"It's not you, it's me": transformational leadership and self-deprecating humor

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate leaders' use of humor as an expression of how they value themselves relative to others. The paper suggests that humor can minimize or exacerbate the status differences between leaders and followers. The paper hypothesizes that leaders' use of self- or in-group-deprecating humor would be positively associated with ratings of transformational leadership as they minimize those distinctions, whereas leaders' use of aggressive humor would be negatively associated with ratings of transformational leadership because it exacerbates status distinctions.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 155 undergraduates (58 males, 97 females; M age $= 20$ years, $SD = 1.31$) were assigned randomly to one of four conditions, each depicting a different type of humor in a leader's speech.

Findings – Leaders using self-deprecating humor were rated higher on individualized consideration (a factor of transformational leadership) than those that used aggressive humor.

Research limitations/implications – The authors encourage future field research on the role of humor as an expression of leaders' self- versus other-orientation.

Originality/value – Humor and work might seem inconsistent, but this study demonstrates how leadership can use humor to improve leader-follower relationships. Furthermore, it contributes to our understanding of self-deprecating humor which has received scant attention relative to other forms of humor.

Keywords Humour, Self-interest, Transformational leadership, Vignette, Leadership

Paper type Research paper

A sense of humor is part of the art of leadership, of getting along with people, of getting things done (Dwight D. Eisenhower).

The power of humor has been well documented in a range of literatures, including neurology (e.g. Bartolo *et al.*, 2006; Coulson and Williams, 2005), communications (e.g. Gorham and Christophel, 1990; Wanzer *et al.*, 2005), and applied psychology (e.g. Cooper, 2005; Ford and Ferguson, 2004). In organizational studies, there has been some focus on leaders' use of humor (e.g. Romero and Cruthirds, 2006) and its consequences on work satisfaction (e.g. Davis and Kleiner, 1989), collegiality (e.g. Bowling *et al.*, 2004), and psychological climate (e.g. Taylor and Bain, 2003). Extending previous research, we focus on whether the type of humor that leaders use is associated with perceptions of their leadership, in particular transformational leadership.

Transformational leadership is comprised of four components: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1998). Idealized influence occurs when leaders treat followers fairly and earn followers' trust and respect, thereby serving as a role model. As such, there are two parts to idealized influence: an attributional component made on the part of the follower, and a behavioral component enacted by the leader. Inspirational motivation encompasses expressing a compelling vision of the future for followers, and motivating followers to surpass their expectations. Intellectual stimulation involves encouraging followers to look at problems in new and different ways, to be creative, and to think independently. Last, individualized consideration entails leaders being attentive and sensitive to followers' individual needs and skills. Collectively, the goal of the four facets of transformational leadership is to elevate followers, and to this end, transformational leadership has been associated with higher organizational performance (e.g. Dvir *et al*, 2002), employee satisfaction (e.g. Nemanich and Keller, 2007), organizational commitment (e.g. Barling *et al*, 1996), and employee proactivity (e.g. Madzar, 2001).

There has also been focussed attention on the ethics of transformational leadership, thus giving rise to the notion of "pseudo-transformational leadership" (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999). In contrast to transformational leaders, who place primary emphasis on elevating others, pseudo-transformational leaders act out of self-interest, emphasizing the fulfillment of their own personal goals even at the expense of others (Christie *et al*, 2011; Price, 2003). While little empirical research exists on pseudo-transformational leadership, its conceptual development recognizes that leaders' values and behaviors might not always be aligned, and that pseudo-transformational leaders could generate leader idolization and dependency in followers (Barling *et al*, 2008). Pseudo-transformational leadership has also been related to personalized power (i.e. "expressions of power for the sake of personal aggrandizement"; Chusmir, 1986, p. 149), the counterpart to which is the socialized power of transformational leaders (i.e. power "used for institutional advancement rather than personal aggrandizement"; Chusmir and Parker, 1984, p. 760). Thus, a key distinction between transformational and pseudo-transformational leadership is the extent to which leaders focus on themselves vs others.

