great deal of leaders in organizations. Second, from what is known from research, middle managers’ roles are characterized by unique dependencies and resulting challenges (Newell & Dopson, 1996; Tinline & Cooper, 2016). As Della Rocca describes, a middle manager job is “an intermediate, vicarious job devoid of entrepreneurial and managerial responsibility. His [sic] autonomy is regulated and prescribed by the division and organisation of labor within the company...” (1992, p. 57).

Indeed, a central feature of middle managerial positions is a lack of autonomy or, in other words, a dependency on various contingency factors. For example, middle managers lead others, but are also led by higher-level superiors (Caughron & Mumford,
2011; Kinicki, Jacobson, Galvin, & Prussia, 2011; Parris, Vickers, & Wilkes, 2008; Yang, Zhang, & Tsui, 2010). As such, middle managers’ own leadership behavior is likely to be influenced by, or dependent on, the leadership behavior they experience themselves. Similarly, these managers have limited autonomy in setting their goals. Oftentimes, top-level leadership determines the organization’s strategy and direction and subsequently assigns goals to middle and lower-level management (Miller & Weiss, 2015). Finally, middle managers are dependent on organizational policies and procedures regarding their careers. Traditional middle management career paths have changed dramatically in the last years and decades such that the number of middle management positions has decreased, thereby slowing down traditional promotion rates (Morison, Erickson, & Dychtwald, 2006).

Together, these dependencies create unique challenges for middle managers. This dissertation strives to empirically investigate these challenges in more detail and to understand their implications for middle managers. First, how do middle managers deal with the behavior of their own superiors, and how does this in turn shape their own leadership behavior? Second, how and under which conditions do the goals assigned to middle managers relate with their well-being and their subsequent leadership behavior? Lastly, how do middle managers deal with decreasing opportunities for career progress (and, thus, with increasing job tenure), and how does this shape their actions as leaders? The remainder of this introduction summarizes existing knowledge on these challenges and, on this basis, identifies relevant research gaps. Subsequently, it briefly describes the general outline and approach of this dissertation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dependency on the Superior: The Dual Leadership Challenge

Middle managers are inherently both leaders and followers (Caughron & Mumford, 2011; Harding et al., 2014; Osterman, 2008; Thomas & Linstead, 2002), and thus both give and receive direction (Stoker, 2008). But how does the leadership of middle managers’ superiors relate to middle managers’ own leadership? In other
words, does superiors’ leadership shape that of middle managers? Previous empirical research indicates that specific top management leadership behaviors are mirrored by lower-level management. Superiors’ leadership could thus be considered an antecedent of middle managers’ leadership. This process is typified as cascading or the trickling down effect of leadership behavior (e.g., Bass, Waldman, Avolio, & Bebb, 1987; Mayer et al., 2009).

The explanation of this trickle-down process of leadership has typically drawn on social learning and role modeling effects (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012). Social learning theory proposes that learning via observing both others’ behavior and the consequences of that behavior can have the same effects as direct experience (Bandura, 1986). Other motivational mechanisms suggest that middle managers will feel the responsibility to enact the top management’s strategy through their leadership behavior, as they perceive themselves to be extensions of top management. As such, “they will be prone to emulate and imitate the behaviors of top management” (Mayer et al., 2009, p. 3).

The scarce research on trickle-down effects of leadership behavior in organizations has addressed different domains. For example, ethical leadership behavior and justice perceptions (Mayer et al., 2009; Wo, Ambrose, & Schminke, 2015) have been found to flow from leaders to followers. Abusive supervision (i.e., a non-physically aggressive form of leadership; Tepper, 2000) has also been found to trickle down across hierarchical layers in organizations. In their study among 51 managers, 127 supervisors, and 189 employees, for example, Wayne, Hoobler, Marinova, and Johnson (2008) found support for their hypothesis that higher-level management’s abusive supervision, through lower-level supervisors’ abusive behavior, indirectly related to employee turnover intentions and cynicism (see also Mawritz, Mayer, Hoobler, Wayne, & Marinova, 2012). Finally, more positive (e.g., transformational) leadership behaviors have also been found to trickle down the organizational hierarchy (Bass et al., 1987).

