Is it normal to lead? Evaluating the role of superiority and similarity in leader emergence

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Introduction: Attempts to explain the leader emergence process have resulted in several seemingly contradictory assertions about who attains power and influence in groups. As such, this study pioneers a novel integration of the two dominant explanations of leader emergence: superiority (trait-based perspective) and similarity (social identity perspective). We posit that the two primary aspects of non-normality—uniqueness and strangeness—have opposing relationships with leader emergence in groups.

Methodology: Through multiple regression analyses, we utilized peer and self-evaluations in a sample of 308 participants in seven social organizations to assess whether and how non-normality evaluations predict formal and informal leadership emergence.

Results: This study provides general support for a relationship between the non-normality dimensions and leader emergence, particularly when evaluations are made by peers. Additionally, we demonstrate that non-normality evaluations predict leader emergence above and beyond evaluations of the Big Five.

Discussion: This research lays the groundwork for a new era in leadership research that embraces the duality of individual traits and social perceptions, paving the way for a more nuanced and effective approach to leader emergence within dynamic group settings.

KEYWORDS

personality, leader emergence, normality, leader categorization theory, social identity theory, social influence, leadership

> *"Followers subordinate themselves, not to an individual whom they perceive as utterly different, but to a member of their group who has superiority at this time and whom they perceive to be fundamentally the same as they are, and who may, at other times, be prepared to follow."*
> –Gibb (1954, p. 915)

Introduction

The importance of leadership for both organizations and societies has been clearly established using both historical and empirical evidence (Hogan and Kaiser, 2005; Hogan, 2007). Moreover, attaining positions of power and prestige matters greatly for the individual in that position themselves. Status in social groups has been associated with a wide variety of outcomes ranging from wellbeing to longevity (Marmot et al., 1998) and is considered one of the most critical dimensions of social interaction (Mumford, 1906; Ganzboom and Treiman, 1996; see also Cheng et al., 2010; Anderson et al., 2015). Consequently, answering the question of who achieves positions of power is of great importance. It is not surprising, then that many sub-disciplines of psychology and

management (e.g., Judge et al., 2002; Neubert and Taggar, 2004; Bass, 2008; Hogg, 2010; Oc and Bashshur, 2013; Badura et al., 2022; Gardner et al., 2024) have attempted to address the question of the characteristics and contexts associated with leader emergence, both formal (i.e., holding titled offices or leadership roles with defined power and responsibilities) and informal (i.e., being regarded as influential or powerful by other members of one's group).

Research on leadership emergence has long been dominated by trait-based approaches for historical and pragmatic reasons (Zaccaro, 2007; see also Badura et al., 2022). Empirical findings have largely supported this approach, with numerous meta-analyses showing robust relationships between leader characteristics and leadership outcomes (Lord et al., 1986; Judge et al., 2002; DeRue et al., 2011; Ensari et al., 2011; Grijalva et al., 2015; Badura et al., 2018; Landay et al., 2019). While not denying the role that traits play in the leader emergence process, more contemporary theories of leader emergence take a follower-centric approach that focuses on the social-cognitive processes underlying perceptions of status and leadership (Acton et al., 2019). Two of these frameworks, leadership categorization theory (Epitropaki and Martin, 2005) and the social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, 2001; Hogg and van Knippenberg, 2003), focus on the evaluations of the leader made by followers and the role that they play in determining the emergence of leadership. Research has established that two of the dimensions most relevant to leadership perceptions are those spoken of by Gibb (1954): superiority and similarity. However, to date, no studies have attempted to reconcile the trait and cognitive approaches to understanding leader emergence in a large-scale field study. Failing to reconcile these perspectives can lead to an incomplete understanding of leader emergence processes, potentially conflicting conclusions on who emerges as a leader, and overlooking the multifaceted nature of the leader emergence phenomenon. Trait approaches tend to case individual differences as relatively static, whereas social cognitive approaches, by getting into the more specific processes by which people vary, potentially provide more leverage points for developmental interventions and provide a better understanding of behavioral triggers. Further, relying on a single perspective could potentially lead to conflicting conclusions. For example, wherein trait-based research might suggest that high extraversion consistently predicts leadership, cognitive-based research might show that an extraverted individual is not perceived as a leader in specific group contexts where different traits are valued. Finally, by not reconciling these perspectives, we risk overlooking the multifaceted nature of leader emergence that includes the individual's inherent characteristics and the social-cognitive processes of group members. Thus, this holistic view is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of leadership dynamics.

