Leader Self-Awareness: Inception, Progress and Future

Frankie Rayis

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cmc_theses

Part of the Industrial and Organizational Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation
Leader Self-Awareness: Inception, Progress and Future

submitted to
Professor David Day

by
Francis Rayis

for
Senior Thesis
Fall 2019
December 9th, 2019
Abstract:
This paper examines the theoretical and empirical literature on the field of leader self-awareness, in an effort to provide an overarching review of the inception, development, and potential future of the theory. The concept’s origins of managerial self-awareness (MSA) and self-other agreement (SOA) are considered, as is the progress of leader-self awareness through a variety of updated metrics. Relationships with organizational outcomes and the ability to develop leader self-awareness in individuals are investigated, and the paper concludes with my assessment of the theory in a discussion of the field’s limitations and recommendations for future research, hopefully providing direction that will spell some of the oldest issues the literature has encountered.

Keywords:
Leader Self-Awareness, Organizational Outcomes, Leader Development
Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Professor David Day, to whom I submit this thesis for his continued support and guidance over the past four months. It has been an honor to write a thesis under someone so distinguished in the leadership field, someone who was just as happy to hear about my employment pursuits and chat about Big Ten football as he was to assist in the development of this thesis. I would also like to thank my friends who embarked on this semester long journey alongside me; our mutual encouragement has made all the difference when things have gotten tough. Lastly, I’d like to thank my family for the unconditional love I have received over the course of my life.
# Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 2: Origins ........................................................................................................................... 3

Chapter 3: Measurement of Leader Self-Awareness .................................................................. 12

Chapter 4: Relationships with Organizational Outcomes ......................................................... 21

Chapter 5: Developing Self-Awareness in Leaders .................................................................. 27

Chapter 6: Limitations and Future Research ............................................................................ 31

Chapter 7: Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 35

References ....................................................................................................................................... 37
Chapter 1: Introduction

The business world is changing in unprecedented ways. Gone are the days of simple, hierarchically structured chain of commands for more companies each year. As we move into a phase where firms are becoming flatter, self-awareness for people at the top of organizations has never been more important. In these companies that preach meritocracy of ideas and egalitarian structure, a successful leader knows that he or she cannot run his or her respective organizations alone. Understanding one’s own strengths, limitations, coworker perceptions and impacts on others is essential for any leader that wants to succeed in this rapidly changing climate; effective leaders must first properly understand themselves before they can attempt to understand their subordinates, peers, and superiors.

To try and fully comprehend the importance of self-awareness as a construct, it is helpful to step a foot into the world of human history. It has been theorized that self-awareness in humans was the driving factor in our evolution, occurring only some 40,000-60,000 years ago (Leary & Buttermore, 2003). Pointing to our earliest found evidence of artwork, the ritual of burial, and ornamental depictions of the human body, Leary and Buttermore (2003) suggest that during this time period, a heightening of self-awareness occurred, which subsequently set the stage for all of civilization.

Self-awareness helped humans evolve, and helps make humans different from all other species on the planet, serving as the last essential piece in our evolution. But as the world changes around them, ambitious leaders have no choice but to keep evolving right alongside it. In this paper, I seek to provide an overarching review of the past, present, and potential future of the field of leader self-awareness. I will begin by looking at the
origins of the theory in the late 20th century, before transitioning into the measurement of leader self-awareness. The relationship between organizational outcomes and leader self-awareness and the development of this concept in individuals will also be considered. Finally, the paper will conclude with a review of major limitations in both the literature and this paper, before providing direction for future research.
Chapter 2: Origins

The modern field of self-awareness research begins with Duval and Wicklund’s (1972) objective self-awareness (OSA) theory. OSA theory, while extensively constructed and developed since its conceptualization, can be summarized as a two-component theory of self-awareness, where the first component is one’s self-view and the second is the ability to predict the thoughts of others (Duval & Wickland, 1972). It must here be noted that though OSA is commonly referenced in many studies of leader self-awareness, the two are distinct concepts from one another. Taylor (2010) concisely and accurately describes how leader self-awareness distinguishes itself from OSA theory and self-awareness as a general concept, as “OSA theory is a theory of individual self-awareness” while leader self-awareness is “Focused on individuals who adopt the role of leader” (Taylor, 2010).

Though the theory of self-awareness has been researched for a very long time, the field of leader self-awareness is a very modern concept. It is also commonly discussed in reviews of leadership and leadership development, but not often at length and it rarely serves as the focus of an entire paper. Because of this, it does not have quite the extensive literature as other theories within the field of leadership, such as emotional intelligence, authentic leadership, transformational leadership and self-efficacy, for example. Despite being a young and relatively small field of study, leader self-awareness’s importance shouldn’t be understated and is virtually self-evident. The studies that the literature of leader self-awareness does have are mostly thorough, inventive, and contemporary works that have opened the doors to a world of exploration for new researchers. To my
knowledge there is not currently a modern, comprehensive review of the history and development of this concept in the literature, which is what this paper seeks to be.

The idea of Leader Self-Awareness traces its origins back to Wohlers and London (1989), who described the concept as “Managerial Self-Awareness” (MSA). Their paper helped set the basis for the entire field of literature on the subject, as before this study, most similar research was focusing on peer, supervisor, and subordinate ratings and their relations to individual performance (Wohlers & London, 1989). While recognizing these ratings as significant, Wohlers and London (1989) point out that the vast majority of these studies are not comparing these aforementioned ratings with self-ratings when trying to find relationships with employee performance.