Yet, despite some first empirical studies, more specific knowledge and a broader
theoretical understanding of how and when leadership trickles down hierarchical layers is still scarce (Kinicki et al., 2011). Most importantly, the mechanisms and contingency factors (i.e., mediators and moderators) that address the specific nature of the trickling down of particular leadership behavior are under-addressed. Since middle managers both lead and are led, a better understanding of these trickle-down effects is of pivotal importance to understand (a) due to which mechanisms and (b) under which boundary conditions these managers’ particular leadership behavior is influenced by higher-level leadership in the organization (Caughron & Mumford, 2011; DeChurch et al., 2010; Uk, Yammarino, Dionne, Sosik, & Koo, 2009; Yang et al., 2010).

Chapter 2 of this dissertation therefore examines if, how, and when higher-level superiors’ leadership cascades or trickles down the hierarchy to middle managers. Specifically, it focuses on supervisors’ transformational leadership, a frequently explored leadership style that is highly relevant for follower and business unit performance (Koene, Vogelaar, & Soeters, 2002; Ng, 2016; Wilderom, Van den Berg, & Wiersma, 2012). Transformational leaders inspire their followers with a compelling vision, show individual consideration, have high performance expectations, and as such guide followers to attain future goals by overcoming their self-interests (Bass, 1999; Podsakoff, Mackenzie, & Bommer, 1996; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990).

The chapter focuses on the inherently affective nature of transformational behavior (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000) to explicate its potential trickle-down process. Theory suggests that transformational leadership can arouse positive emotions in followers through affective mechanisms (Ng, 2016; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Empirical studies have indeed linked such leadership behavior with followers’ positive moods and emotions (McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002; Menges, Walter, Vogel, & Bruch, 2011). Moreover, transformational leadership is at least partially based on leaders’ expression of strong positive feelings (e.g., enthusiasm, excitement; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Bono & Ilies, 2006). Accordingly, research shows that leaders who experience more positive affect themselves are more likely to exhibit such behavior.
(Erez, Misangyi, Johnson, LePine, & Halverson, 2008; Walter & Bruch, 2009). Hence, in this chapter a conceptual model is developed and tested that casts middle managers’ positive affect as a key mediating mechanism that links superiors’ transformational leadership with middle managers’ respective behavior.

In addition, the chapter examines whether middle managers rely on additional cues to determine whether their leaders’ transformational behaviors are sincere. Followers often rely on justice perceptions to arrive at such attributions (Colquitt & Rodell, 2011). In particular, scholars have argued that transformational leadership and organizational justice “must be looked at in tandem, rather than separately” (De Cremer, Van Dijke, & Bos, 2007, p. 1809; see also Judge, Piccolo, & Ilies, 2004; Van Dijke & De Cremer, 2012) since these constructs are inherently related. Based on attribution theory (Martinko, Harvey, & Douglas, 2007), it is therefore proposed here that middle managers’ justice perceptions may act as a key boundary condition for the proposed trickle-down effect of transformational leadership. Empirical research indeed shows that followers’ attributions of transformational leaders’ intentionality play an important role for the positive effects of this leadership style to unfold (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002).

As such, this dissertation aims to address the complexity of middle managers’ dual role as both leader and follower by examining trickle-down effects of transformational leadership behavior. Knowledge of middle managers’ dependency on their superiors’ leadership and the mechanisms and boundary conditions underlying the respective trickle-down effects could help to better examine and understand the (leadership) environment that shapes middle managers’ behavior and effectiveness (cf. Nielsen & Cleal, 2011).

**Dependency on Assigned Objectives: The Goal Challenge**

Middle managers’ behavior and effectiveness also depend on the goals they must achieve (Shi et al., 2009). One crucial characteristic of middle managers’ position is the limited autonomy they have in setting goals and directions for themselves. Their
goals are oftentimes cascaded from higher-level management (Kinicki et al., 2011). In other words, middle managers rarely have much say in selecting their goals, but they have to translate and achieve these goals through their leadership behaviors towards their employees.

