

Self-transcendent leadership: A meta-perspective

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Abstract

Self-transcendence as a concept is increasingly found in leadership literature—yet in diverse ways. It is this diversity that serves as the motivation for the current article in which we develop a comprehensive and coherent conceptualization of self-transcendence for leadership research. We demonstrate that self-transcendence is the cognitive orientation of accepting something other than one's self to be of highest worth. We show that this something, which is greater than the self, may take four different forms: other people, social collectives, moral principles and ideals, or metaphysical beings. We contribute to leadership research by linking each greater something to one theory: servant, transformational, moral, and spiritual leadership. Our conceptualization of self-transcendence allows us to integrate different leadership theories into a meta-perspective of self-transcendent leadership. We conclude with implications for leadership research as well as practice.

KEYWORDS

leadership ethics, leadership theory, self-interest, self-transcendence

INTRODUCTION

Bowie (1991: 1) outlined that classical economists and business ethicists have competing paradigms of human nature: People behave egoistically versus people can behave non-egoistically. Self-transcendence allows people to behave non-egoistically. The management literature has incorporated the concept of self-transcendence in diverse publications (e.g., Rauch & Ansari, 2022) in particular related to leadership (e.g., Carey, 1992; Chen et al., 2020; Mao et al., 2019). Morris et al. (2005) were among the first to highlight the idea of self-transcendence. Scholars have started to draw on self-transcendence to successfully challenge the self-fulfilling norm of self-interest (Ferraro et al., 2005; Merton, 1948: 195; Miller, 1999). However, we lack a comprehensive conceptualization of the multiple facets of self-transcendence for theories of leadership. Definitions and interpretations of self-transcendence remain rather unclear (e.g., Theissen & Theissen, 2019; Weaver, 2010). The literature also struggles to differentiate between self-transcendence and related concepts such as spirituality (e.g., Chawla & Guda, 2013; Pawar, 2009).

This is unfortunate, as self-transcendence offers a strong counterpoint to the notion of self-interest and a robust conceptualization would enable more scholars to include it in their repertoire for ethical debates on resource allocation and consumption, as well as self-centricity (e.g., George et al., 2015; George et al., 2016).

The purpose of this article is to offer a comprehensive and coherent conceptualization of self-transcendence and present implications for leadership research. We demonstrate that self-transcendence is the cognitive orientation of accepting something or somebody other than one's self to be of highest worth.¹ *Something that is greater than the self* may take four different forms: other people (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004: 464); social collectives (e.g., Tangney, 2011: 484); moral principles and ideals (e.g., Grenberg, 2005: 141, 142; Koltko-Rivera, 2006); or metaphysical beings (e.g., Gümüşay, 2021; Templeton, 1997). In each case, self-transcendence manifests in people who put themselves in service of their

¹We only use the term *something* hereafter and thereby also mean to express *somebody* at the same time.

greater something instead of putting themselves first. Christine Oliver, first female editor of the *Administrative Science Quarterly*, stressed a self-transcendent attitude in her reflections upon stepping down from the editorship: “I am especially grateful to [people] who epitomize what I think is most important in the day-to-day realities of working as a colleague: ... a willingness to serve something beyond oneself, and a sincere interest in the good of others” (Oliver, 2003: 171, 172).

This article offers two theoretical contributions. First, we bring together the dispersed views on self-transcendence and classify four different forms of greater somethings, namely, other people, social collectives, moral principles and ideals, and metaphysical beings. Second, we connect each greater something to an extant prominent leadership theory, namely, servant, transformational, moral, and spiritual leadership, to highlight how the notion of a greater something impacts specific theoretical perspectives. Responding to Antonakis’ (2017: 7) call for more “theoretical integration” (see Grandori & Morley, 2022), our conceptualization of self-transcendence allows us to integrate different leadership theories into a meta-perspective of self-transcendent leadership. This helps to unravel and refine the theoretical foundation of those leadership theories that encourage leaders to transcend their self-interests (see Lemoine et al., 2019: 150). Recognizing self-transcendence as their common thread enables us to better comprehend otherwise only loosely coupled leadership theories with regard to shared and/or separate antecedents, mediators and moderators, outcomes and boundary conditions, and means of operationalization.

Our conceptual article is structured according to the five building blocks of Lange & Pfarrer (2017). We first review the so far rather unconnected literature on self-transcendence in light of leadership research. Next, we develop our conceptualization of self-transcendence with the help of a systematic screening of the literature and we situate self-transcendence within the wider nomological network of related constructs. We then make the case for how our theorizing impacts four leadership theories—servant, transformational, moral, and spiritual leadership—and introduce a meta-perspective of self-transcendent leadership. We end with implications for leadership research and practice.

SELF-TRANSCENDENCE IN SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

This section is divided into two parts. In the first part, we provide a brief overview of the existing literature on self-transcendence to establish a common ground for our theorizing. In the second part, we explain the need for a robust conceptualization of self-transcendence and why this is of particular concern for leadership research.

The use of self-transcendence

The term self-transcendence consists of two parts: the self and transcendence. We share Baumeister’s (1998: 680–683) understanding of the *self*, which has three facets: First, there is the experience to become aware and construct a concept of the self, which is called “reflexive consciousness”; second, there is the experience to socially relate to others, which is called “interpersonal being”; and third, there is the experience to take decisions and initiate actions, which is called “executive function.” Baumeister (1998: 681, 728) stresses the important role of cognition for a human’s selfhood. Similarly, Phills et al. (2011: 198) understood the self as a multi-faceted “cognitive representation.”

The noun *transcendence* is a compound of “transcendent” and “-ence”: The adjective “transcendent” originates from Latin “transcendentem,” meaning “surmounting [and] rising above,” and the suffix “-ence” is a “word-forming element attached to verbs to form abstract nouns of process or fact [and] of state or quality” (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

Putting the parts together, self-transcendence is in its literal meaning a state in which people surmount and rise above their own self. Existing (management) literature has employed the term in two conceptually different yet complementary forms. Broadly speaking, scholars have used self-transcendence to refer either to the cognitive state (orientation) described above (e.g., Qiu & Rooney, 2019) or to the values associated with this state (e.g., Schwartz, 1994). In what follows, we present a brief overview of each usage. We start with the *cognitive state* usage and then turn to the *value* usage.