Wohlers and London (1989) also differentiate themselves from the rest of the preexisting field of research with their operational definition of self-awareness: “the degree to which individuals see themselves as others see them.” This creates an important distinction from a more traditional definition about knowing one’s own strengths and weaknesses, and being willing to share them with co-workers, while still including this idea in the self-awareness measures they created (Wohlers & London, 1989).

While the study did make some additional minor contributions to the field, such as affirming the previous thoughts that getting as many co-workers as possible to review managers will yield the most accurate ratings, by far their most significant contribution was that to gain a full understanding of one’s impact on others in an organization, subordinate, peer, supervisor and self-ratings should be obtained (Wohlers & London,
This finding helped draw interest to the idea of Leader-Self Awareness, subsequently leading to the literature we have today.

Atwater and Yammarino (1992) built on Wohler and London’s (1992) research by using their operational definition in an effort to examine how self-awareness moderates the relationships between behavioral predictors and actual leader behavior, as well as leader behavior and organizational performance.

Looking at 91 leaders-in-training and 158 officers from the U.S. Navy, Atwater and Yammarino (1992) attempted to answer their research questions through administering questionnaires about the students’ and officers’ leadership to subordinates, and, in the case of the student trainees, their direct supervisors. Subjects were described as over-estimators, those in agreement and under-estimators based on their own self-evaluations of their leadership and the evaluations of their subordinates and superiors (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992).

Self-awareness was found to be a moderator in both relationships, that being between behavioral predictors and actual leader behavior, and between actual leader behavior and organizational outcomes (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992). It is important to note that for behavioral predictors, significance was only found in under-estimators and those in agreement, leading to the conclusion that for those who are over-estimators, self-awareness will not be an important facet of predicting behavior (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992). Also, the component found to be significant in correctly predicting leader behavior was the leaders’ experiences, while the leaders’ abilities were not correct in the same pursuit (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992).
Another major takeaway from this study was that managers who are classified into the over-estimator category have the lowest average ratings from others (subordinates and superiors), and those who fall into the under-estimator category have the highest average ratings from others (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992). This is incredibly significant to the field because before this finding, the reason for a discrepancy between self-ratings and other-ratings was ambiguous; it was plausible that over-estimators just rated themselves higher than under-estimators, yet this study suggests that these managers may be rating themselves the same on occasion, but the distinction to over-estimator and under-estimator could still exist from the average scores of their subordinates and superiors. Therefore, both self-ratings and the ratings of others make important contributions to the discrepancy.

Using Wohler and London’s 1989 operational definition of self-awareness, Atwater and Yammarino (1992) make a major step in validating self-awareness as an important driver of behavioral predictions for leaders and organizational outcomes, while finding a key relationship between the average ratings of others and over/under-estimator groups. Though their research was incredibly important to the development of the leader self-awareness literature, a few problems in their method bring up questions about whether these findings can truly be generalized.

To start, the U.S. Navy, like any other military organization, has a strict and rigid hierarchical structure, and one that is certainly in contrast with most modern companies around the world. Can it be taken that this research can apply fully to organizations outside of the field? Absolutely not. Additionally, only 8 of the 91 student-leaders were
female, and there was not a single female officer in the sample (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992). This undoubtedly brings up questions of generalizability as more and more organizations are making it a point of emphasis to put women in leadership positions.

Discrepancies are also found between the two samples; namely that for the student leaders, subordinates and superiors were surveyed, but for officers, only subordinate surveys were collected (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992). This issue may not be as large as others, however, for only a single superior was surveyed for each of the student-leaders. This is a large problem for any researcher that wants to examine this relationship as it has been shown that to gain a more accurate rating, leaders need multiple raters.

Wohlers and London (1989) describe how their study coincides with a rise in organizational efforts to provide multi-source feedback to leaders. These findings were later validated by Atkins and Wood (2002) who also found an aggregation of subordinate, peer, and supervisor ratings to be most effective. This is another way demonstrating what has more recently been referred to as 360-degree feedback, as Garavan, Morley, and Flynn (1997) explain, a concept with a name that may be misleading as it implies a creation of the theory when in actuality there is not a singular source that it started from. The idea of 360-degree feedback is to provide leaders with feedback from subordinates, peers, and superiors, which has been suggested to be most effective when measuring self-other agreement (SOA) (Wohlers & London, 1989; Atkins & Woods, 2002). Despite this, Atwater and Yammarino (1992) and Van Velsor, Taylor and Leslie (1993), the final of the three founding studies of leader self-awareness, do not decide to describe SOA using
ratings from subordinates, peers, and superiors. This problem of ignoring the importance of 360-degree feedback has become a common habit in the leader self-awareness field that will be touched on in greater detail in the coming sections.

Van Velsor, Taylor and Leslie (1993) use both Wohler and London’s (1989) study and Atwater and Yammarino’s (1992) study in an effort to learn more about why differences exist between self-ratings and the ratings of others, and see how the different groupings of managers, in this study called underraters, accurate raters, and overraters, affect performance (Van Velsor, Taylor, & Leslie, 1993). The trio also sought to further investigate the relationship between SOA and leader effectiveness, and to explore the subject of gender in relation to self-awareness and SOA (Van Velsor et al., 1993).

The researchers created three unique samples, where all members included had completed their benchmark assessment, a 1990 assessment from the Center for Creative Leadership (Van Velsor et al., 1993). The first was a random sample of 648 managers selected from the assessment database they were using, the second consisting of 168 managers from large companies (Fortune 100), and the third and final containing 79 hospital administrators (Van Velsor et al., 1993).