Consequently, in order to reconcile the trait and cognitive frameworks for understanding leader emergence, the present study utilizes an assessment of two dimensions of non-normality (uniqueness and strangeness), which reflect the core evaluative features (superiority and similarity) that have been proposed as the basis for selecting leaders in cognitive accounts of the leader emergence process. The current study adopts a multi-source

framework in order to better reflect how these evaluations are shared among group members and influence leader selection processes (Roberts et al., 2006). Also, in consideration of the distinctions between formal and informal power or leadership in organizations and the potential that each may have unique antecedents and processes, we consider both formal leadership positions and informal social influence outcomes. Further, by collecting this data in a field setting, we aim to increase the generalizability of our results to real-world settings. Overall, the present study aims to assess the degree to which deviations from normality can help to explain leader emergence outcomes above and beyond traditional trait accounts and provide new avenues through which trait and cognitive accounts of leadership may be further integrated. By integrating these perspectives, we not only resolve potential issues present in prior accounts of leader emergence, but also establish a foundation for a new leadership research phase that recognizes the interplay between individual traits and social perceptions, leading to a more sophisticated and effective understanding of leader emergence in dynamic group contexts.

Theoretical background

Superiority: trait-based leader emergence

The trait approach to understanding leader emergence flows from the "Great Man" theory of leadership (Hoffman et al., 2011). This early approach to explaining leadership suggested that great leaders were born and not made because their emergence as leaders was due primarily to their "extraordinary endowment" (p. 2) of attributes deemed valuable for leadership (Organ, 1996). Those who emerged as great leaders were more intelligent, charismatic, decisive, creative, adaptable, and ambitious than those who failed to emerge as leaders. Thus, great leaders emerge because they are *superior* to those they lead regarding the traits necessary to lead. The process by which this occurs is elaborated on in leader categorization theory (Epitropaki and Martin, 2005; Lord et al., 2020), which postulates that group members evaluate one another on critical dimensions and tend to elevate the individuals who most closely match their shared prototype of an ideal leader (Van Quaquebeke et al., 2011; Van Quaquebeke and Van Knippenberg, 2012).

Drawing from this trait-based, prototype-matching approach to leadership, the majority of early leader emergence research focused on the search for traits that distinguished leaders from followers (Smith and Foti, 1998). Although the validity of this approach has faced criticisms (Stodgill, 1948; Mann, 1959), it remains the predominant approach to studying leader emergence (Kenny and Zaccaro, 1983; Lord et al., 1986; Judge et al., 1999, 2009; Antonakis, 2011; Antonakis et al., 2012; Badura et al., 2022). One reason for this is the ample evidence that traits play an important role in determining who achieves positions of prominence in groups. For example, Kenny and Zaccaro (1983) estimated that between 48 and 82% of the variance in leadership emergence is due to personality and meta-analytic reviews have found relationships between leader emergence and trait Extraversion, Conscientiousness, Emotional

Stability, and Intellect/Openness (Judge et al., 2002). However, research has also suggested that the relationships between traits and leader emergence outcomes can depend on how leader emergence is operationalized (Anderson et al., 2001; Harms et al., 2007). That said, despite these variations, trait Extraversion has consistently proven to be a robust predictor of leadership emergence across various status and leadership criteria (Grosz et al., 2024). One explanation for this is that individuals who tend to talk more during group tasks are assumed to be more knowledgeable or task-competent (Paulhus and Morgan, 1997; Jeung, 2013; Anderson and Cowan, 2014; Grijalva et al., 2015; Grosz et al., 2020).

It is perhaps no surprise then that intelligence has also been shown to be one of the primary determinants of leader emergence and perceptions of leadership (Stodgill, 1948; Mann, 1959; Bass, 1990; House and Aditya, 1997; Antonakis, 2011; Badura et al., 2022). For example, an early review of the leader emergence literature (Lord et al., 1984) reported that intelligence was the strongest predictor of leadership among 59 attributes. Taken together, the evidence regarding traits and leader emergence broadly supports the idea that leaders are superior to, or perceived as being superior to, those who do not emerge as leaders concerning the traits critical for effective leadership.