Carey (1992) was the first who prominently used the idea of self-transcendence in management literature (cf. Krueger, 1986). Carey (1992: 217) stressed the importance of a leader’s basic orientation toward the self and others and argued for the existence of a “fundamental option, or stable choice, for either self-transcendence or self-embeddedness” in leadership. On a broader level, Pawar (2009: 245) later proposed not only that “self-interest transcendence” is part of transformational leadership (Grant, 2012) and workplace spirituality (Chen & Li, 2013) but also that it is a common aspect in the following three organizational behavior concepts: “organizational citizenship behavior, organizational support, and procedural justice.” Building on Pawar (2009), Chawla and Guda (2013: 63) linked self-interest transcendence to certain “relationship-oriented selling characteristics,” such as ethical selling behavior, to argue that spirituality in the workplace is a potential antecedent to them. Qiu & Rooney (2019) recently included self-transcendence as one of four stages in their model of employees’ experiences in mindfulness programs in the workplace. Qiu & Rooney (2019: 724) provided two descriptions of self-transcendence in this context:

Drawing on Buddhist perspectives, self-transcendence refers to “a full (and humbling) realization of the ultimate reality of oneself and the universe,” and, drawing on Loy (1996a, 1996b), self-transcendence refers to “the state in which an individual experiences detachment from external definitions of the self and dissolves rigid boundaries between self and other.” Finally, studying the effects of CEO mortality salience on corporate prosocial behavior, Chen et al. (2020: 3142) noted the relationship between mortality salience, that is, the “awareness of the inevitability of death” (Greenberg et al., 1997: 62), and “self-transcendent cognitive responses” such as an increased desire to contribute to society.

The term self-transcendent value has been most visible in the context of Schwartz' (1994) basic value typology. Schwartz' (1994: 24) theory of human values (e.g., Ralston et al., 2011) includes ten types of basic values, which guide people's actions, and four “higher order value types.” Under the higher order value type of self-transcendence, Schwartz (1994: 22) classified two basic values: universalism, that is, “understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature,” and benevolence, that is, “preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact.” These two basic values are both “concerned with enhancement of others and transcendence of selfish interests” (Schwartz, 1994: 25). Management scholars have used Schwartz' (1994) basic value typology and studied the two self-transcendent values in diverse contexts such as leadership in the environmental sector (Egri & Herman, 2000; see Crilly et al., 2008; see also Al-Najjar & Abualqumboz, *in press*), expatriates' cross-cultural adjustment (Van Vianen et al., 2004), and occupational values of accounting professionals (Racko, 2019).

Similar to scholars in the field of management, scholars in the field of psychology have studied the term self-transcendence either in Schwartz' (1994) tradition of basic values (e.g., Pulfrey & Butera, 2013; Wolf et al., 2019) or in other theoretical frameworks (e.g., Crocker et al., 2008; Grossmann et al., 2019) that are separate from his value typology. Because other disciplines such as nursing (e.g., Haugan et al., 2013; Hwang et al., 2019) or neuroscience (e.g., Kang et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2019) have also explored the topic of self-transcendence, it is a phenomenon that has explanatory power in multiple disciplines.

The need for a robust conceptualization of self-transcendence

As we have shown, management research and related disciplines have started to successfully incorporate the idea of self-transcendence. However, we lack a robust conceptualization, which impedes progress in those fields of research, for two reasons. First, there is no established definition of self-transcendence and its essence remains

rather unclear (e.g., Theissen & Theissen, 2019; Weaver, 2010). Qiu and Rooney (2019: 724) noted that self-transcendence is subject to “different understandings in Eastern traditions and Western philosophy and psychology.” Second, a convincing differentiation between self-transcendence and related, yet different, concepts such as spirituality (e.g., Chawla & Guda, 2013; Pawar, 2009) or altruism (e.g., Kennedy et al., 2018) is absent from the literature.

In the following section, we thus develop and present a robust and clear conceptualization (e.g., Klein et al., 2012) of self-transcendence, which enables scholars to include it in their theory repertoire especially for current debates on resource allocation and consumption (e.g., George et al., 2015, 2016) that revolve around the problems of overcoming self-interest and conflicts of interest (Ciulla et al., 2018). The conceptualization is necessary for arriving at compelling answers (Osigweh, 1989; Suddaby, 2010; Whetten, 1989) to at least three central concerns that remain insufficiently addressed: antecedents of self-transcendence in leaders (see Wang et al., 2018); measures for self-transcendence among organizational leaders (see Owens et al., 2013); as well as outcomes of executive self-transcendence in organizations and its respective boundary conditions and moderators (see Ou et al., 2017).

CONCEPTUALIZING SELF-TRANSCENDENCE

Self-transcendence is the cognitive orientation of accepting something other than the self to be of greater worth than the self (Morris et al., 2005). As the term cognitive orientation refers to an individual's “logic of action” (Bacharach et al., 2000: 721; see also Bigley & Wiersema, 2002: 707; Obstfeld, 2005: 104), self-transcendence denotes a specific cognitive orientation, in which people let something other than the self take center stage in their worldviews. As that something else does not share the center stage with the self, we label it *greater something*. The evaluation of a greater something lies in the eye of the beholder. While a person's evaluation of his or her own greater something will be positive, an outsider's evaluation of that same greater something may range from desirable to undesirable.