Subjects in all samples were then further distinguished by placement into the three groups of underraters, accurate raters, and overraters, based on the size of differences in their own scores on the self-assessment and the scores of subordinates, the same concept used in Atwater and Yammarino’s (1992) study, albeit with slightly different phrasing (Van Velsor et al., 1993).
Van Velsor, Taylor and Leslie (1993) confirm Atwater and Yammarino’s finding that the differences in self and other-ratings are a function of both self-ratings, and other-ratings, instead of simply being the result of managers over-inflating their own scores. Present in all of the samples used were underraters who rated themselves lowest out of all managerial groups, yet are rated highest by their subordinates, and over-estimators that rated themselves highest out of all of the managerial groups, yet were rated lowest by their subordinates (Van Velsor et al., 1993). This explains how both self and other ratings are responsible for the once unexplained discrepancy, as overraters suffer from self-rating inflation on these assessments, while also receiving worse average ratings from others.

Underraters were also considered by subordinates to be the best-performing managers, while overraters were considered to be the worst-performing (Van Velsor et al., 1993). The researchers point out that both under and overraters lack self-awareness in a way, yet underraters receive the highest self-awareness scores from others while overraters receive the lowest (Van Velsor et al., 1993). Van Velsor et al. (1993) suggest that underraters might be benefitting from subordinates’ affinity for leaders with greater humility. This sense of humbleness in leaders may make it easier for followers to relate with their leaders, as they will not be intimidated working with them and might feel that their opinions are valued. The opposite effect may also be taking place for overraters, who could be perceived as arrogant and therefore distance themselves from their followers.

This study also had multiple important findings on the topic of gender in leader self-awareness. The hypothesis that women would underrate themselves more often than
men was not supported in this study, despite being commonplace in other research (Van Velsor et al., 1993). Van Velsor et al. (1993) attribute this to the underrepresentation of women in many other studies that claim this effect to be present. Despite ratings themselves similarly to men on self-rated self-awareness, female managers received higher self-awareness scores from subordinate raters than their male counterparts (Van Velsor et al., 1993).

Though this study was monumental for the field as it confirmed previous thoughts about the discrepancy in self- and other-ratings and the organizational performance of over and underraters, while breaking ground with new insights on how gender is relevant to the topic, it was not without a blemish of its own. A major issue that must be noted in this study is the absence of superior and peer ratings in the sample. The researchers address this problem in their paper, claiming that they felt ratings would be inflated by superiors as it was known the scores would be made public, and that recent studies suggesting subordinates to be the most important raters were correct (Van Velsor et al., 1993). While these points are arguable, the latter one is in direct opposition to a study they cite themselves, Wohlers and London’s (1989) paper, that suggested getting a circumspect group of manager ratings (360-degree ratings) will yield the most accurate results.

These three studies, all published within a four-year period of each other serve as the origin for the existing literature of leader self-awareness, originally described as managerial self-awareness. Looking at the majority of studies that followed these three makes that clear; some or all of them are cited in almost every single paper. While
Wohlers and London (1989) set the original foundation for the field with their operational definition of managerial self-awareness and their findings on the discrepancy between self- and other-ratings, the importance of Atwater and Yammarino’s (1992) study and Van Velsor, Taylor and Leslie’s (1993) study should not be understated; these two papers helped solidify the validity of Wohlers and London’s (1989) findings, while also answering important questions they had left open.

Church (1997) pointed out that without a linking to other important variables, individual performance, for example, the significance of this theory would be limited. Church (1997) also noted that though the previous studies discussed in this paper were important in establishing a cursory relationship between MSA and performance, due to small sample size and their potential lack of generalizability, more research is needed to establish a strong, empirical relationship between MSA and the variable of performance. To help address these previous shortcomings, Church’s (1997) sample consisted of 134 high-performing and 470 average performing individual managers, both middle and senior level, from three different industries: tech, pharma, and an airline service. The ratings for each manager came from direct reports, 973 for high performers and 3,398 for average performers (Church 1997). This study improves on its predecessors not only with a better, more generalizable sample, but with multiple enhanced forms of measurement.
Chapter 3: Measurement of Leader Self-Awareness

Any empirical theory is only as good as its methods of measurement. In the original three studies mentioned, measurement was relatively constant. These researchers were using the operational definition that MSA is the level of agreement between self and other ratings, commonly referred to as Self-Other Agreement (SOA). Over the past two decades of research, the measurement of leader self-awareness has evolved in a variety of ways, starting with Church’s (1997) study.

Church (1997) did not disregard the work of past researchers in this regard, as one of his measures, described as “difference score approach” sought to calculate the same concept. However, his study enhanced this measure by creating two difference scores, the first to consider the absolute average difference in ratings, and the second to account for degree and magnitude of differences (Church 1997). This study points out that the previous studies have been obtaining a general rating measure for individuals (over-estimators, underraters, etc.) but have failed to measure “the cumulative degree of congruence across a series of specific comparisons” (Church 1997). 

Church also takes step forward in leader self-awareness measures by including “between manager correlations” or the coefficient of correlation of average self-ratings and average other-ratings, as well as including a revised version of Mark Snyder’s self-monitoring test (Church 1997).