Little is known about the implications of such assigned goals for middle managers. In particular, knowledge could be expanded on the mechanisms and the conditions under which striving for highly difficult goals relates to potentially detrimental leadership behaviors and outcomes. Based on goal setting theory (Lee, Locke, & Latham, 1989), a broad body of evidence has illustrated the potential benefits of well-set goals (e.g., increased individual and organizational performance; Gould, 1986; Locke & Latham, 2013, 2014). However, recent theory and research suggests that overly challenging goals can also have severe negative outcomes (Ordóñez et al., 2009). It has been proposed that attaining challenging goals requires focus, motivation, effort, and persistence, all of which require considerable resource investments (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007). Overly ambitious goals can therefore induce stress and deplete individuals of crucial resources, disabling them from effectively regulating their behavior (Welsh & Ordóñez, 2014). As such, difficult goals could impair middle managers’ motivation and ability to regulate their leadership behavior (Welsh & Ordóñez, 2014). In this vein, studies show that middle managers face conflict and frustration when top management goals are overly ambitious and support is lacking (Dahlsten, Styhre, & Willander, 2005). Moreover, empirical evidence has shown that difficult goals relate to cheating, unethical behavior, and stress (Gino, Schweitzer, Mead, & Ariely, 2011; Mawritz et al., 2014; Vriend, 2016).

However, research on the detrimental effects of goals is still in its infancy. In particular, the possible detrimental effects of goal setting for middle managers’ leadership have rarely been empirically examined. Drawing on conservation of resources theory (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989), Chapter 3 of this dissertation therefore examines how goals that are difficult to attain relate to middle managers’ abusive supervision. More specifically, it investigates whether this relationship is
mediated by the depletion of middle managers’ emotional resources (cf. Tepper, 2000).

In addition, the chapter examines how middle managers’ work climate perceptions relate to the aforementioned detrimental effects of goal setting. In general, the normative standards conveyed through an organization’s overall climate could provide external pressure or increased motivation to show or withhold specific behavior in the workplace (Arnaud & Schminke, 2011). For example, climate perceptions have been linked to organizational deviance (Hsieh & Wang, 2013), but also to unethical behavior such as bullying (Bulutlar & Öz, 2009). Accordingly, the chapter investigates whether individual perceptions about moral and ethical behavioral norms within the organization (Arnaud & Schminke, 2011; Martin & Cullen, 2006) could alter middle managers’ motivation to withhold abusive supervision even when faced with difficult goals and thus suffering from resource depletion.

By relating the difficulty of assigned goals to abusive supervision, Chapter 3 addresses a fundamental dependency challenge middle managers face—namely, to strive for externally assigned goals—and relates this challenge to individual and organizational outcomes. To this end, the chapter focuses on under-examined but specific characteristics of middle managers’ position (i.e. both their assigned goals and their work climate perceptions). As such, the aim is to further the understanding of the specific mechanisms and boundary conditions that shape middle managers’ leadership behavior.

**Job Tenure, Age, and Leadership Behavior: The Career Challenge**

Technological, organizational, and demographic developments contribute to the prospect of longer job tenure (i.e., increasing time spent in a specific job or position; Ng & Feldman, 2013) for middle managers. For example, the reduction of managerial layers due to organizational restructuring (Newell & Dopson, 1996) can limit the availability of management positions. Similarly, technological innovations such as automation (see Frey & Osborne, 2013; Millman & Hartwick, 1987; Stoker, 2006) have the potential to substantially reduce the number of available middle management
positions. This decreased availability is likely to slow down middle managers’ career trajectories, for example by reducing the number of promotions. Moreover, the ageing population and the related increasing retirement age may also cause middle managers to stay in their positions for longer, simultaneously preventing the entrance of new middle managers (see Weigl, Müller, & Hornung, 2014; Zacher, Rosing, Henning, & Frese, 2011). Together, these developments are likely to present considerable career challenges for middle managers, most prominently manifesting themselves in greater periods of time spent in the same job (i.e., longer job tenure) than was common for these managers in the past.

Interestingly, however, little empirical research has examined the possible consequences of such increased job tenure for middle managers. In theory, the effects of longer job tenure could be either beneficial or harmful (Ng & Feldman, 2013a). On the one hand, the more positive perspective on tenure would argue that such increased leadership experience relates to higher performance (Avery, Tonidandel, Griffith, & Quiñones, 2003). On the other hand, it also seems plausible that middle managers could perceive prolonged job tenure as a negative sign of their career progress. In particular, they may see this as a violation of their psychological contract with the organization (Taylor, Audia, & Gupta, 1996). Such contracts are implicit representations of individuals’ expectations of the mutual obligations between themselves and the organization (Rousseau, 1995). Besides monetary exchanges (e.g., pay for work), these contracts also include implicit exchanges, such as job security or career progress (Bal, De Lange, Jansen, & Van der Velde, 2008). As such, increased job tenure could violate middle managers’ expectations of career progress and spark pronouncedly negative job attitudes.