Another way to characterize this self-vs-other focus of leadership is to consider humility. Morris *et al* (2005) define humility as "a personal orientation founded on a willingness to see the self accurately and a propensity to put oneself in perspective" (p. 1331). Although research on leader humility is still sparse, researchers have contrasted humility and narcissism (e.g. Exline and Geyer, 2004; Morris *et al*, 2005), with leader narcissism negatively associated with others' ratings of the leader's transformational leadership (Judge *et al*, 2006). Unlike humble leaders, narcissistic leaders enjoy the attention of others, which affirms their sense of self-importance (Judge *et al*, 2006). By extension, we argue that transformational leaders are humble; unlike narcissistic or pseudo-transformational leaders, self-aggrandizement is not their primary motivation.

Based on this understanding of the differential nature of transformational and pseudo-transformational leadership, and how humility and narcissism contrast leaders' self- vs other-oriented motivation, we examine how leaders express their values and concern for others (or themselves) using humor. We chose humor as a mechanism through which leaders express their concern for others (vs the self) because of the potential for humor to be both a weapon to harm others and a tool to build relationships. We further discuss the dual nature of humor in the next section.

Humor and leadership

Humor in the workplace has been identified as beneficial for reducing stress (Yovetich *et al.*, 1990), promoting a "fun" culture (Fleming, 2005; Holmes and Marra, 2002), encouraging group cohesion (Francis, 1994), and encouraging communication (Greatbatch and Clark, 2003). Specific to leadership, humor has been described as a way of preserving leader modesty (Kets de Vries, 1990) and improving the leader-follower relationship (Avolio *et al.*, 1999). There is also evidence from cadets in the US Military Academy that "good leaders" (as defined by cadets' subjective experience) were associated with "a warm humorous style" and consistently rated higher on humor than "bad leaders" (Priest and Swain, 2002, p. 174). However, humor has also been considered taboo, subversive, incompatible with work, and limited to the "rude and foolish" (Collinson, 2004; Malone, 1980; Morreall, 1991).

Although those perspectives are seemingly contradictory, our conceptualization of the relationship between transformational leadership and humor allows for both of these perspectives to be correct: some forms of humor are destructive, such as those that demean others, whereas other forms of humor are constructive, such as those that preserve and even strengthen the leader-follower relationship. In other words, it is the nature of the humor that is critical. Consistent with Martin *et al.*'s (2003) humor styles, we suggest that humor which targets the joke-teller (self-deprecating humor) has a different effect than humor which targets its audience (aggressive humor).

Self-deprecating humor deliberately targets the person who is telling the joke and is a form of affiliative humor: a "non-hostile, tolerant use of humor that is affirming of self and others" (Martin *et al.*, 2003, p. 53). However, self-deprecating humor should not be confused with self-defeating or self-disparaging humor, in which "there is an element of emotional neediness, avoidance, and low self-esteem underlying [this] use of humor" with its purpose to "ingratiat[e] oneself or gai[n] approval" (Martin *et al.*, 2003, p. 54; Romero and Cruthirds, 2006). While self-deprecating humor conveys an honest and humble look at oneself, self-defeating humor expresses a depressive and negative view of the self.

It follows that leaders who use self-deprecating humor are willing to make themselves potentially vulnerable by identifying their weaknesses, and exposing kernels of truth (Westwood, 2004). As such, self-deprecating humor de-emphasizes status distinctions within the relationship so that leaders who use self-deprecating humor appear closer to or on the same level as their followers (Kets de Vries, 1990; Martin *et al.*, 2003).

Consistent with the notion that self-deprecating humor will benefit leader-follower relationships, Ziv (1984) reported that individuals who could laugh at themselves were perceived as more likeable than those who could not. In addition, because much of leadership involves getting work done through others, humor is especially important for leaders as the ability to laugh at oneself has been positively correlated with persuasiveness (Lyttle, 2001).