Results from this study confirmed previous research on MSA, finding that managers who were higher performing are better at assessing their self-behaviors at work, therefore they have a higher level of MSA then average performing managers.
(Church 1997). It is also noted that general trends in self and other reports seen in the Atwater and Yammarino (1992) and Van Velsor et al. (1993) studies were seen to be replicated here (Church 1997).

While helping solidify the work of previous researchers is important, the real impact made here is the enhancement of measurement, which makes the findings even more concrete due to the circumspect nature and increased thoroughness of calculations used.

A major component of leader self-awareness is the aforementioned idea of SOA. The theoretical measurement of this phenomena is fairly simple, to account for it researchers must have self-ratings and other-ratings (subordinate, peer, and superior) and more or less compare the two, subsequently looking to see how relationships with variables (i.e. individual performance) change due to different levels of rating discrepancy.

The measurement of SOA is not entirely consistent among researchers. As previously discussed, Van Velsor et al. (1993) only included “other” ratings of subordinates of the managers they had selected in their sample. McKee, Lee, Atwater, and Antonakis’s (2018) more recent study on SOA and its relationship with personality factors reflects the increasing embrace of 360-feedback in the field, the notion that managers should get feedback from peers, subordinates and superiors, something that Wohler’s and London’s (1989) study supports. In their sample, all three of these raters were utilized in the “other” category (McKee et al., 2018).
Not all researchers are satisfied with measuring leader self-awareness using the SOA operational definition alone. Taylor (2010) contends that the concept of leader self-awareness needs to be redefined, as it is leaving out a major factor of what self-awareness is actually composed of. Taylor (2010) defines this factor as “the ability of the leader to anticipate his or her impact and influence on others”. This is a significant change from the majority of the preexisting field on the theory, where all emphasis is placed on the leader’s ability to accurately judge his or her own abilities and how he or she is viewed by others (Taylor, 2010). The study also points out that this component was actually described in original self-awareness literature but has been outrightly ignored with the inception of the field of managerial/leader self-awareness (Taylor, 2010).

Hall (as cited by Taylor, 2010) did agree that a leader’s impacts on others was part of the original, two pronged self-awareness theory that was born out of OSA, but even he does not choose to explore the component other than pointing out that it exists as a process of the leaders self-evaluation.

Taylor (2010) described this component of anticipation as a three pronged concept, the first being the beginning of this self-reflective process, the second being a self-reflection against previously set external standards and the final being the leader/s knowledge of his or her influence on followers (Taylor, 2010).

Because this purpose of this paper is setting a conceptual framework around this forgotten aspect of leader self-awareness, it is does not contain an experiment and therefore does not include specific, tested measurements within it. However, Taylor (2010) does provide examples that could easily be constructed into measurements, while
also concluding the paper by presenting a new measure that changes the way leader-self-awareness is researched.

This starts with the leader beginning to self-reflect, which has been explained by Silvia and Duval (2001), stating that a leader must first shift his or her attention to himself or herself for the self-awareness process to begin. Taylor (2010) suggests that these thoughts could manifest themselves in the form of long reviews of the self after a triggering incident, whether that is creating a written plan for one’s leadership, getting surprising feedback from colleagues or participating in activities that are designed to evoke reflective thoughts; all of these are events that could very easily be manipulated in a psychological experiment to test for their effectiveness, though finding an outcome variable that represents a change in leader-self awareness is not simply constructed (Taylor, 2010).

As the study points out, the set external standards are reflected in the perceptions of a leader’s followers, which we know can be measured in a variety of ways but is at its core simply the idea of feedback (Taylor, 2010). Self-perception here also can’t be ignored, as the study suggests that leaders who perceive themselves to be one way or another will often assume that others also see them this way and will subsequently decrease their motivation to seek feedback as they may see it as irrelevant (Taylor, 2010). This is in line with self-concept theories that demonstrate an individuals’ eagerness for positive, often inflated self-thought instead of actually finding out the true opinions of others (Baumeister, 1999). This also brings up questions about the relationship of this
phenomena with the previous findings of the actual perceptions of under and over-estimators.

The final piece of this forgotten component of leader self-awareness is the most difficult to measure, and this study doesn’t necessarily implicate any potential examples of what measurement of it could look like. It does suggest that a newfound outlook of a leader’s impact on others would elicit change in said individual, which could manifest itself in a change of the leaders work behaviors and potentially even the structure of the organization depending on the extent of the effect the realization has on the leader (Taylor, 2010). Hull and Levy’s (1979) findings in an alternative to the Duval and Wickland (1972) OSA theory support this notion, as they also suggest that once a leader discovers a discrepancy between his or her self-thoughts and reality, leaders will either ignore this and make no changes, or be strongly affected by it and seek to reduce the degree to which it exists. This would be possible to measure, though concluding that a change in behavior or company structure would solely be caused by the phenomena of increased awareness of impact on others would be far-fetched in most cases.

The paper ends with its most important contribution to both the literature of self-awareness as a whole and the measurement of the theory. Taylor (2010) suggests that this entire second component of self-awareness can be measured in a similar way to how SOA is measured, but in this case having leaders consider the way they are perceived by followers beforehand. This can be done by having leaders predict how they will be rated by followers before they have access to said ratings (Taylor, 2010). This, in combination with the more traditional measurements of leader self-awareness will allow leaders to
identify particular opportunities for development that should be prioritized over others (Taylor, 2010).