Similarity: social identity theory of leadership

In contrast to the leader categorization approach to leader emergence, the social identity approach to leadership (Hogg, 2001) focuses on the representativeness of group members rather than the exceptionality of a single group member when predicting leader emergence. The social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, 2001) asserts that the person most likely to be perceived as a leader will best capture the relative *similarities* among in-group members and differentiate themselves from a relevant out-group. Thus, representativeness is the primary issue in the social identity perspective on leader emergence. People who are most prototypical or representative of the group members' identity are perceived to best represent the behaviors, values, and attitudes to which other group members are conforming (Hollander, 1958). "As a result, there is a perception of differential influence within the group, with the most prototypical member appearing to exercise influence over less prototypical members" (Hogg, 2001, p. 189).

This perceived influence allows prototypical group members to assume an embryonic leadership role within the group. Individuals who possess both the motives and traits that are conducive to assuming leadership positions will then actively begin to exert influence on the other group members. For this reason, "the behavior of highly prototypical members is likely to be attributed, particularly in stable groups over time, to the person's personality rather than the prototypicality of the position occupied" (Hogg, 2001, p. 190). As this quote indicates, the social identity theory of leadership credits prototypicality as the primary and crucial role in leader emergence. Thus, similarity may be as critical a component of leader emergence as superiority.

Formal and informal leader emergence

Leader emergence is one of the most widely studied outcomes in the broader leadership literature, with philosophical debates concerning who should lead stretching back thousands of years and more than a century of empirical studies. Although some notable reviews of the leadership literature do not differentiate between formal and informal leadership (e.g., Judge et al., 2002), most recent reviews have agreed that the distinction between formal and informal leadership is both conceptually and empirically meaningful (Hanna et al., 2021; Badura et al., 2022; Grosz et al., 2024). Specifically, informal leadership involves a group granting a particular individual more influence over group decision-making and processes but not necessarily changing their formal status or authority by giving them a title (Badura et al., 2022). Informal leadership is, therefore, frequently assessed by group consensus ratings of social influence. Formal leadership involves the group bestowing an individual a recognized title that includes specific powers and responsibilities (Badura et al., 2022). Although the antecedents of these two types of leadership emergence tend to overlap, they nonetheless can show different patterns. For example, communal traits such as Agreeableness and Conscientiousness may be more associated with informal rather than formal leader emergence because individuals displaying these characteristics may be acknowledged as significant contributors to the group, but they themselves may not aspire to the public recognition that comes with a formal role. Consequently, in the present study, we assess both of these types of leader emergence separately.

Hypotheses development

Normality evaluations

The trait approach and social identity theories of leadership propose that superiority and similarity, respectively, are key factors in leader emergence processes. We propose that normality evaluations offer a means of accounting for both of these factors and integrating these two theoretical perspectives. Normality evaluations are based on work by Wood et al. (2007; see also Kim et al., 2023). They represent trait-like perceptions held by the self and others, representing global assessments of an individual's characteristics, attitudes, values, and behaviors. Based on factor analyses of person- descriptors, Wood et al. (2007) found that deviations from what is perceived as normal could readily be divided into two different types, which, although related, are largely independent of one another and represent the positive and negative aspects of deviating from the norm.

The positive side of this deviation—uniqueness—encompasses the idea of being viewed as unique, exceptional, or remarkable. Being considered non-normal on this dimension would indicate a deviation from the norm in a positive, socially-enhancing manner. These evaluations are typically associated with agentic traits (e.g., openness to experience, extraversion).[1] In the context of the

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1   Although the two dimensions of non-normality assessed in the current study, uniqueness and strangeness, have been shown to be related to both personality traits and demographics (Wood et al., 2007), it is likely that both

trait approach to leader emergence, individuals rated highly on this dimension would be expected to achieve prominence or positions of influence. However, an individual described as non-exceptional or average on this dimension—thus, not deviating far from normality—would be unlikely to garner attention from group members and would likely be overlooked as a potential leader. Thus, we predict the following:

> *Hypothesis 1a. Evaluations of uniqueness are positively related to attaining formal leadership positions.*
>
> *Hypothesis 1b. Evaluations of uniqueness are positively related to aggregated peer ratings of social influence.*