Let us now focus our attention on the four facets of transformational leadership and how they may be associated with self-deprecating humor in different but complementary ways. Honesty is integral to idealized influence (Bass and Steidlmeier, 1999), and as such, idealized influence should be enhanced with a frank look at oneself rather than promoting self-aggrandizing images characteristic of narcissists and pseudo-transformational leaders. We expect that self-deprecating humor is one way in which a leader can express an honest look at him/herself. Inspirational motivation appeals to followers' emotions (Bass, 1985), and we expect that the genuine mirth

following a humorous self-deprecating statement would only enhance followers' positive affect (Martin *et al.*, 2003). Self-deprecating humor may also reinforce intellectual stimulation through modeling; leaders who use self-deprecating statements oppose the traditional and pervasive depictions of heroic leadership (Meindl *et al.*, 1985). By confronting such predominant notions of leadership, we expect that followers will be inspired to challenge other assumptions and ultimately foster out-of-the-box thinking, creativity, and innovation. Finally, self-deprecating humor improves interpersonal relationships (Martin *et al.*, 2003), demonstrating that the leader understands the importance of preserving the dignity of others which is central to individualized consideration.

In summary, transformational leaders are interested in the advancement, achievement, and needs of their followers. They are other-centric, and as such, they would be more concerned with promoting an egalitarian leader-follower relationship than exaggerating the status distinctions between themselves and their subordinates. Self-deprecating humor is one viable way for transformational leaders to achieve those means. Therefore, we hypothesize:

> *H1*. Use of self-deprecating humor is positively related to transformational leadership ratings.

Any understanding of the effect of self-deprecating humor on transformational leadership will be augmented by simultaneously focussing on humor targeting others, often called "aggressive humor." Martin *et al.* (2003) describe aggressive humor as "the tendency to express humor without regard for its potential impact on others" (p. 54). The nature and effects of aggressive humor can be gleaned from the superiority theory of humor (Westwood, 2004), which posits that aggressive humor reinforces and maintains existing norms and hierarchical structures so that the interpersonal distance between leaders and followers increases (Nevo, 1985; Westwood, 2004). This contrasts directly with the goal of transformational leadership: While transformational leadership focusses on elevating followers, aggressive humor puts others down, presumably to enhance the leaders' self-perceived importance and strength. In addition, the denigrating nature of aggressive humor is inconsistent with the individualized consideration, one of the aforementioned facets of transformational leadership. Therefore:

> *H2*. Use of aggressive humor is negatively related to transformational leadership ratings.

Having discussed the nature of both self-deprecating and aggressive humor, as well as their respective links with transformational leadership, it is important to note that it is also possible to deprecate oneself and others simultaneously via in-group-deprecating humor. One example of in-group-deprecating humor occurred in Nevo's (1985) study. Jokes about ethnic minorities and majorities were presented to participants who belonged to different ethnic groups, and it was found that minorities preferred in-group-deprecating humor, that is, jokes about their own ethnic group. Similarly, Vuorela (2005) showed that in-group-deprecating humor enhanced in-group identity in the context of negotiations; although buyers and sellers in the negotiation were essentially at odds, they were able to reduce tensions by telling and laughing at jokes about their shared national culture.

Strong in-group identities and images are particularly beneficial for transformational leaders. To support collective goals and in acting in the interest of the collective good (Bass, 1998), it would be an asset for these leaders to appear representative of their followers (van Knippenberg and van Knippenberg, 2005). Using in-group-deprecating humor could serve two purposes. First, in-group-deprecating humor demonstrates that the leaders consider themselves to be part of that in-group, which fosters a collective identity. Second, because the humor is deprecating, it reinforces the values of humility and modesty described earlier. As a result:

> *H3.* Use of in-group deprecating humor is positively related to transformational leadership ratings.

Method
Materials and manipulation checks
We chose to use a vignette approach in this study because it offers control over the type of humor being used. Such control is appropriate in this study, not only as it enables us to isolate types of humor that a leader may use, but also to control exposure to the humor stimulus (e.g. joke) which would not be possible outside of the laboratory (Bryman, 2008) and others' reactions (e.g. laughter, smiles) to the humor stimulus that might make the humor more or less salient (Provine, 1992). Furthermore, vignettes provide participants with a select situation, and thus make for excellent simulations of individuals' selective attention to aspects of their daily lives (Hughes, 1998).