We purposefully do not speak of a *bigger something* (Ciulla et al., 2018: 4; Seligman, 2011: 12, 17). We submit that a greater something is necessarily bigger than the self, but a bigger something is not necessarily greater than the self. A bigger something exceeds or holds the potential to exceed the boundaries of the self in terms of time, space, and/or resources. For example, a political party may thrive much longer than a human life which is (still) biologically restricted to a certain age (see Wade-Benzoni & Tost, 2009: 188). A bigger something enables human beings to satisfy different needs

(Koltko-Rivera, 2006; Maslow, 1943, 1954) such as finding a sense of belonging and value in life (Seligman, 2011: 12, 17, 18). It does not have to take center stage in an individual's worldview, because it can simply serve as a means to an end, that is, to serve the individual's agenda (Bolino, 1999; Hui et al., 2000; Perlow & Weeks, 2002). To continue our previous example, people may well find belonging and value in their identification with a political party but remain ultimately self-centered at the same time (see Galvin et al., 2015). If a bigger something does take center stage in an individual's worldview, it becomes greater than the self and hence a greater something.

Finally, we recommend to distinguish between *forgetting the self* (Tangney, 2000) and a *forgotten self*. A low self-focus is an inevitable manifestation of self-transcendence, and forgetting the self and a forgotten self describe potential manifestations of self-transcendence. While forgetting the self describes a process of ongoing striving to forget the self, we suggest that a forgotten self describes an extreme final manifestation of self-transcendence at which the individual is no longer aware of his or her self-interests.

Characterizing greater somethings

To identify references to specific greater somethings in the existing literature, we conducted a systematic screening of the management literature and other relevant literatures on self-transcendence as follows. We searched on the EBSCO database for the term “self-transcend*” in the title, abstract, and keywords (i.e., subject terms) in all FT-50 journals and in 32 other relevant journals (e.g., *The Leadership Quarterly* and *European Management Review*). The 82 journals used in our literature screening are listed in Table 1. The journals used in our literature screening fall into four broad categories: management, economics, psychology, and general sciences. We identified 67 journal articles in this process. To ensure that we did not miss pertinent journal articles, we also ran this search using the Scopus database. We identified one additional journal article in doing so. We, therefore, identified 68 journal articles in total.

Next, we looked in the available article abstracts for in-vivo codes that refer to different greater somethings. We provide exemplary in vivo codes in the following. Hornsey et al. (2018: 198) use the term “oneness with others.” Yeager et al. (2014: 559) use the term “prosocial.” Torelli et al. (2012: 948) use the terms “social responsibility” and “protecting the welfare of all.” Johnson et al. (2019: 1) use the terms “God,” “mystical cosmic force,” and “being beyond imagination.”

Finally, we used the in vivo codes to categorize the greater somethings concluding that *something that is greater than the self* may take four different forms: firstly, *other people* (see Hornsey et al., 2018), which refers to

individuals with whom one is in frequent and close contact such as family members, friends, or work colleagues; secondly, *social collectives* (see Yeager et al., 2014), which refers to larger groups with a shared goal and/or identity such as organizations or social movements; thirdly, *moral principles and ideals* (see Torelli et al., 2012), which refers to deep-rooted standards (e.g., ethical norms) and ideas (e.g., beauty); and fourthly, *metaphysical beings* (see Johnson et al., 2019), which refers to superior, knowable or mysterious, and potentially omnipotent spirits, powers, or persons (Ciulla et al., 2018: 7), such as a single God in a monotheistic context (e.g., Gümüşay, 2019; Ratzinger, 2011) or multiple deities in a polytheistic context (e.g., Gries et al., 2012).

To aid the fine-grained understanding of self-transcendence, we propose that the four greater somethings differ according to the following four attributes. First, there is the attribute of human personhood, which applies only to individual human beings, that is, other people. Second, there is the attribute of empirical tangibility, which applies to other people as well as social collectives. Third, there is the attribute of metaphysics, that is, beyond what empirical science can offer (Mitroff & Mason, 1981), which applies to moral principles and ideals as well as metaphysical beings. Fourth, there is the attribute of spirituality, which applies only to metaphysical beings.

The distinctiveness of, and potential rivalry among, the four forms of greater somethings is exemplified by “unethical pro-organizational behavior” (Umphress & Bingham, 2011: 621; Vardi & Wiener, 1996).² In the case of unethical pro-organizational behavior, the third form of a greater something, that is, moral principles and ideals, is in conflict with the first two forms of a greater something, that is, other people and social collectives. People who conduct such behavior decide against moral principles and ideals and prioritize certain other people or collectives (see Pearsall & Ellis, 2011; see Scott, 2003 for instances from the airline industry). In addition to violating moral principles and ideals, the practice of unethical pro-organizational behavior can involve the acceptance of harmful consequences for entities other than the focal organization such as its customers (Baker et al., 2019; see Umphress & Bingham, 2011: 623; see Molinsky & Margolis, 2005: 245 for “necessary evils”).

Self-transcendence and related constructs

To advance the study of self-transcendence in organizational contexts, it is important to conceptually situate the construct within the wider nomological network of related constructs (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955; Podsakoff

²See Gilead & Liberman (2014) for parental caregiving and aggression toward outsiders, and, similarly, see Hahn-Holbrook et al. (2011) for breast-feeding women and heightened aggression.

TABLE 1 Journals included in our literature screening.