Empirical research supports this notion. Perceptions of being stalled, reaching a career plateau, or being immobilized in a career have been shown, for instance, to be related to negative job attitudes such as decreased commitment and increased turnover intent (Allen & Meyer, 1993; Ballout, 2007; Bown-Wilson, 2008; Ference, Stoner, & Warren, 1977; Stout, Slocum, & Cron, 1988; Veiga, 1981; Zacher, Ambiel, &
Noronha, 2015). Moreover, research has illustrated that middle managers can become inflexible, bored, and unchallenged if they stay in their positions for extended periods of time (Kass, Vodanovich, & Callender, 2001; Loukidou, Loan-Clarke, & Daniels, 2009; Miller, 1991). Based on this knowledge, one would expect the overall leadership consequences of increasing job tenure among middle managers to be detrimental as their job attitudes are likely to suffer, with potential implications for their subsequent leadership behavior.

Corroborating this notion, research on employee behavior shows that violations of psychological contracts relate not only to work attitudes but also to work behaviors. For example, following such violations, individuals have been found to display their disenchantment through counterproductive work behaviors or lowered performance (Bal, Chiaburu, & Jansen, 2010; Konovsky & Pugh, 1994). In a similar vein, when individuals are satisfied with a job, this may initiate their desire to reciprocate towards the organization by contributing more than is expected (e.g. Guest, 2004; Lavelle, Rupp, & Brockner, 2007). However, whether comparable behavioral effects can be found for middle managers remains unclear. This is empirically tested in this thesis (Chapter 4).

Finally, the possible outcomes of prolonged job tenure on middle managers’ leadership behavior could be dependent on individual differences, since research shows that individuals react differently to psychological contract breach (Bal, De Lange, Jansen, & Van der Velde, 2013). More specifically, it is expected here that middle managers’ age will act as a moderator for this relationship. According to socio-emotional selectivity theory (SST), older individuals put greater value on more proximal goals, while younger individuals are generally more future-oriented (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003; Reed & Carstensen, 2012). Therefore, especially for younger middle managers, being stalled in their position might impact their attitudes more strongly than for older middle managers. Hence, addressing age as an important characteristic that moderates the relationship between tenure, job attitudes, and leadership behaviors could deepen the understanding of the role of middle managers’ tenure.

Chapter 4 therefore examines how job tenure in a specific middle manager
position relates to middle managers’ job attitudes, leadership behavior, and performance. Drawing on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), it first examines whether middle managers’ job tenure negatively relates to their transformational leadership through lowered job satisfaction. Further, to clarify the boundary conditions under which middle managers’ job tenure relates to lowered satisfaction, the chapter draws on SST (Carstensen, 2006) to introduce the moderating role of a middle manager’s age. In this way, the chapter advances an increasingly relevant understanding of the mechanisms and boundary conditions that shape middle managers’ leadership and organizational outcomes related to increasing job tenure.

OVERALL APPROACH OF THIS DISSERTATION

All in all, the empirical focus of this dissertation is on three specific challenges faced by middle managers. All these challenges are typified by particular forms of dependency. Together, the empirical chapters aim to identify and empirically examine three gaps in academic research on middle managers. First, Chapter 2 examines the specific middle manager challenge of being both a dependent follower and a leader, using data gathered at a large retail organization in 2011. Next, Chapter 3 addresses the relationship between goals and middle managers’ leadership. Using data collected in 2012, this chapter investigates relationships between difficult assigned goals and middle managers’ leadership and performance. Finally, Chapter 4 examines middle managers’ job tenure and its relationship with their leadership and subsequent performance, using data gathered in 2013. Thus, for each examination of a middle manager challenge, new data were collected. This was done within the same organization each time.

Chapter 5 summarizes the findings of these three investigations, reflecting on the potential theoretical contributions with regard to middle managers’ challenges. The chapter identifies potential avenues for future research while considering the limitations of the current empirical work, and discusses the practical implications of the insights gathered. Finally, the dissertation concludes with a summary and acknowledgement of all those who have made this endeavor possible.