The vignette used in this study focussed on a project manager at a fictitious company, Magi Corporation. In the vignette, the project manager addresses three direct reports (i.e. vice-president of marketing, vice-president of finance, and vice-president of accounting) at an inaugural project meeting for the company's new "Beat the Heat" initiative. Not only does the project manager introduce the initiative, but the project manager also introduces to the three direct reports a new recruit (Pat) who will be working on the initiative. (The vignette is reproduced in Appendix.) To establish that this vignette contains an instance of leadership upon which participants can form their impressions of the leader/project manager, we asked 22 MBA students (11 male, six female, five gender undisclosed; M age $= 39$ years, SD $= 7.2$ years) from a mid-sized Canadian business school to read the vignette (described in Appendix as the control condition). They rated the characteristics exhibited by the project manager on four dimensions: knowledge/competency, guidance/direction, authority, and importance. Each of these items was measured on a five-point Likert-type scale ($1 =$ strongly disagree, $5 =$ strongly agree). The reliability (α) of the aggregated scale was 0.66 (mean $= 3.51$, SD $= 0.80$). The MBA students were also asked to compare the project manager's characteristics to Pat's characteristics on the same four dimensions. As Pat was not intended to be the focal leader in the vignette, Pat's average score was expectedly significantly lower ($t(18) = 2.23$, $p < 0.05$) than the project manager's average score. Pat's average score was 3.07 (SD $= 0.64$), whereas the project manager's score was 3.51 (SD $= 0.80$), indicating that the project manager was perceived as exhibiting more leader-like characteristics than Pat.

To determine if this effect was driven by the exhibited characteristics rather than the job title "project manager," a separate sample of 22 MBA students (17 males, five females; M age $= 37$ years, SD $= 8.42$ years) from the same Canadian business school was recruited. In this version of the vignette, the gender-neutral name "Jamie Stevens" replaced all references to the title "project manager" while the rest of the vignette

stayed the same. Respondents were asked to rate Jamie Stevens' characteristics using the same four items ($\alpha = 0.57$). The average score for Jamie Stevens ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.60$) in the second vignette was not significantly different from the project manager's average score ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.76$) collected using the first vignette, $t(40) = 0.06$, ns. This result indicates that the title "project manager" did not affect leadership ratings, and that the content of the project manager's speech in the vignette primarily contributed to respondents' perceptions of the project manager's leadership characteristics across both versions of the vignette. In sum, these results provide empirical support for the use of this vignette as an instance of leadership. In the focal study described below, the project-manager version of the vignette (as opposed to the "Jamie Stevens" version) was used.

Participants
In total, 155 undergraduate business students (58 males, 97 females; M age = 20 years, $SD = 1.31$ years) from a Canadian university volunteered to participate in the main study. Participants received bonus course credit for their participation.

Experimental design and procedure
In this between-subjects design, participants were assigned randomly to one of four conditions: self-deprecating humor ($n = 38$), aggressive humor ($n = 39$), in-group-deprecating humor ($n = 40$), and a control condition with no humor ($n = 38$). Participants assumed the role of vice-president of marketing, one of the project manager's three direct reports.

The last line in each vignette corresponded to the humor condition; all other text in the vignette remained consistent across the four conditions. The different experimental conditions were manipulated with a single statement at the end of the vignette: "I am so glad that Pat took this job despite knowing all about me!" (self-deprecating), "I am so glad that Pat took this job despite knowing all about you!" (aggressive humor), "I am so glad that Pat took this job despite knowing all about us!" (in-group-deprecating), and "I am so glad that Pat took this job!" (control condition with no humor).

After reading the vignette, participants rated the extent to which they liked the project manager, the extent to which they trusted the project manager, how funny they found the speech to be, and provided demographic information (gender, age). They also rated the project manager's transformational leadership behaviors.

Measures
Likeability of leader. Participants completed a four-item leader liking scale (Brown and Keeping, 2005). All items were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). An example item is "I like the CEO."

Trust in leader. Participants completed the ten-item trust inventory (Dunn and Schweitzer, 2005). Each item was rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all likely, 7 = very likely). An example item is "The CEO would never intentionally misrepresent my point of view to others."

Humorousness of the speech. We asked participants "How funny was the project manager's speech?" to which they responded on a six-point Likert-type scale (1 = there was no humor, 6 = very funny).