FT-50 journals		Other relevant journals	
1.	<i>Academy of Management Journal</i>	1.	<i>Academy of Management Annals</i>
2.	<i>Academy of Management Review</i>	2.	<i>Academy of Management Perspectives</i>
3.	<i>Accounting Review</i>	3.	<i>Annual Review of Clinical Psychology</i>
4.	<i>Accounting, Organizations and Society</i>	4.	<i>Annual Review of Neuroscience</i>
5.	<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i>	5.	<i>Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior</i>
6.	<i>American Economic Review</i>	6.	<i>Annual Review of Psychology</i>
7.	<i>Contemporary Accounting Research</i>	7.	<i>Business and Society</i>
8.	<i>Econometrica</i>	8.	<i>Business Ethics Quarterly</i>
9.	<i>Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice</i>	9.	<i>Clinical Psychology Review</i>
10.	<i>Harvard Business Review</i>	10.	<i>Current Directions in Psychological Science</i>
11.	<i>Human Relations</i>	11.	<i>Educational Psychology Review</i>
12.	<i>Human Resource Management</i>	12.	<i>European Management Review</i>
13.	<i>Information Systems Research</i>	13.	<i>Family Business Review</i>
14.	<i>Journal of Accounting and Economics</i>	14.	<i>Health Psychology Review</i>
15.	<i>Journal of Accounting Research</i>	15.	<i>Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization</i>
16.	<i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i>	16.	<i>Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied</i>
17.	<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	17.	<i>Journal of Experimental Social Psychology</i>
18.	<i>Journal of Business Venturing</i>	18.	<i>Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology</i>
19.	<i>Journal of Consumer Psychology</i>	19.	<i>Journal of Occupational Health Psychology</i>
20.	<i>Journal of Consumer Research</i>	20.	<i>Journal of Organizational Behavior</i>
21.	<i>Journal of Finance</i>	21.	<i>Journal of Personality and Social Psychology</i>
22.	<i>Journal of Financial and Quantitative Analysis</i>	22.	<i>Journal of Vocational Behavior</i>
23.	<i>Journal of Financial Economics</i>	23.	<i>Leadership Quarterly</i>
24.	<i>Journal of International Business Studies</i>	24.	<i>Nature</i>
25.	<i>Journal of Management</i>	25.	<i>Organizational Research Methods</i>
26.	<i>Journal of Management Information Systems</i>	26.	<i>Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin</i>
27.	<i>Journal of Management Studies</i>	27.	<i>Personality and Social Psychology Review</i>
28.	<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	28.	<i>Personnel Psychology</i>
29.	<i>Journal of Marketing Research</i>	29.	<i>Psychological Bulletin</i>
30.	<i>Journal of Operations Management</i>	30.	<i>Psychological Review</i>
31.	<i>Journal of Political Economy</i>	31.	<i>Psychological Science</i>
32.	<i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</i>	32.	<i>Science</i>
33.	<i>Management Science</i>		
34.	<i>Manufacturing and Service Operations Management</i>		
35.	<i>Marketing Science</i>		
36.	<i>MIS Quarterly</i>		
37.	<i>Operations Research</i>		
38.	<i>Organization Science</i>		
39.	<i>Organization Studies</i>		
40.	<i>Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes</i>		
41.	<i>Production and Operations Management</i>		
42.	<i>Quarterly Journal of Economics</i>		
43.	<i>Research Policy</i>		
44.	<i>Review of Accounting Studies</i>		
45.	<i>Review of Economic Studies</i>		

TABLE 1 (Continued)

FT-50 journals	Other relevant journals
46. <i>Review of Finance</i>	
47. <i>Review of Financial Studies</i>	
48. <i>Sloan Management Review</i>	
49. <i>Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal</i>	
50. <i>Strategic Management Journal</i>	

et al., 2016) for the sake of construct clarity (Suddaby, 2010) and construct validity (Hinkin, 1995; Netemeyer et al., 2003). We illustrate below that self-transcendence is distinct from the following four related constructs that co-appeared with our focal construct in our literature analysis: transcendence (e.g., Maslow, 1993: 259–269), spirituality (e.g., Pavlovich & Krahne, 2012), altruism (e.g., Preston & Shin, 2017), and self-transcendent values (e.g., Schwartz, 1994).

Self-transcendence and transcendence

Transcendence “entails constructing mental models of what is not directly experienced” and means to “mentally traverse temporal distance, spatial distance, social distance, and [or] hypotheticality” (Lieberman & Trope, 2008: 1201). Similarly, Baumeister (1995: 122) defined transcendence as “the capacity to perceive the immediate stimulus environment in relation to long-range or abstract concerns.” Scholars have outlined various forms of transcendence on its own (Lieberman & Trope, 2008; Maslow, 1993: 259–269) such as the transcendence of time (e.g., Mainemelis, 2001) or space (e.g., Henderson et al., 2006). Hence, the term transcendence alone also refers to phenomena other than the cognitive orientation of self-transcendence, which is our focal construct throughout this article. Therefore, if we simply replaced self-transcendence by transcendence, this would lead to “criterion contamination,” because transcendence contains aspects that are not part of the self-transcendence space (Owens et al., 2013: 1520; see Schwab, 1980: 6, 14).

Self-transcendence and spirituality

Spirituality refers to a search for deeper meaning and the quality of being concerned with one (or multiple) superior, potentially omnipotent, metaphysical being(s) or spirit(s) (e.g., Ashmos & Duchon, 2000; Templeton, 1997). The term spirituality can include religion and faith-based beliefs (see Koenig, 2008: 350; Pargament, 1999). Due to the tense relationship between spirituality and science (e.g., Barron, 2018; McCauley & Whitehouse, 2005: 3; Taylor, 2018), colleagues have noted a tendency among some scholars to avoid scientific enquiry that involves

spirituality and related phenomena (e.g., Bloom, 2012; Chan-Serafin et al., 2013; Koltko-Rivera, 2006: 309). This has significant implications. For instance, Tangney (2011: 483) asked why the concept of humility had been neglected for so long and reasoned that it is “linked to values and religion in many people’s minds. As a field, for many years, mainstream psychology steered clear of such value-laden topics as religion, virtue, and ... morality.” Due to spirituality’s practical relevance (e.g., Chan-Serafin et al., 2013; Lambert et al., 2010), however, empirical studies have recently explored its role within organizations (e.g., Damaraju & Makhija, 2018; Gümüşay et al., 2020; see also Neubert, 2019: 253).