The negative side of non-normality, strangeness, involves being seen as peculiar, strange, or bizarre. Not being considered normal in this context would indicate a deviation from the norm in a negative, possibly anti-social, manner. These evaluations are often associated with a lack of communal attributes (e.g., agreeableness, conscientiousness). In the social identity theory of leadership framework, an individual with high scores on this dimension would be unlikely to be perceived as influential or selected for leadership positions because they are seen as unrepresentative of their group. On the other hand, an individual perceived as relatively normal in this context would be more likely to be recognized as a prototypical individual of the group. Because of this, they would be more likely to be considered for leadership positions. Thus, we predict the following:

> *Hypothesis 2a. Evaluations of strangeness are negatively related to attaining formal leadership positions.*
>
> *Hypothesis 2b. Evaluations of strangeness are negatively related to aggregated peer ratings of social influence.*

Further, we expect that normality evaluations are proximal considerations in who should be afforded power. That is, when deciding whom to nominate, elect, or consider as a leader, critical evaluations concern decisions of whether the candidate is "normal," "exceptional," or "strange." Consequently, we hypothesize that both dimensions of non-normality would predict leader emergence above and beyond the Big Five which can be considered more distal considerations in who should be afforded power. Moreover, because normality processes are most relevant to the group members who nominate or elect leaders, we hypothesize that although both self- and peer-ratings of non-normality may be related to formal and informal leader emergence, the associations between peer-rated non-normality and the leader emergence outcomes will be stronger. As such, we predict the following:

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self- and peer-based evaluations of these traits could, and likely are, based on a wide array of characteristics including abilities, values, and behavioral patterns and are influenced by the degree to which these characteristics are publicly disclosed or made obvious (Funder, 1995; Hogan and Roberts, 2000; McAbee and Connelly, 2016; Solomon and Vazire, 2016). Nonetheless, reviews of leader emergence research have suggested that all of these elements of character are involved in leadership emergence processes (Badura et al., 2022; Galvin et al., 2024).

> *Hypothesis 3. Peer ratings of non-normality, both uniqueness and strangeness, will be more strongly associated with attaining both formal leadership positions and aggregated peer ratings of social influence than will self-ratings of non-normality.*

Methodology

Participants

A total of 308 participants (164 women) were recruited from four fraternities and three sororities. Fraternities and sororities present a unique setting to test our hypotheses because the organizations are invariably social, and officers are directly voted into formal positions by their peers. Thus, evaluations of non-normality and their influence on leader emergence should be especially salient in this sample. According to Paterson et al. (2016), the average effect size for relationships between individual difference variables and leadership-related outcomes is 0.18. Based on this, a sample size of 240 is sufficient to achieve sufficient statistical power (Cohen, 1992).

Participants were paid 10 dollars for completing the survey, and the organization was also compensated for their assistance with the study. The average age of the participants was 19.6 years old (SD = 1.1), and nearly all were Caucasian.

Measures

Self-rated non-normality

Participants rated themselves on the two non-normality dimensions, each assessed with six items using adjectives reported by Wood et al. (2007). The items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) Strongly disagree to (5) Strongly agree. Uniqueness was measured by the items "extraordinary," "exceptional," "unique," "original," "average" (R = reversed), and "ordinary" (R). The scale had an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.74. Strangeness was measured by the items "abnormal," "odd," "strange," "unusual," "weird," and "normal" (R) and had an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.86.

Peer-rated non-normality

Each participant was rated by an average of three random peers in the organization using the same items mentioned above. For each person, ratings were averaged across all ratings of that person. The intraclass correlations (ICC; Shrout and Fleiss, 1979) for ratings of uniqueness and strangeness were 0.13 and 0.27, respectively.

Formal leadership positions

To assess who had emerged into a formal leadership role (i.e., currently held an executive office), participants were asked to self-report the offices they held in the organization. Responses were categorized for executive office positions only (0 = held no executive office, 1 = held an executive office), which was limited to executive board positions (e.g., president, vice-president, treasurer). Within a sub-sample that was eligible

for such positions,[2] 9% of the participating members held executive positions.

Perceived social influence

To assess who had emerged as a leader, albeit not in a formal capacity, perceived social influence was assessed by gathering peer ratings of how much influence each organization member possessed. Participants rated the extent to which each member "has influence among other people in the organization," with values ranging from 1 (weak) to 7 (strong). An average of 39 raters assessed each individual's social influence. For each person, ratings were averaged across all participants who had rated the person. The intraclass correlation for ratings of social influence was positive for each of the organizations sampled [mean ICC (2, 1) = 0.34]. Consequently, across organizations, there was good reliability for ratings of influence (α's range from 0.90 to 0.98). Because this variable was substantially linked to seniority, the effect of tenure was removed by using the unstandardized residual of influence regressed on the number of years spent in the organization.