Transformational leadership. The multifactor leadership questionnaire (MLQ) served as the dependent variable (Form 5X; Bass and Avolio, 1995). We used four items

from the MLQ-5X to assess each facet of transformational leadership (i.e. idealized influence combining attributional and behavioral items; inspirational motivation; individualized consideration; and intellectual stimulation). Participants were asked how frequently they sensed that the project manager exhibited these behaviors and indicated their responses on a five-point Likert-type scale ($1 =$ not at all, $5 =$ frequently or always).

Factor analysis

Before proceeding further, we tested the measurement model implied by these variables. Recognizing the small sample size for this study and sample-to-parameter guidelines (Bentler and Chou, 1987) of between 5:1 and 10:1 required for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), we used an item-parceling strategy. Item-parceling aggregates groups of items to form indicators for latent constructs, reducing the number of parameters that need estimating and permitting CFA with smaller samples (Bandalos and Finney, 2001). Using Hall *et al*'s (1999) guidelines for creating item parcels, we conducted exploratory factor analyses on the items from each scale, forcing items into two factors and pairing the highest-loading items from each of these forced factors into item parcels. This created two item parcels for each of liking of the leader, trust in the leader, and the four components of transformational leadership.

We conducted the CFA using maximum likelihood estimation and a covariance matrix based on the parcel scores as input in LISREL 8.3 (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1999). To evaluate the best-fitting model, we used the χ^2 goodness-of-fit index (χ^2), the comparative fit index (CFI), and the standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR). As guidelines for acceptable model fit, Hu and Bentler (1999) recommend CFI values of > 0.96 and SRMR scores of < 0.10.

Table I shows the fit indices for the different models tested. A comparison of the fit indices suggested that the proposed six-factor model with correlated factors (i.e. Model 1: leader liking, trust in the leader, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration) provided the best fit to the data. This model is superior to the three-factor oblique model (i.e. Model 2: leader liking, trust in the leader, transformational leadership; $\Delta\chi^2$ (12) $= 171.32$, $p < 0.001$), and a one-factor model (i.e. Model 3: all items forming one factor; $\Delta\chi^2$ (15) $= 247.17$, $p < 0.001$).

Results

Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and intercorrelations of all study variables are presented in Table II.

Model	χ^2	df	CFI	SRMR
Six-factor oblique	74.07	39	0.96	0.06
Three-factor oblique	245.39	51	0.80	0.09
Single factor	321.24	54	0.68	0.11

Notes: CFI, comparative fit index; SRMR, standardized root-mean-square residual

Table I
Fit indices for the measurement models

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender (0 = male)	0.62	0.49	–								
2. Age	20.10	1.32	0.04	–							
3. Idealized influence	3.29	0.59	-0.12	0.00	*0.77*						
4. Inspirational motivation	3.98	0.56	0.04	-0.04	0.52**	*0.73*					
5. Individualized consideration	2.90	0.80	-0.02	0.01	0.55**	0.37**	*0.82*				
6. Intellectual stimulation	3.11	0.66	-0.00	-0.16	0.66**	0.36**	0.62**	*0.80*			
7. Liking of leader	3.07	0.72	-0.06	-0.05	0.43**	0.18*	0.46**	0.31**	*0.82*		
8. Trust of leader	4.96	0.82	-0.11	0.05	0.42**	0.39**	0.37**	0.31**	0.51**	*0.85*	
9. Humorousness of the speech	2.73	1.31	0.11	0.11	0.12	0.28**	0.06	0.17*	-0.06	0.08	–

Notes: $n = 155$. Reliabilities are presented in italics on the diagonal. **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$

Table II
Descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities, and intercorrelations

Manipulation checks

We first analyzed the manipulation checks which asked participants to select a form of humor, if any, that the project manager used in the vignette: slapstick (including practical jokes and physical humor), self-deprecating (the target of the joke is the joke-teller), aggressive (the target of the joke is the audience), in-group deprecating (the joke-teller and the audience are the targets of the joke), or no humor at all. A χ^2-test with equal expectancies showed that participants, on average, correctly identified the type of humor in the vignette: χ^2 (12, $n = 154$) = 161.26, $p < 0.01$. Specifically, 82 percent of control-group participants correctly identified no humor in the vignette, 66 percent of participants in the self-deprecating condition identified self-deprecating humor in the vignette, 69 percent of participants in the aggressive-humor condition identified the vignette as aggressive, and 41 percent of participants in the in-group-deprecating condition perceived the vignette as in-group-deprecating. We found a main effect for type of humor on humorousness of speech, $F(3, 150) = 3.15$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$, such that those in the control group reported the speech to be significantly less funny than those in the self-deprecating condition (M difference = -0.58, SD = 0.22), and no additional significant differences were found among the self- ($M = 2.39$, SD = 0.95), in-group-deprecating ($M = 2.35$, SD = 1.05), and aggressive humor ($M = 2.31$, SD = 0.83) conditions on humorousness of the speech. This means that the humor manipulation was effective.