Informing our focal construct, spirituality can fuel self-transcendence but is not a requirement for it (Morris et al., 2005), even though self-transcendence has theological and philosophical roots (e.g., Aquinas, 1972; De Sales, 2010). Thus, spiritual beliefs are not a necessary condition for the cognitive orientation of self-transcendence (see Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007: 352). The something that is greater than the self is often non-spiritual (see United Nations, 2019): other people (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004: 464), social collectives (e.g., Tangney, 2011: 464), moral principles and ideals (e.g., Grenberg, 2005: 141, 142; Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Specifically, moral principles correspond with the last stage of Kohlberg’s six stages of moral development, which is “based on moral reasoning alone” (Kohlberg, 1969, 1976: 32; see Trevino, 1986). Like self-transcendence, the construct of “necessary evils” in organizational literature involves behavior which is done “in the service of achieving some perceived greater good or purpose” (Molinsky & Margolis, 2005: 247) and is a non-spiritual phenomenon, too. If we replaced self-transcendence by the construct of spirituality, this would lead to both “criterion deficiency,” because spirituality does not capture the complete space of self-transcendence, and “criterion contamination,” because spirituality contains aspects that are not part of the self-transcendence space (Owens et al., 2013: 1520; see Schwab, 1980: 6, 14).

Self-transcendence and altruism

Scholars from several disciplines have drawn attention to the construct of altruism (e.g., Barry & Stephens, 1998;

Locke & Becker, 1998). Different understandings of its key features exist (Li et al., 2014). We build on the established (e.g., Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003) behavioral definition of altruism: “costly self-sacrifice in the service of others” (Kennedy et al., 2018: 359). Put differently, altruism consists of two fundamental features (Dawkins, 1989: 5): first, increasing the welfare of others and, second, performing a costly act such as giving up financial resources (Li et al., 2014: 544). An example of altruism would be to voluntarily donate a kidney to a stranger (Marsh et al., 2014). It becomes evident that altruism and self-transcendence describe related but different phenomena. While altruism designates an act of selflessness, self-transcendence is a cognitive orientation. Self-transcendence may cause altruistic behavior in people, but this is not inevitable. We also argue that self-transcendence is not a necessary condition (see Fiss, 2007, 2011; see Vergne & Depeyre, 2016) for altruistic behavior. Religious eremites are an example of people who hold a pronounced degree of self-transcendence but do not focus on pursuing (tangible) altruistic actions. With respect to the nomological network, we can conclude: If we replaced self-transcendence by the construct of altruism, this would lead to both “criterion deficiency,” because altruism does not capture the complete space of self-transcendence, and “criterion contamination,” because altruism contains aspects that are not part of the self-transcendence space (Owens et al., 2013: 1520; see Schwab, 1980: 6, 14).

Self-transcendence and self-transcendent values

Our previous arguments show that self-transcendence has construct validity as other established constructs in its nomological network—that is, transcendence, spirituality, and altruism—do not capture its essence. In addition, it is helpful to attend to the difference between the cognitive orientation of self-transcendence and the “higher order value type” of self-transcendent values by Schwartz (1994: 24). As mentioned earlier, Schwartz (1994: 22, 24) in his theory classified two basic values under the higher order value type of self-transcendence: universalism and benevolence. While self-transcendence might well be an antecedent of universalism and benevolence (e.g., Qiu & Rooney, 2019: 724), self-transcendence and Schwartz’ (1994: 24) higher order value type of self-transcendent values are distinct, although complementary concepts. First, the latter is concerned with values and not with a cognitive orientation. While values are “beliefs, [which] pertain to desirable end states or behaviors, ... transcend specific situations, ... guide selection or evaluation of behavior and events, and ... are ordered by relative importance” (Schwartz, 1992: 4), a cognitive orientation refers to an individual’s “logic of action” (Bacharach et al., 2000: 721). Thus, people can hold several (conflicting) values but can

only have one cognitive orientation at a point in time. Second, people without the cognitive orientation of self-transcendence can share the values of universalism and benevolence, and people without the values of universalism and benevolence can have the cognitive orientation of self-transcendence.

In sum, we define the cognitive orientation of self-transcendence as accepting something other than one’s self to be of highest worth. This essence of self-transcendence manifests in a relatively low focus on the self and a high focus on something other than the self (Ou et al., 2014), which takes one of the following four forms: other people, social collectives, moral principles and ideals, or metaphysical beings.

DISCUSSION

The question of why a leader pursues his or her leadership role is “one of the most distinctive elements of leadership” (Ciulla et al., 2018: 3) and can be found in early texts such as Plato’s *Republic*: “anyone who is really a true ruler doesn’t by nature seek his own advantage but that of his subjects” (Plato., 1992). Exploring self-transcendence in leadership behaviors opens up an important complement to the long-standing tenet of transactional self-interest in leaders and followers (Bass, 1985, 1999; Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). The cognitive orientation of self-transcendence allows leaders to ultimately refrain from selfish behavior (e.g., Graffin et al., 2013) and engage in unselfish behavior (e.g., Horwitz & McGahan, 2018). Unselfish behavior of leaders may be especially needed in view of corporate social irresponsibility (Troisi et al., *in press*; Zhong et al., *in press*).

Thus far, we have presented our conceptualization of self-transcendence and introduced four greater somethings as the underlying motivation for self-transcendence. Next, we link self-transcendence to four theories of leadership and present a meta-perspective of self-transcendent leadership. These four theories of leadership refer back to the four greater somethings and have been grouped before (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Hoch et al., 2018; Lemoine et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2014: 1448; Peterson et al., 2012: 589; van Dierendonck, 2011).

Our intention is twofold. First, we highlight the centrality of self-transcendence and greater somethings in diverse theories of leadership and the role of self-transcendence for the authenticity of the leader. Second, we note self-transcendence as an overarching construct that bridges multiple theories of leadership. This offers a meta-perspective through a within-leader lens (Liao et al., 2021) and answers the repeated call for integrating proliferated leadership theories (e.g., Avolio, 2007; Liden et al., 2014). In particular, we follow the advice of Avolio (2007: 29, 30) and emphasize the important role of cognitions in this integrative effort. Hence, while we continue previous work to note the distinctiveness (i.e., greater

some things) among theories of leadership (Lemoine et al., 2019: 150), we also respond to the call for scholarship integration (Liden et al., 2014: 1448) and stress self-transcendence as a fundamental theoretical commonality of servant, transformational, moral, and spiritual leadership.