In Taylor, Wang and Zhan’s 2012 study, this measurement is put to work. The purpose behind this study was to explore the impact of the second component of self-awareness, leaders anticipating their impacts on others, on leader effectiveness (Taylor et al., 2012). Two research questions were developed for this study, the first being whether the prediction of others-ratings test is truly separate from the self-rating measure, as both measures come from the leader and the second being to see if the prediction measure can better describe leader effectiveness than the preexisting measure of self-other rating comparison (Taylor et al., 2012).

The results provided evidence that there is a distinction between leaders’ self-ratings and leaders’ predictions of other ratings, which researchers suggest may be explained by an individual’s urge to rate themselves positively being higher than their urge to confirm their thoughts via feedback from direct reports (Taylor et al., 2012). This helps to solidify Schoorman and Mayer’s (2008) findings into the literature, whose study demonstrated that prediction ratings are distinct from traditional self-ratings due to two completely separate forms of cognition. It was also suggested that this may make prediction ratings even more important in explaining leader effectiveness than self-ratings, as prediction ratings do not contain the almost unavoidable bias that the literature has shown exists in self-ratings (Taylor et al., 2012).

The most important finding of this paper was that the model that used the leader prediction-ratings was able to explain a greater amount of the variance in the outcome
variable of leader effectiveness: in this study, the second component of leader self-awareness, the ability to predict impact on others, was better at predicting leader effectiveness than the traditional measurement of SOA ratings (Taylor et al., 2012).

As groundbreaking as this study was for the field, being the first paper to verify that the “second component” of leader self-awareness was significant in practice, it is not without its own faults. As mentioned earlier, the actual sample of leaders who predicted the ratings of direct reports was very small, undeniably hurting the credibility of this paper. The sample as a whole is imperfect, as despite a relatively even split amongst gender, minorities are barely represented, though this is a reflection of a different problem within organizational leadership.

The largest problem with this paper may lie with the selected outcome variable, described as “leader effectiveness”. As important as this sounds at the surface level, using the reputational effectiveness scale limits the meaning of the term “effectiveness” as it is completely opinion-based and does not rely on any important business figures in characterizing leaders as more or less effective (Taylor et al., 2012).

In their 2012 paper, Ashley and Reiter-Palmon (2012) suggest that the field of leader self-awareness has failed in creating a comprehensive measurement scale, which they see as necessary for the continuation and development of the field. The study suggests that previously used forms of measurement have not accounted for the true complexities of self-awareness in leaders, mainly due to financial restraints (Ashley & Reiter-Palmon, 2012).
Researchers sought to develop a new scale in an effort to negotiate the shortcomings of preexisting measures (Ashley & Reiter-Palmon, 2012). The theorized scale of self-awareness was described as having four parts, an acceptance of a set of standards, internal and external, an understanding of one’s strengths and weaknesses, a desire for self-reflection and a desire to locate discrepancies in leader behaviors, traits, and agendas (Ashley & Reiter-Palmon, 2012). Overall, the model researchers created had very mixed results, regarding both predictive validity measures and the goodness of fit of the model (Ashley & Reiter-Palmon, 2012).

Despite this, the study is important to the field of leader self-awareness because it helps indicate the direction that the field is moving in. Researchers need to continually push for better scales of measurement for leader self-awareness, something that had not been occurring prior to Ashley and Reiter-Palmon’s (2012) study. The researchers also provide a few potential avenues for model construction in the future, as certain questions are yet to be explained, such as whether the development of leader self-awareness is a drawn out, continual process or a sudden leap triggered by a certain major life-event (Ashley & Reiter-Palmon, 2012). Another question that needs answering is what is the best way to develop self-awareness in our leaders, in a formal training session or simply by reflecting on actual work experiences which are much more random and filled with potential for development (Ashley & Reiter-Palmon, 2012).

Through the continuation of research and model construction of this variety, the field of leader self-awareness will continue to enhance measurement scales and therefore be better able to explain a variety of leader outcomes.
There is one major, overarching issue that is harming the measurement of leader self-awareness, at least from the SOA standpoint and it is described thoroughly by Fleenor et. al. (2010) in their review of SOA. The problem is a lack of consistency in measurement and how the concept is operationalized across the field of literature, which can vary greatly from one study to another and may explain some of the inconsistencies that researchers are finding (Fleenor et. al., 2010). In order for leader self-awareness to become widely accepted, understood and capitalized upon by organizations, consistency of measurement is a must, and Fleenor et al. (2010) suggest that new research needs to make use of the robust, accepted, and existing methods of measuring SOA instead of developing their own.
Chapter 4: Relationships with Organizational Outcomes

A theory is only as good as its implications are, and what would the point be of rigorously studying something and creating a variety of complex and painstakingly constructed measurement scales if the critical idea is not relevant? Thankfully this is not the case with leader self-awareness, as studies throughout its history highlight its importance, most notably through its relationship with organizational outcomes.

Though this relationship of leader self-awareness has been briefly described in earlier portions of this paper, for example Atwater and Yammarino (1992) finding that higher levels of SOA were related higher levels of performance in leaders, the studies that have been examined thus far have mostly been concerned with setting foundations for the field of literature, exploring various relationships with variables and creating and testing a plethora of measurements in order to strengthen the validity of this concept. Here, we turn to a portion of the literature focused on results: performance results, that is.

It is important to note that when discussing the relationship between leader self-awareness and organizational outcomes, one must look past the sole leader and consider the performance of both leaders and their followers. A leader’s impact on an organization can be captured by exploring the performance of the people he or she is leading, who of course make up the vast majority of organizations and without whom a leader’s behavior would be irrelevant.