Primary analysis

Given the significant correlations among the four transformational leadership components (see Table II), we computed a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) to test the three hypotheses. To enhance the validity of our findings, it was important to control for variables that might help exclude alternative explanations. Accordingly, we controlled statistically for both likeability of and trust in the project manager. We also controlled statistically for how humorous the speech was perceived to be, as the focus of this study is on the type of humor used, not its strength. In addition, we controlled for age and gender of the participant. A multivariate main effect emerged for humor condition on the four components of transformational leadership, Pillai's trace $F(12, 354) = 1.87$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$. Subsequent univariate analyses (see Table III) revealed that the type of humor had a significant effect on only one of the components of transformational leadership: individualized consideration, $F(3, 119) = 4.17$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.10$. Post hoc Bonferroni tests showed that individualized consideration was rated significantly higher in the self-deprecating condition than in the aggressive-humor condition (M difference = 0.74, $p < 0.01$). Individualized consideration was also rated significantly lower in the

Condition	Idealized influence		Inspirational motivation		Intellectual stimulation		Individualized consideration	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Self-deprecating	3.44	0.60	4.05	0.51	3.28	0.63	3.14	0.80
Aggressive	3.33	0.59	3.95	0.56	2.99	0.72	2.59	0.85
In-group deprecating	3.17	0.63	4.08	0.54	3.15	0.70	2.90	0.70
Control	3.25	0.55	3.84	0.61	3.00	0.55	2.99	0.76
F	$F(3, 119) = 0.71$, ns		$F(3, 119) = 0.20$, ns		$F(3, 119) = 0.78$, ns		$F(3, 119) = 4.17$, $p < 0.01$	

Table III
Results of the univariate analyses of variance

aggressive humor condition than the control condition (M difference $= 0.70$, $p < 0.05$). No significant *post hoc* tests were yielded with regards to in-group-deprecating humor.

Acknowledging that some participants failed the manipulation check, we repeated the above analyses, only including participants who correctly indentified being in the self-deprecating ($n = 25$), aggressive humor ($n = 26$), in-group-deprecating ($n = 15$), or control condition ($n = 31$). Despite the reduction in cell sizes, the multivariate effect approached significance, Pillai's trace $F(12, 210) = 1.76$, $p = 0.06$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$. Subsequent univariate analyses were again significant for individualized consideration only, $F(3, 71) = 4.42$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.16$. *Post hoc* comparisons revealed that the self-deprecating humor condition was related to higher ratings of individualized consideration than the aggressive-humor condition ($M = 1.07$, $p < 0.01$). No other significant *post hoc* comparisons were found using this reduced sample.

Discussion

The goal of this research was to refine our understanding of the relationship between humor and transformational leadership. In contrast to prior research that has focussed primarily on leadership and humor in general (e.g. Avolio *et al.*, 1999), our focus was on whether the type of humor as determined by its target would have differential effects on the perceptions of transformational leadership.

Our results enable us to refine the first hypothesis that self-deprecating humor (i.e. targeting oneself) would predict higher ratings of transformational leadership, and the second hypothesis that aggressive humor (i.e. targeting others) would result in poorer perceptions of transformational leadership. Specifically, *post hoc* univariate analyses showed that the effect was evident only for the individualized consideration component of transformational leadership, and we replicated this result using a subset of our sample that excluded participants who failed to identify correctly the type of humor featured in the vignette. Characteristically, individualized consideration is exhibited by leaders who make an active contribution to follower development through coaching and mentoring – both of which are other-oriented behaviors. However, our results indicate that individualized consideration might be expressed through more than just focussing on followers through coaching and mentoring; it is also possible to demonstrate individualized consideration by putting oneself last and de-emphasizing one's superiority. In this light, deprecating humor is associated with individualized consideration (and not the other three components of transformational leadership) because of its equaling effect on leader-follower relationships – unlike aggressive humor, it does not target others to exaggerate status distinctions in the relationship. To this end, Martin *et al.* (2003) classified self-deprecating humor as a form of affiliative humor, the definition of which accentuates the relational and other-orientation that also characterizes individualized consideration.