Control variables

We controlled for Big Five Personality because, as previously mentioned, several dimensions have been shown to correlate with leader emergence and social influence, and we wanted to demonstrate the ability of normality evaluations to predict leader emergence above and beyond these traits. A 53-item adjective-based measure of the Big Five personality traits (Goldberg, 1993) was employed. Participants rated how much they agreed the adjectives were descriptive of them in the context of their organization on the same 5-point scale as the normality items. Alpha reliability coefficients ranged from 0.74 to 0.87. We examined the predictive capabilities of normality ratings above and beyond the Big Five traits using logistic regression for executive office and multiple regression for perceived social influence.

Results

Table 1 presents the sample's descriptive data and correlations between the personality variables, normality ratings, formal leadership positions, and perceived social influence. Results at the zero-order level showed that both holding executive office and peer-rated social influence were positively correlated with Extraversion ($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$ and $r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$, respectively). Peer-rated social influence was also positively correlated with Conscientiousness ($r = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$) and Intellect ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$). Additionally, consistent with our hypotheses, holding an executive office was positively associated with self-rated uniqueness ($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.01$). Possessing social influence was also positively related to both self and peer-rated uniqueness ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$ and $r = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$, respectively) and negatively related to peer-rated strangeness ($r = -0.14$, $p < 0.05$).

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[2] Only individuals who had been members for more than 1 year were eligible for officership positions.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables.

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Extraversion	3.58 (0.72)	*0.87*									
2. Emotional stability	3.19 (0.51)	0.18**	*0.80*								
3. Agreeableness	4.13 (0.55)	0.35**	0.26**	*0.78*							
4. Conscientiousness	3.75 (0.60)	0.23**	0.04	0.48**	*0.82*						
5. Intellect/openness	3.80 (0.49)	0.53**	0.03	0.36**	0.35**	*0.77*					
6. Self-rated uniqueness	3.35 (0.61)	0.51**	0.04	0.23**	0.25**	0.57**	*0.74*				
7. Self-rated strangeness	2.39 (0.78)	−0.27**	−0.25**	−0.28**	−0.29**	−0.06	0.05	*0.84*			
8. Peer-rated uniqueness	3.39 (0.46)	0.12*	0.01	0.07	0.05	0.04	0.06	0.03	–		
9. Peer-rated strangeness	2.41 (0.60)	−0.01	0.07	−0.07	−0.04	0.18**	0.16**	0.22**	−0.16**	–	
10. Executive office	0.09 (0.29)	0.20**	−0.08	0.08	0.11*	0.13*	0.20**	0.03	0.03	−0.02	–
11. Social influence	3.92 (1.07)	0.42**	−0.01	0.10	0.21**	0.29**	0.28**	−0.07	0.19**	−0.14*	0.42**

$N = 281$–308.
Alpha reliabilities are in italics on the diagonal for self-report measures.
$*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$.

Attaining formal leadership positions

Hypotheses 1a and 2a stated that normality evaluations of uniqueness and strangeness would be related to attaining formal leadership positions. However, only self-rated uniqueness showed a significant correlation ($r = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$) with holding executive offices. To further evaluate this relationship within a multivariate framework, the personality trait and non-normality predictors were also entered into regression analyses predicting the two leadership emergence outcomes. The results of these regressions are presented in Table 2.

Although Extraversion continued to be a significant predictor of attaining executive office ($B = 1.18$, $p < 0.05$), neither self-rated nor peer-rated non-normality was a significant predictor of attaining higher office when phenotypic personality traits were controlled for ($B = 0.79$, $p = 0.14$ for self-rated uniqueness, $B = -0.15$, $p = 0.78$ for peer rated uniqueness, $B = 0.50$, $p = 0.12$ for self-rated strangeness, and $B = -0.41$, $p = 0.38$ for peer-rated strangeness). Therefore, hypotheses 1a and 2a received only limited support.