Another major factor that must be considered when examining how a leader’s self-awareness can affect his or her organization is the attitudes of his or her employees. Employee attitudes have been shown time and time again in research to be effective
predictors of employee performance. In a meta-analysis of over 300 hundred studies and over 54,000 individuals, Judge et. al. (2001) concluded that job satisfaction does indeed have a significant affect on employee performance, and as one looks at jobs of greater complexity, the effect of satisfaction on performance only grows stronger. Therefore, if a leader fosters positive employee attitudes, it must be included in discussing his or her affect on organizational outcomes, especially in a current business climate where the average job is becoming more complex. Leaders who are more self-aware may be better equipped to ensure the work environment they create is conducive to breeding employee satisfaction from their enhanced understanding of follower abilities and needs.

A relevant starting to place for examining this portion of the literature is Moshavi, Brown and Dodd’s (2003) paper that explores how leader self-awareness impacts follower attitudes and performance. Drawing on studies previously discussed in this essay, most heavily Atwater and Yammarino (1992) and the operational definition of leader self-awareness they utilized, researchers point out that up to this point, there has been a lack of focus within the field of the actual implications of leader self-awareness on organizational outcomes, which are mainly characterized here as follower attitudes and performance (Moshavi et. al., 2003). Sosik, Sosik and Megerian (2001; 1999) are the only empirical studies that had previously been conducted to examine a potential relationship between leader self-awareness and any sort of performance measures, but these studies did not center their efforts around objective performance measures (as cited in Moshavi et al., 2003).
The subjects for the study’s sample come from the manufacturing department of a large tech company, more specifically 660 hourly workers who were asked to complete questionnaires for 28 different leaders, while also being asked about their satisfaction with their specific leaders and the job itself, and workers were also evaluated on their performance from an objective standpoint (Moshavi et. al., 2003). This performance assessment was not developed by researchers, but by the organization itself, and used regularly to ensure that shipping orders were going out on schedule and that the quality of these orders was being met. Leaders also completed the leadership assessment, Bass and Avolio’s (1990) multifactor leadership questionnaire, so that self- and other-ratings of leadership could be compared in a seamless manner (Moshavi et. al., 2003).

In a way similar to other studies in the preexisting literature, (Atwater & Yammarino, 1992; Van Velsor et al., 1993) leaders were classified into the three groups of overestimators, those in-agreement, and underestimators based on the differences in self- and other-ratings, or what has been discussed as SOA (Moshavi et. al., 2003). The results of this study were congruent with parts of the literature (ex. Van Velsor et al., 1993), most strikingly that follower attitudes on leader and job satisfaction of those who report to an overestimator are significantly lower than of those who report to both in-agreement leaders and underestimators (Moshavi et. al., 2003).

However, certain findings from this study greatly differ from past research. One of Atwater and Yammarino’s (1992) findings was that followers of underestimators were not more likely to have positive attitudes towards their managers and their jobs than those in agreement, which was not supported in this case (Moshavi et. al., 2003). The paper
suggests that this may be because underestimators don’t feel that they can adequately support their followers, and because of this they will put great effort into doing so, where in-agreement managers wouldn’t to the same extent (Moshavi et. al., 2003).

The confirmation and disputes that these results cause are important, but not so much as the major finding of the paper which revolves around the performance of employees within the three management groups. As overestimators have been suggested to relate to worse follower attitudes towards the leaders themselves and follower jobs, this group of managers was also found in this study to have the worst performing followers by a significant amount (Moshavi et. al., 2003). This study is groundbreaking as it is the first to make use of truly objective performance metrics for followers to link follower performance to different levels of leader self-awareness, and it gives the field some concrete evidence that overestimators are damaging to organizations from a business outcome perspective, not just from an employee attitude perspective (Moshavi et. al., 2003).

There is a major issue mentioned by Moshavi et. al. (2003) in their paper: a possible problem with the generalizability of their study due to the sample that was selected. Though it in no way makes this paper unimportant to the field of leader self-awareness, all workers being hourly paid employees at a manufacturing plant may diminish its overall significance, as much of the complexity found in more advanced organizations with full-salaried employees might be missing in this case (Moshavi et. al., 2003). This continues a theme of samples that may not be truly generalizable due to the
specific nature of the individuals within it (Ex. Atwater and Yammarino (1992) using naval officers and trainees).

Moshavi et al. (2003) also describe the potential threat of unaccounted for personality differences among leaders in the sample that were not controlled for, and suggest future researchers take personality into account when conducting their studies. This inference is in agreement with Seibert et al.’s (1999) study which demonstrated how subordinate attitudes can act as a function of personality factors (as cite in Moshavi et al., 2003).