Our third hypothesis predicted a relationship between in-group-deprecating humor (i.e. targeting one's in-group) and transformational leadership, but it was not supported. Methodological factors may account for this non-significant finding. For the in-group deprecating statement to be humorous, it "requires a recognition of our own contradictions and mastery of the relationship with the self" (Bloomfield, 1980, p. 136). Given the artificial nature of the experiment (i.e. participants assumed the role of vice-president of marketing in the vignette), participants may not have had sufficient contextual information about their persona and the others in the in-group to appreciate the humor. Field data, on the other hand, with all its contextual complexity and

richness, would provide a better test of this hypothesis, and enable a direct test of whether in-group-deprecating statements minimize the status distinctions between leaders and followers.

Nevertheless, these results have implications for management. Perceptions of transformational leadership may be enhanced by managers' focus on egalitarian relationships, and one way to demonstrate one's commitment to egalitarian relationships would be to recognize and laugh at one's own shortcomings as appropriate. While there were no differences in how funny the self-deprecating, aggressive, and in-group deprecating comments were perceived to be (thus excluding a rival hypothesis that any differences in transformational leadership perceptions occurred because of humor perceptions), it is important to note that significant differences did emerge with respect to individualized consideration among these types of humor. Thus, it is important to reiterate that the perception of transformational leadership may be less dependent on how funny leaders are perceived to be, and more dependent on what the type of humor indicates about leaders' values.

Nonetheless, based on our findings, we resist the temptation to recommend that self-deprecating humor is always beneficial for leaders. Before making any such recommendation, future research should entertain the long-term effects of self-deprecating humor. Recurring self-deprecating statements might undermine a leader's sense of power and perceived confidence in the eyes of followers, or even be an indication of the leader's well-being (Frewen *et al*, 2008). In addition, repeated self-deprecating statements may be perceived as insincere, as if they were being used in a manipulative way to elicit sympathetic responses (Janes and Olson, 2010).

The limitations of this study can also inspire future research. The university-student sample and cross-sectional data limit the generalizability of our model; for example, a young student audience might be humored by very different stimuli than a more mature audience. In addition, despite the experimental control it afforded us, the vignette approach might underestimate any effects of the type of humor because the vignette limits participants to a working relationship with a "paper" leader, a specific context, and to a certain amount of information. In reality, when humor is used, many other features of the situation might be critical to determining one's reaction to the humorous remark such as others' responses to the humor, how often the leader uses humor, as well as the body language of the leader while telling the joke. Field research would be better poised to capture humor *in vivo*.

However, it is important to appreciate that the control afforded by a vignette study was necessary to answer our questions about leadership and deprecating humor. By keeping the conditions identical except for the last line of the leader's speech, we can be sure that our findings are due to the target of the humor rather than other situational features (e.g. others' laughter, the audience's familiarity with the leader, etc.). Given that this is the first study that we know of to focus on types of deprecating humor and transformational leadership, it was especially critical that we establish the internal validity of the effect. Indeed, future research might proceed with more vignette studies to test the outcomes of self-deprecating humor in combination with other targets of deprecating humor (i.e. in-group members and others), or realistic video vignettes (i.e. video clips of the leader giving the speech) to provide insight into the effect of leader body language (e.g. pointing, looking down, smiling) when relaying the deprecating humor.

Regardless of method, future research is needed to examine the underlying mechanisms behind deprecating humor. We have argued that status distinctions are

reduced when leaders can laugh at themselves, but we did not directly test this. It would be more appropriate to test whether perceived status distinctions changed after a leader made a self-deprecating joke, and test whether reducing status distinctions is a prominent motivator for using self-deprecating humor.