Perceived social influence

Hypotheses 1b and 2b predicted that normality evaluations of uniqueness and strangeness would be related to peer ratings of social influence. At the zero-order level, self-rated uniqueness ($r = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$), peer-rated uniqueness ($r = 0.19$, $p < 0.01$), and peer-rated strangeness ($r = -0.14$, $p < 0.05$) all displayed significant relationships with social influence. In a simultaneous regression, both peer-rated uniqueness ($B = 0.29$, $p < 0.05$) and strangeness ($B = -0.30$, $p < 0.05$) were significantly related to being considered influential in one's organization. That is, above and beyond the Big Five variables, both being considered above average or exceptional (i.e., superior) and not being considered weird or strange (i.e., similar) were associated with having more social influence. Thus, hypotheses 1b and 2b were supported.

Self and peer ratings

Hypothesis 3 predicted that peer ratings of non-normality would be stronger predictors of both leader emergence and social influence than would self-ratings. The difference in the effects between self- and peer-rated non-normality were examined using Steiger's (1980) test of differences of correlations. Contrary to our expectations, at the zero-order correlational level, self-rated uniqueness was a significantly stronger predictor of holding executive office than peer-rated uniqueness ($z = 2.10$; $p < 0.05$), but not social influence ($z = 1.14$, $p = 0.25$). Further, there was no significant difference between the correlations for self- and peer-rated strangeness for either executive office ($z = 0.68$; $p = 0.51$) or social influence ($z = 0.94$; $p = 0.35$). However, these self-ratings were no longer statistically significant predictors when these relationships were controlled for Big Five personality traits in our multiple regression analyses (see Rohrer, 2018). In contrast to the zero-order effects, the peer ratings of non-normality continued to

be statistically significant predictors of possessing social influence when controlling for Big Five personality traits ($\Delta R^2 = 0.05$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, hypothesis 3 was partially supported.

Discussion

Prior research had established the importance of possessing superior traits (Lord et al., 1984; Grosz et al., 2024) and of being similar to group prototypes (Hogg, 2001; Badura et al., 2022) in determining who attains positions of power and influence. However, to date, no empirical research has attempted to jointly evaluate and integrate these perspectives by directly assessing the perceptions of followers in functioning organizations where they pick their leaders. Without integrating these approaches, our understanding of leader emergence remains fragmented due to an incomplete understanding of leader emergence processes, potentially conflicting conclusions on who emerges as a leader, and overlooking the multifaceted nature of the leader emergence phenomenon. Consequently, the question of whether or not such attributions had additive, or even significant, effects in determining which individuals came to power has been largely unaddressed. To address this oversight, we sought to integrate and evaluate leader categorization theory with the social identity theory of leadership by operationalizing their primary tenets utilizing non-normality evaluations while controlling for traditional personality trait predictors. We utilized a new measure of subjective normality (Wood et al., 2007) that captured group superiority and similarity in such a way as to make the leader categorization and social identity-based models of leader emergence comparable. Moreover, we assessed both self- and peer-ratings of non-normality in order to compare their relative contributions to leader emergence processes. Finally, we also differentiated between formal and informal leader emergence outcomes in order to reflect the potential that leader emergence processes might have different antecedents (see Badura et al., 2022).

Overall, our results provided some support for an integrative approach to understanding leader emergence. After controlling for Big Five traits,[3] we found that peer-reported uniqueness and strangeness both predicted peer ratings of social influence but not holding formal office. It is possible that this is due to the small number of individuals holding elected office, resulting in substantial range restriction and lack of variance in the outcome. It is also possible that these differences simply reflect that leader emergence processes are merely different for formal and informal leadership and that peer evaluations of normality matter more for informal influence (which may be more personal and intimate) than they do for choosing formal leaders. Moreover, our results

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3 Consistent with prior meta-analytic research (Grosz et al., 2024), we found relationships between trait Extraversion with both leadership emergence outcomes and Conscientiousness with the social influence outcome. There was also a statistically significant negative relationship between Agreeableness and peer-ratings of social influence in the regression predicting social influence, but because the zero-order relationship was non-significant, and because prior meta-analytic estimates (Grosz et al., 2024) also suggest this relationship does not differ from zero, we believe that this particular finding is likely spurious.

TABLE 2 Multiple regression with leader emergence outcomes.