Tiuraniemi (2008) sought to see how SOA potentially affects leader performance, in a method similar to what had been done in the studies that preceded Moshavi et. al. (2003), additionally looking to explore the relationship between SOA and the work environment that leaders create. Work environments may have an important role to play in leader self-awareness’s relationship with organizational outcomes, as the literature has suggested that healthy, engaging work environments have a positive effect on subordinate work performance (Tuckey et al., 2012). This study’s sample is centered around two social welfare organizations in Finland’s, consisting of 445 individuals, of whom 44 were managers (Tiuraniemi, 2008). Over 80% of the leaders in the sample were female, and each individual, leader and follower, completed a leadership questionnaire developed by Kivistö (1989) before ratings were compared and managers were grouped into the overestimator, in-agreement and underestimator categories, a process that mimics almost all other SOA rating procedures (Tiuraniemi, 2008).
Tiuraniemi’s (2008) study had multiple new and relevant findings for the field, while also further confirming the work of previous researchers of leader self-awareness (ex. Atwater and Yammarino (1992)). The paper describes that overestimators were most confident in their personnel management skill, something that the followers in this setting would clearly have a better indication of than the leader himself or herself (Tiuraniemi, 2008). Most notably, the study found that managers who were classified as overestimators were rated as less effective and described as having created a worse working atmosphere, which can be concluded to affect follower attitudes and satisfaction, and potentially have a negative performance impact on the organization (Tiuraniemi, 2008). Despite the potential lack of generalizability of the social welfare industry, Tiuraniem (2008) describes that in these organizations, “leaders are on an equal footing with their subordinates. If the leader over-rates her leadership, the subordinate might be more critical in their estimates.” This could strengthen the potential implications of this study as modern firms become flatter in structure.

The essay is not without its flaws, as it must be noted that when using a sample of leaders that is so heavily populated with one gender, females in the case of the present study, results may be confounded even though it is interesting as other studies in the field usually have an inflation problem with male leaders (Tiuraniemi, 2008).
Chapter 5: Developing Self-Awareness in Leaders

For the potential of leader self-awareness to be truly realized as a concept, the literature must show not only that the theory exists and has relevant implications on a variety of business outcomes, but also that developing this trait in leaders is possible. If not, the construct still has relevance, but organizations are not as likely to think of it as a top priority: instead it may be viewed as a random trait that some individual leaders have, and others do not.

Romanowska, Larsson and Theorell (2014) aimed to develop self-awareness in leaders through an interventional experiment, where leaders were exposed to various art forms including music, poetry and texts that would theoretically give a greater perspective of the human experience. Researchers wanted to investigate whether this art-based intervention would be superior to more traditional organizational intervention practices in developing self-awareness in leaders (Romanowska et al., 2014). It has been evidenced in past literature that these kinds of outside thinking interventions are superior for developing self-awareness as traditional intervention methods don’t contain an ethical piece which is essential for this process (Avolio et al., 2010).

Leaders (N=48) were distributed into control and experimental groups and chose four followers to serve as “other” raters for comparison in a traditional SOA context (Romanowska et al., 2014). Over the course of ten months, leaders in both groups underwent a dozen intervention sessions, with each session lasting 3 hours, and where the experimental group was exposed to the art performance and the control group to a lecture before similar reflection exercises took place (Romanowska et al., 2014).
After comparing leader and follower ratings before and after the intervention period, leaders in the experiential group were shown to have increased self-awareness at a significantly higher rate than leaders in the control group due to a much better SOA score at the final rating comparison (Romanowska et al., 2014). Leaders in the art-based intervention program actually shifted from overraters to underraters, as their own leadership self-ratings declined and other-ratings raised, and leaders subjected to conventional intervention training inflated their scores as the ratings of their followers declined, increasing the gap in SOA (Romanowska et al., 2014).

Romanowska et al. (2014) suggested that this may be accurately attributed to the overwhelming nature of the art performances leaders in the experimental group observed, often containing thought-provoking imagery and causing viewers to have profound experiences about human life. These interventions are thought to have forced leaders to step back and look at their own egos from a different perspective, allowing them to refocus priorities and leading to a better SOA performance. The research is especially encouraging considering leaders were selected from a variety of professions, rather than a single organization or industry (Romanowska et al., 2014).

As exciting as this creative approach to developing self-awareness is, a small sample size of under 50 leaders brings up questions about the generalizability of this approach if it was conducted on a larger scale. Nevertheless, it is an important study for the field and has major implications about the importance of using non-conventional methods to develop self-awareness in leaders.
Palmer (2014) also looked to see how a non-traditional, creative intervention method would affect the development of self-awareness in leaders, using a volunteering event instead of the art-based approach used by Romanowska et al. (2014).

Though the present research is framed through the lens of authentic leadership, a topic much larger than leader self-awareness, the literature has described leader-self awareness as an essential component of the authentic leader equation (Avolio, 2010). Similarly to the way in which art has been shown to evoke inward thinking processes, volunteering has been described as having a similar self-reflective effect on individuals (Phillips & Phillips, 2010).

The main goal of Palmer’s (2014) study was to see if there would be a larger increase of self-awareness in leaders who attended a volunteering event than in the individuals who did not, therefore finding whether or not volunteering could be a useful tool for leader self-awareness interventions in the future. It was found that individuals who completed this volunteering event saw a significant increase in their own self-awareness after the event, and over a 40-day span which followed the event, while members in the control group did not experience any increase in self-awareness and ended the study with lower ratings than their peers in the volunteer group, despite having higher self-awareness ratings prior to the event (Palmer, 2014).

The ability to develop self-awareness in leaders will be crucial to organizations trying to improve business outcomes and employee attitudes, and the studies discussed provide direction for behavioral interventions going forward. Creativity is needed to ensure that intervention programs are maximizing potential development, as the success
of non-traditional techniques such as art and volunteering have yielded fruitful results in past trials.
Chapter 6: Limitations and Future Research

A major limitation when examining the measurement in this field is that in almost all research of leader-self awareness there is a lack of consistent measurement of SOA across studies. As described by Fleenor et. al (2010), there has been wide range metrics trying to capture SOA, the most researched and arguably most important component of leader self-awareness, with little consensus achieved. In order to compare studies in an effective and thorough manner, I recommend researchers gravitate towards a singular statistical measure of SOA going forward, which I believe will help alleviate this issue. A simple, significant starting point for this change would be a consensus embracing of 360-degree feedback, which Wohlers and London (1989), the creators of MSA, saw as the most effective form of “other” ratings but has subsequently been excluded by many studies in the field.