How does self-transcendence connect with theories of leadership?

Our combination of the scattered literature on self-transcendence advances the field's understanding on possible motives for unselfish behavior. After screening the relevant literature, we find four greater somethings that scholars have linked to self-transcendence: other people, social collectives, moral principles and ideals, and metaphysical beings. Our effort to (re-)define and clarify (Makadok et al., 2018) the idea of self-transcendence—by introducing the four greater somethings—lays conceptual ground (Osigweh, 1989; Suddaby, 2010; Whetten, 1989) for future studies that aim to include non-selfish explanations for organizational phenomena. Examples are organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., Kutcher et al., 2010) and corporate mindfulness programs (e.g., Qiu & Rooney, 2019: 716).

In the following, we present insights for the selected four theories of leadership, namely, servant, transformational, moral, and spiritual leadership. We selected these leadership theories for illustration, because each theory can specifically be linked to one greater something. Our theorizing contributes to the contemporary literature (e.g., Ou et al., 2017: 1916) on non-traditional leadership styles (see Bass, 1985: 5). To date, servant, transformational, moral, and spiritual leadership have been simply categorized as “new-genre leadership theories” (Avolio et al., 2009: 422; see Lemoine et al., 2019; see Wang et al., 2014), and have commonly been conceptualized separately in the literature, although research is needed on the relationships among multiple leadership behaviors (Liao et al., 2021: 1210, 1211). Strikingly, all four leadership styles build on the concept of leaders who reach beyond self-interests.

Servant leadership

Greenleaf coined the concept “servant leadership” in his essay “The Servant as Leader” in 1970 (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2016) and wrote: “The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types ... The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served.” Laub (1999) described servant leadership as an “understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader” (see Lemoine et al., 2019: 151, 152

for “putting others first”). Greenleaf “placed ‘going beyond one's self-interest’ as a core characteristic of servant leadership” (van Dierendonck, 2011: 1230). Hence, the greater something that servant leaders focus on is *the other*, be it followers or stakeholders (Lemoine et al., 2019; Liden et al., 2014). These leaders have a motivation to lead and a need to serve (van Dierendonck, 2011: 1228) while having a positive impact on organizational performance (Peterson et al., 2012). This need to serve others will be sincere and sustained (Liao et al., 2021; Peterson et al., 2012: 586)—and not solely displayed—if the leader's behavior is rooted in self-transcendence. To look out for the other overcomes the mere concern for the self. Peterson et al. (2012: 570) even noted that “to display leadership behaviors that transcend self-interest” is “the most central characteristic of servant leadership” (see Sendjaya et al., 2008). Interestingly, van Dierendonck (2011: 1233, 1244) emphasized that humility is the second key characteristic of servant leadership belonging to the “core of servant leadership.” Similarly, Liden et al. (2014: 1434) stressed that “[l]eaders who are more concerned about others than themselves are humble.” Humility in leaders, in turn, has been conceptualized and operationalized to include self-transcendence (Mao et al., 2019; Morris et al., 2005; Ou et al., 2014, 2017).

Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006)—with its closely related forms of charismatic, visionary, and inspirational leadership (Dvir et al., 2002; Shamir et al., 1993)—is arguably the most prominent theory among the new-genre leadership theories (Hoch et al., 2018). Multiple studies have provided evidence for transformational leadership being powerful and effective (for early reviews, see Shamir et al., 1993; Bass, 1990). Such leaders “influence followers' values and aspirations, activate their higher-order needs, and arouse them to transcend their own self-interests for the sake of the organization” (Podsakoff et al., 1996: 259, 260). Hence, the transformational leader devotes his or her final attention to the organization and its objectives (van Dierendonck, 2011). At the same time, he or she shows consideration for each follower (Bass & Riggio, 2006: 7; Rubin et al., 2005; see Wang et al., 2005) and assesses whether and how much transformational leadership is currently adequate (Tepper et al., 2018). This is where transformational leadership differs from servant leadership (see Peterson et al., 2012). Transformational leaders focus on bringing themselves and their followers into service to the organization, which becomes the greater something. This attitude manifests in self-transcendence. Otherwise, it allows for abusive and exploitive leadership behaviors (Bass, 1990: 25; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). In this regard, Bass and Riggio (2006: 13, 14) stressed the

distinction between authentic transformational leaders, who “transcend their own self-interests,” and inauthentic transformational (pseudo-transformational) leaders, who “cater, in the long-run, to their own self-interests” (see Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). The difference between these two options is precisely the presence of either self-transcendence or “self-embeddedness” in the leader (Carey, 1992: 217). By way of illustration, Carey (1992: 229, 231) argued how self-embeddedness is evident in the “ideological” leadership of Adolf Hitler and how self-transcendence is evident in the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Based on the present literature, we argue that self-transcendence is the essential ingredient for practicing authentic transformational leadership behaviors. It is evident then that transformational leadership—like the other three self-transcendent leadership styles (Peterson et al., 2012: 586)—is not a clever dress to put on, but a deep-rooted attitude that most likely cannot be pretended in the long run (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Fu et al., 2010).