	Executive office			Social influence		
	B	SE	p	B	SE	p
Extraversion	1.18*	0.50	0.02	−0.55*	0.11	0.00
Emotional stability	−0.75	0.47	0.11	−0.07	0.12	0.56
Agreeableness	0.22	0.60	0.71	−0.27*	0.13	0.04
Conscientiousness	0.43	0.45	0.34	0.31*	0.11	0.01
Intellect/openness	−0.54	0.65	0.41	0.23	0.16	0.14
Self-rated uniqueness	0.79	0.54	0.14	0.09	0.12	0.45
Self-rated strangeness	0.50	0.32	0.12	0.10	0.08	0.24
Peer-rated uniqueness	−0.15	0.56	0.78	0.29*	0.13	0.02
Peer-rated strangeness	−0.41	0.47	0.38	−0.30*	0.10	0.00
ΔR^2 for self-rated normality	0.02		0.11	0.00		0.55
ΔR^2 for peer-rated normality	0.00		0.60	0.04*		0.00
Overall R^2	0.07*		0.04	0.27*		0.00

$N = 281$ for executive office; $N = 278$ for social influence.
*$p < 0.05$.

showed that peer ratings of uniqueness and strangeness were more closely associated with social influence than were self-ratings of the same dimensions. One explanation for this finding is that self-rated non-normality is largely irrelevant to determining who will be nominated as a leader in a group. As Hogan (2007; see also Hogan et al., 2021) has pointed out, what you think you are like (your identity) is largely inconsequential compared with what everyone else thinks you are like (your reputation) when social outcomes and processes are under consideration. That said, the fact that social influence ratings are peer-rated may suggest that common method variance may have played a role in driving these effects (Doty and Glick, 1998).[4] Finally, our results underscored the significance of peer evaluations in determining leader emergence. While self-ratings of non-normality were related to emergence, it was peer assessments that demonstrated predictive power for social influence, aligning with Hogan's (2007) emphasis on reputation over identity in group dynamics.

Theoretical and practical implications

Our study successfully integrates two well-established social-cognitive accounts of the processes underpinning the relationship between traits and leader emergence: leader categorization theory and the social identity theory perspective. In reconciling the trait and cognitive approaches, we foster a deeper and more effective framework for understanding leader emergence in diverse group environments, recognizing that leadership is influenced by both who the individuals are (their traits) and how they are perceived

by their peers (their social identity). By employing normality evaluations representing superiority and similarity, we bridge the gap between these two theories, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted processes involved in leader emergence. This integration invites future research to adopt a more holistic view of the emergence process, acknowledging both individual traits and social-cognitive processes as contributors to leadership dynamics.

Our study also introduces subjective non-normality as a crucial factor in leader emergence, adding a new dimension to consider in leadership research.[5] In particular, our findings on the importance of peer perceptions of non-normality challenge the traditional emphasis on phenotypic traits alone and highlight the importance of subjective evaluations by group members in shaping leadership dynamics within groups. Finally, our results emphasize the potency of peer ratings in predicting leader emergence and social influence. This underscores the social nature of leader emergence, indicating that how individuals are perceived by their peers plays a pivotal role in determining their ascension, much more pivotal than how they perceive themselves.

Our study not only advances theoretical understandings of leader emergence but also offers practical implications for organizations seeking to identify, nurture, and develop emerging leaders. As one example, organizations can leverage the insights from our study to enhance leadership development programs. Recognizing the importance of both trait-based characteristics and subjective non-normality evaluations, leadership training initiatives can be designed to cultivate positive traits associated with leadership, like Conscientiousness and Extraversion, while also highlighting the importance of monitoring group norms and

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4   As the peer-ratings of non-normality were done by only a small subset of those who rated social influence, we believe that this relationship cannot be wholly attributed to method artifacts.

5   Perceptions of normality have already been linked in prior research to perceptions of transformational leadership (Kim et al., 2020).

being sensitive to perceptions of prototypicality. Our findings also have implications for selecting and nominating leaders within groups. Organizations can incorporate insights from our study into their leadership selection processes, considering not only objective traits but also subjective non-normality evaluations when deciding whom to promote or hire into leadership roles. In particular, organizations may want to be sensitive to the degree to which perceptions of prototypicality and representativeness may hinder the emergence of individuals from traditionally underrepresented groups or whether their leadership selection processes may inadvertently discriminate against individuals based on non-job relevant attributes or disabilities.

Limitations and future research directions

The current study is not without limitations. First, the sample used in this study consisted of young people living together who came to power extremely quickly in democratic systems. While this provided an excellent context to study the nature of leader emergence in an intimate environment, these results may not be reflective of leader emergence processes in workplace settings where status is typically conferred by more senior members of the organization over much more extended periods. Future research should expand this study by evaluating the predictive capabilities of normality evaluations in more traditional organizational settings.