Moving to the relationship of leader self-awareness and organizational outcomes, the main affliction that most SOA studies find themselves plagued with is clear: an inability to draw results from concrete performance measurements, instead opting to use estimates of effectiveness from followers who may be wildly inaccurate in judging the actual organizational effectiveness of their leaders. As mentioned at the beginning of chapter 4, for leader self-awareness to be taken seriously as an important facet of leadership, it needs to be shown to have impacts on organizational performance. A few of the explored studies have attempted to do so with the use of leader attitudes towards superiors and their jobs, which is accepted as a predictor of employee performance, therefore bettering the overall organizations performance. Yet often researchers feel these attitude measures are not enough and attempt to supplement them with “leader
effectiveness” ratings, which are subjective at best, and aren’t consistent in their measurement across studies.

Moshavi et. al. (2003) provides a refreshing and important example of where this field can go if the effort and diligence is put into it by using a completely objective performance measure. This gives the study more generalizability and importance than the others in the literature that have sought to describe the same relationships. Researchers in said study did benefit from the sampled organization having an existing measure of performance, which certain organizations either may not possess or may not be willing to share. Despite this, if future researchers hope to replicate the results from Moshavi et al. (2003), they must work to develop objective and consistent measures of organizational outcomes. This is echoed by Day et al. (2014) in their review of leader and leadership development stating “In order to test the relationship between self-awareness and leader effectiveness, there is a need to develop valid and independent measures of self-awareness.

Regarding the literature of the development of self-awareness in leaders, the exciting results suffer from a lack of replication. This portion of the field is relatively new and very small, and results of existing studies must be achieved again in the future to help solidify these creative methods as reliable, effective forms of self-awareness development.

A final, overarching problem with the current literature examining leader self-awareness is the utter failure to incorporate the second component of leader self-awareness, a leader’s impact on followers, into their model. Some of this can be
understood in the studies preceding Taylor’s (2010) study which resurfaced this long-lost component of the theory, but its absence diminishes the credibility of the existing field of study. Going forward, the inclusion of the second component of self-awareness with the existing tests of SOA should be the field’s standard, as its relevance to the literature has already been demonstrated.

This paper is not without limitations of its own, the most glaring being the lack of actual literature on leader self-awareness itself. While certain portions of the theory have been researched very extensively, SOA for example, there is a limited number of existing scholarly articles to review. This isn’t surprising considering the recency of the theory, and in certain chapters, the development of self-awareness in leaders for example, dissertations had to be included due to the scarcity of published scholarly articles on the subject. Hopefully if the field can continue to grow and develop over the coming decades, a more comprehensive review that relies solely on published journal articles and books will be achievable.

It also must be noted that when writing a senior thesis on any theory in any discipline, time is absolutely a factor. Having a four-month semester to try and create a thorough and complete overview of this topic may have affected me in my research and construction of the previous chapters, whereas a true scholarly article does not necessarily suffer from the same short timeframe.

Underraters or underestimators have been shown throughout the literature to be the managers that subordinates most prefer to work with and perceive as more effective
than leaders in the other two categories. Because of this, the relationship between leader self-awareness and leader humility should be explored further in future research.

Studies on the development of self-awareness in leaders has suggested that non-traditional methods of intervention training may be better at increasing self-awareness in leaders. I see this as a huge opportunity for the field going forward, as there are many of these creative avenues to be explored that may yield similar results for leaders, making them step into uncomfortable, provocative settings and forcing them to reevaluate from a different lens. I see potential in interventions focused around meditation, yoga, and extended service trips to foreign countries.

Overall, the most important recommendation I can give for future research is for the field to come to a consensus on measurement, not just for SOA but also for organizational performance and an embracing of the second component of leader self-awareness in all new studies. Doing so would allow this field to come together and negate skepticism that arises from the lack of consistency that is currently present.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

The ever-changing nature of the current workplace requires leaders who are attentive to their own strengths and limitations and can see the importance of surrounding themselves with co-workers who complement their own abilities. A comprehension of one’s impacts on others also requires leaders to have a concrete understanding of themselves before they can gain an understanding of their co-workers. Self-awareness played a key part in the evolution of our species and will remain essential to leaders in an evolving workplace. Leader self-awareness is a major component of the leadership equation, despite not being researched and described to the same extent as other major theories within the topic.

Leader self-awareness has been given a historical context in this paper, and its importance has been reflected in sections about the theory’s measurement, relationship with organizational outcomes, and its ability to be developed within leaders. Though research on the field as whole is limited, the potential can be seen through these studies which suggest relationships with positive co-worker perceptions and attitudes, leader ratings of self-awareness, and performance measures for organizations.

A lack of consistency across studies in the leader self-awareness literature is the issue currently afflicting the field the most, and if the concept is to develop and grow in the way that it can, this problem will need to be remedied. This solution can only happen if a concerted effort is made by all researchers in the literature going forward.

There are endless avenues to explore, and I hope that future researchers are not discouraged from the small literature or absence of consensus measurements, but instead
encouraged by the potential to make a real impact in an important field and solve issues that their predecessors could not.
References