Moral leadership

Next, there is moral and ethical leadership (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2015). We make use of both terms here to refer to the same leadership theory, as they have been used as synonyms before (Solinger et al., 2020). Brown et al. (2005: 120) defined ethical leadership as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making.” Hence, the ethical leader is known for being a “moral person” and a “moral manager” (Treviño et al., 2000: 128). They ask: “What is the right thing to do?” (Brown et al., 2005: 125; see Waldman et al., 2017: 1300). Followers respond to leaders, who practice ethical leadership, with less unethical behavior themselves and fewer relationship conflicts with coworkers (Mayer et al., 2012: 166). Ethical leadership behavior shows consideration for others and for the organization; yet, at its most basic level, it is rooted in ethical principles, which is the greater something for the moral leader. This differentiates ethical leadership from servant and transformational leadership. In case of conflict, stakeholders and the organization (Brown et al., 2005: 123) have to stand back (Waldman et al., 2017: 1300): “sometimes the welfare of certain individuals may need to be compromised to ensure *the greater good*” [emphasis added]. In their effort to find a “neurological signature for ethical leadership,” Waldman et al. (2017: 1287, 1301) offered support that ethical leadership behavior is not about a situational masquerade: “Ethical ideology and leadership ... reflect ongoing ways of thinking and acting that we propose are best predicted by the relatively stable patterns of activity in the intrinsic brain.” Recently, Solinger et al. (2020: 509)

further theorized emergent moral leaders to “essentially defy an existing moral order and spur change in moral systems over time.” The authors state that moral leadership can emerge and develop within and beyond formal organizations (Solinger et al., 2020: 505, 522) to trigger social change if followers cooperate. They referred to real-life examples of emergent moral leadership (Solinger et al., 2020: 509): Elisabeth Whalen (Columbia Forest Products), Darcy Winslow (Nike), and Tariq Yusuf (Google). Taken together, ethical or moral principles transcend the ethical leader’s self, the stakeholders, and the organization (Treviño et al., 2000).

Spiritual leadership

Finally, there is spiritual leadership, which has been described to facilitate the experience of a “sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership” (Fry, 2003: 694–695). Spiritual leadership is discussed within the wider context of workplace spirituality, which Giacalone and Jurkiewicz (2010: 13) conceptualized as “aspects of the workplace ... that promote individual feelings of satisfaction through transcendence.” Although contested (Dent et al., 2005: 633–635) and disliked (Harvey, 2001), scholars have linked spiritual leadership to religious beliefs and practices (e.g., Low & Ayoko, 2020; Parameshwar, 2005), which can manifest, for example, in serving others. For spiritual leaders, a higher meaning and being, like a God, becomes the greater something (Fry, 2003; Reave, 2005). A prominent example is Nobel laureate Mary Teresa Bojaxhiu (“Teresa of Calcutta” or “Mother Teresa”) (Parameshwar, 2005) who built and led the Missionaries of Charity, a religious organization, to serve extremely poor people worldwide. She sacrificed her “ego-based self in the service of a higher purpose” to support lasting social changes (Parameshwar, 2005: 717, 719). Similar to servant leadership, research on spiritual leadership includes humility as a characteristic of spiritual leaders (Fry, 2003; Low & Ayoko, 2020; Reave, 2005). This is noteworthy because self-transcendence is the “cognitive core” of humility (Ou et al., 2014: 38). Although the spiritual leadership literature still appears to be in its infancy, the increasing attention for post-materialistic visions lends promising attractiveness to it (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2010: 14).

How does a meta-perspective of self-transcendent leadership evolve?

There is a tendency to theorize new-genre leadership styles separately. The following example illustrates this. In their seminal article on humble leadership, Owens and Hekman (2012: 801) summarized their findings: “humble leaders *model how to grow* to their followers.” Bass and Riggio (2006: 3) earlier stated in their overview on

transformational leadership, which had been developed by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985): “transformational leaders help followers grow and develop into leaders by responding to individual followers’ needs.” Despite this overlap, Owens & Hekman (2012) in their theorizing did not refer to the available and established knowledge about transformational leadership. There is real value to theorize the existing new-genre leadership styles in an integrated and joint effort so that one leadership style is reasonably informed by another.

Drawing on our theorizing, we can infer that a leader’s self-transcendence is at the cognitive core of servant, transformational, moral, and spiritual leadership, which causes them to form one cohesive body of leadership theory and to share common antecedents. Because these four major leadership styles possess a common root, we categorize them as *self-transcendent leadership theories*. At the same time, the entire domain of self-transcendent leadership theories can be differentiated and arranged along two dimensions: *predefinition of greater something* and *substance of cognitive core*. First, each of the four self-transcendent leadership theories that we focus on in this article, for illustrative purposes, has one specific greater something. Conversely, leaders who practice, for example, humble leadership—that is, another self-transcendent leadership theory (Mao et al., 2019; Ou et al., 2014)—do not assume a predefined greater something from the four types (Morris et al., 2005: 1331). Humble leaders can serve “other people” (e.g., Owens & Hekman, 2012) or “God” (e.g., Templeton, 1997), among other greater somethings. While humility requires a low focus on the self and a high focus on something other than the self, it is not bound to a specific greater something. Second, self-transcendent leadership theories may include an additional characteristic in their particular cognitive core. Specifically, transformational leadership includes visionary charisma, besides self-transcendence, in its cognitive core (see Dvir et al., 2002); humble leadership includes incremental self-theory (Dweck, 1999, 2008), besides self-transcendence, in its cognitive core (Wang et al., 2018). Instead of joining in the “prevailing trend [of] identifying new leadership influences” (Ou et al., 2017: 1916), our conceptualization of self-transcendence helps to connect otherwise scattered leadership styles and aids their construct validity.

Summing up, our conceptualization of self-transcendence contributes to the theorizing of leadership by integrating four major contemporary leadership styles into a meta-perspective of one cohesive body of self-transcendent leadership theories. This “theoretical integration” (Antonakis, 2017: 7; see Grandori & Morley, 2022) spurs a concerted search for mutual and/or separate antecedents, mediators and moderators, outcomes and boundary conditions, and choices for operationalization of so far rather loosely coupled styles of leadership. Further, it

suggests that a change from one leadership style to another (McClean et al., 2019) is especially likely among self-transcendent leadership styles due to their shared cognitive core.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

How can future research proceed?