There was also a relatively low number of individuals who held the executive officer position (9%) in their organization overall. This low base rate and the binary nature of the outcome may have resulted in truncated variance and a reduction in the capacity to detect statistically significant effects for this outcome. Future research could benefit from examining leader emergence in organizations with varying structures and power distribution to overcome this limitation. Exploring how the proposed model operates in contexts with higher base rates of executive roles or in situations where power transitions are slower may offer a more comprehensive understanding of leader emergence.

Our study focused on a relatively homogeneous sample, limiting our ability to explore the impact of diversity on leader emergence. Future research should consider additional factors such as gender, ethnicity, and cultural background, which may intersect with normality evaluations and personality traits in determining both peer perceptions and the likelihood of leader emergence. Understanding how diverse characteristics influence the emergence of leaders will contribute to a more inclusive and comprehensive leadership model.

On a similar note, beyond replicating these findings in more traditional workplace settings, the present study also suggests that more research remains to be done to explain the mechanism by which subjective normality assessments are made. Although these judgments have been demonstrated to be important, it is unclear what specific factors (e.g., behaviors, demographics, attitudes, etc.) are being considered when such judgments are made. Future research comparing subjective normality evaluations to multi-dimensional prototypicality assessments may enable researchers to disentangle which features are most important for making such evaluations. This need is exemplified when considering how some

groups are underrepresented in leadership roles (i.e., women and minorities, Appelbaum et al., 2003; Ng et al., 2005), which can strongly influence what is perceived as "normal" for a leader and thus exclude members of underrepresented groups from emerging as leaders. From an empirical perspective, future research could also determine whether the subjective ratings of non-normality used in the present study might align with mathematical operationalizations of fit or misfit (e.g., statistical deviation from group means or profile correlations). The present study focused on the "psychologically real" aspects of perceived non-normality in that observers were explicitly aware of them (see Cable and Judge, 1996; Edwards et al., 2006). However, the present analyses could not determine whether these evaluations were based on matches of behavioral traits, abilities, or values. Future research utilizing a wider array of individual differences might be better positioned to determine what aspects of fit or misfit drive non-normality evaluations and, in turn, leader emergence (see Hanna et al., 2021; Badura et al., 2022; Galvin et al., 2024). Moreover, a helpful reviewer suggested that a more molecular assessment would also allow future scholars to evaluate whether supplementary or complementary fit (Muchinsky and Monahan, 1987; Cable and Edwards, 2004) on various types of individual differences might also contribute to a fuller understanding of the cognitive mechanisms underpinning leadership emergence processes.

Building on the cross-sectional nature of our study, future research could employ longitudinal designs to capture the temporal aspects of leader emergence. Tracking changes in normality evaluations and personality traits over time could unveil the dynamic nature of these processes. Additionally, process-oriented research could explore the sequential steps involved in leader emergence, from initial impressions to the formalization of leadership roles, offering a more nuanced perspective on the unfolding dynamics. In particular, a multi-wave assessment might better illuminate what characteristics are employed in making non-normality evaluations, the circumstances under which individuals make evaluations about non-normality and the reputation consequences of non-normality. Specifically, are these evaluations of non-normality also associated with relational outcomes such as affect- and cognition-based trust (McAllister, 1995).

Conclusion

Leader emergence in group settings is a complex phenomenon with a multitude of variables at play. Both leader categorization theory and the social identity theory of leadership have attempted to explain the process by which traits come to impact who becomes leaders in groups and both frameworks have been largely successful. Our study addressed the complex dynamics of leader emergence by integrating these theories through the lens of normality evaluations. Our findings provide robust support that both perceptions of superiority, as emphasized by leader categorization theory, and group prototypicality, as highlighted by the social identity theory, contribute significantly to leader emergence. Through this integration, this study advances understanding of the multifaceted nature of leadership emergence, offering valuable insights for both academic research and practical applications in organizational settings.

Data availability statement

The data analyzed in this study is subject to the following licenses/restrictions: none. They can be posted on an Open Science Platform if needed or made available for review. Requests to access these datasets should be directed to pdharms@ua.edu.

Ethics statement

Author contributions

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Conflict of interest

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