Our findings also pertain to an ongoing discussion about transformational leadership. Most researchers implicitly assume that the four behaviors of transformational leadership constitute a reflective index, perhaps because of the consistent and substantial correlations among the factors (Mackenzie *et al.*, 2005). By showing that significant effects emerged for one component of transformational leadership (i.e. individualized consideration) despite their high intercorrelations, the possibility that the dimensions form a formative index is raised. If this is the case, it is possible that respondents in our study, and by extension employees in organizations, might well view their leaders as transformational when leaders manifest strengths in one or some of the transformational behaviors, but not all. This would be consistent with Bass' (1998) comment that "transformational leaders [...] behave in ways to achieve superior results by employing one or more of the four components of transformational leadership" (p. 5). Just how transformational leadership is best conceptualized and operationalized is certainly an important topic for future research (Rafferty and Griffin, 2004, 2006).

Perceiver characteristics may play an important role in the relationship between leadership and humor as well, and thus behoove future research as well. For example, Wiseman's (2002) research showed that people of different cultures reacted differently to the same jokes, raising the question of whether self-deprecating humor is more acceptable or effective in some cultures than others. In addition, men and women might use and interpret humor differently (e.g. Crawford, 2003; Decker and Rotondo, 2001; Martin *et al.*, 2003). For instance, the negative stereotypes associated with female leadership (e.g. Hoyt and Blascovich, 2007) might actually discourage female leaders from telling self-deprecating jokes for fear of confirming such stereotypes. It follows that the effect of female leaders telling self-deprecating jokes might be significantly different from the effect of male leaders' self-deprecating humor.

Last, because these results suggest that the type of humor influences aspects of the leader-follower relationship, future research should also investigate the role of humor type in other relational leadership theories (e.g. LMX theory; Gerstner and Day, 1997). For example, as a sign of high relationship quality and closeness, distinctive humor practices between the leader and follower may result (e.g. frequency of humor statements that are self-deprecating), and thereby echo previous research which has documented the emergence of distinctive humor practices in group contexts (Holmes and Marra, 2002). Moreover, we would expect that practicing distinctive humor rituals reaffirms followers' commitment to the organization, trust in the leader, and motivation at work.

In conclusion, self-deprecating humor was associated with higher perceptions of individualized consideration, aggressive humor was associated with lower perceptions of individualized consideration, and in-group-deprecating humor did not yield hypothesized effects. These results provide new information about the possible role of different forms of humor in generating perceptions of transformational leadership, raise questions about how transformational leadership is best conceptualized and operationalized, and expand our understanding of individualized consideration. Expressed through the type of humor used, individualized consideration may be manifest in not only putting others first, but also putting oneself last.

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Appendix. Vignettes for self-, other-, in-group deprecating and no humor conditions

Vignette for all conditions

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. Today is the start of our "Beat the Heat" project. This project will make a significant difference to our industry and to the environment. "Beat the Heat" is a challenging initiative, and so it will require your best efforts. I chose you to participate in this project because of your qualifications and because I trust your dedication to Magi Corp. Through your participation in "Beat the Heat", you will gain valuable insight and experience to further your personal goals and professional careers. I expect you to take initiative, surmount challenges, and solve problems with your team. I offer my support throughout this project. If you come across any problems, please let me know if I can offer advice or assistance, such as coaching or training. It is very important to me that "Beat the Heat" is a success. From the first day of business, I have always wanted Magi Corp to be an active member of the community, and to become a leader in corporate social responsibility. I know that this project is not easy, but I am confident that you will do well.

I also want to take this opportunity to introduce you to a new member of our team. This person is enthusiastic about the "Beat the Heat" project and promises to give Magi Corp 110 percent. Please welcome our new member Pat LaValle. It is great that all of us were able to meet with Pat during our interview rounds. [Insert one of the following "last lines" depending on the humor condition.]

Last line of self-deprecating condition
I am so glad that Pat took this job despite knowing all about me!

Last line of other-effacing condition
I am so glad that Pat took this job despite knowing all about you!

Last line of in-group-deprecating condition
I am so glad that Pat took this job despite knowing all about us!

Last line of no humor condition
I am so glad that Pat took this job!

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