Our theorizing has important consequences for leadership research. By developing a comprehensive and coherent conceptualization of self-transcendence and outlining four different greater somethings, we link self-transcendence to four theories of leadership and combine them into a meta-perspective. This allows us to both bring together and juxtapose different leadership theories. Moreover, our findings help to establish self-transcendence vis-à-vis self-interest, which is commonly seen as “economists’ canonical assumption” (Henrich et al., 2001: 73; Rocha & Ghoshal, 2006) and a core concern in management research (Bowie, 1991; Ciulla et al., 2018). In a next step, scholarship on unselfish behavior would greatly benefit from an increased understanding of when and why leaders develop self-transcendence. In other words, what is it that prompts some leaders to assume a greater something to forego self-interest? Looking at extreme opposites, such as abusive supervision (e.g., Li et al., 2021) vis-à-vis servant leadership, may point researchers toward fruitful directions. Giurge et al. (2021) found support that power activated self-interest in leaders. Thus, less power may prompt or help leaders to develop self-transcendence (see also Hoogervorst et al., 2012; Rus et al., 2012). We strongly encourage scholars to investigate the antecedents of self-transcendence conceptually and empirically (Morris et al., 2005; Pawar, 2009; Rauch & Ansari, 2022), which would also inform the shared genesis of new-genre leadership styles. In order to aid the operationalization of the self-transcendence concept in quantitative studies, qualitative research should start exploring the cognitive processes within self-transcendent leaders. In doing so, scholars will be able to draw on preliminary, yet promising, attempts (Weaver, 2010) to measure self-transcendence in organizational members (e.g., Ou et al., 2014; Yeager et al., 2014).

There is even anecdotal evidence that self-transcendence and self-interest can co-occur, which is an interesting paradox to be studied. Barack Obama (2008) stated in his commencement speech at Wesleyan University: “[I]t’s only when you hitch your wagon to something larger than yourself that you realize your true potential and discover the role you’ll play in writing the next great chapter in the American story. There are so many ways to serve.” He thereby not only called

for self-transcendence (“hitch your wagon to something larger than yourself” and “many ways to serve”) but also linked it to self-actualization needs (“realize your true potential”) (Maslow, 1943, 1954). This fine line between different orientations in practice underlines the importance to conceptualize self-transcendence precisely.

What are practical implications?

Our work offers a new theoretical lens to revisit familiar phenomena in the literature, such as coping with traumatic life events (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011). Viktor Frankl (2008: 85) stressed the existential value of a self-transcendent attitude toward life in his writing about the psychology of experiencing and surviving Nazi concentration camps: “[I]t did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us.” Remembering two cases of men who contemplated committing suicide, Frankl (2008: 87, 88) wrote: “A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life.” And recalling Nietzsche, Frankl (2008: 84, 88) stated that “[h]e knows the ‘why’ for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any ‘how.’” Frankl’s “why” is what we unpack and conceptualize as the four greater somethings in this article.

More recently, the climate activist Greta Thunberg (2019) gained considerable public attention, such as being featured on the cover of *Time* magazine (Haynes, 2019), and scholarly recognition (e.g., Farmer et al., 2019; Warren, 2019) with her very determined call for a radical shift in climate policy. Applying our conceptualizing of self-transcendence, we can now explain that Thunberg (2019: 24, 32, 35) in her work focuses on the greater something of moral principles (“moral duty”) and ideals (“rock-solid science” and “unite behind the science”). Her strict adherence to this form of greater something turned out to be an attractive cause for many people globally to follow her actions.

In addition, our conceptualization of self-transcendence reveals why even unselfish interests are at times insufficient to overcome grand challenges. The problem of climate change (e.g., Howard-Grenville et al., 2014), for instance, requires people to adopt a greater something that goes beyond immediate other people or an immediate community: In order to tackle climate change decision makers need to perform actions that will primarily benefit unknown people in other parts of the world in the future and nature as a whole. This is not appealing for some stakeholders and shareholders and hence difficult to implement. The public dispute between the then CEO of Siemens, Joe Kaeser, and the climate activist Luisa Neubauer on Siemens’ involvement in the controversial Carmichael coal mine project of the

Adani Group in Australia serves as an illustration.³ Joe Kaeser rejected claims to stop Siemens’ engagement in this project, due to the risk of losing firm credibility and the risk of unquantifiable liability for damages associated with such a withdrawal, and explained (Die Welt, 2020: 10): “If it had been perhaps my company, my money, my potential bankruptcy, I would have said, all right, I will take the chance [and stop it].” Luisa Neubauer replied: “The logic of Mr. Kaeser makes of course sense. ... What we need at this point [however] is a ‘bigger picture’, a global perspective, and that is when we just recognize that the Adani-project cannot be implemented this way” (Die Welt, 2020: 10). Drawing on our presented conceptualization, we can now compare the different greater somethings: Joe Kaeser holds the greater something(s) of other people and/or social collectives (i.e., Siemens as an organization), which leads him to continue Siemens’ engagement. In contrast, Luisa Neubauer, like Greta Thunberg, calls for the greater something of moral principles and ideals, which leads her to prompt Joe Kaeser to stop Siemens’ engagement. Hence, we can explain their conflicting conclusions, although they both hold a self-transcendent orientation.

CONCLUSION

Despite its explanatory potential, self-transcendence is an under-explored concept. In this article, we developed a comprehensive and coherent conceptualization demonstrating that self-transcendence is a cognitive orientation of accepting something other than one’s self to be of highest worth. We classified this something into four categories: other people, social collectives, moral principles and ideals, and metaphysical beings. We linked each greater something to a particular theory of leadership, integrated them into a meta-perspective of self-transcendent leadership, and highlighted implications for theory and practice. Thus, our theorizing offers a means not only to bridge and advance diverse theories of leadership but also to engage with one of societies’ core concerns and challenges, namely, self-interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed above declare that each listed author has substantially contributed to this manuscript.

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³Exemplary news coverage: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jan/13/adani-coalmine-siemens-ceo-has-empathy-for-environment-but-will-honour-contract>.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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