

FOLLOWER PREFERENCE FOR LEADERSHIP STYLE

Situational Leadership Theory:
Do Followers Have a Preference?

By

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For mom.

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Abstract

Situational Leadership Theory (SLT) is an intuitive leadership model widely used in organizations; however, it suffers from a lack of empirical support. Researchers have attempted many creative ways to test the theory, but none to date have found strong support. This study discusses several possibilities for the lack of support, including the multiple revisions of the theory, confusion within the literature, and the operationalization of follower readiness at the job level versus the task level. This study takes a fresh perspective by considering the follower's task readiness level and its relationship to the follower's preference for leadership styles as conceptualized by SLT. Participants ($N=253$) were placed into one of the four SLT follower readiness conditions (i.e., R1 as the least ready to R4 as the readiest), responded to an open-ended prompt about personal experience with a task reflecting their assigned condition, followed by a survey measuring their preference for leadership as well as several personality characteristics. Hypotheses stated that followers should prefer the leadership style that matches their level of task readiness. Taken together, results indicate that only followers with an R4 readiness level recognize and prefer the appropriate leadership style (i.e., delegating) as recommended by SLT. Three potential personality characteristics were also tested as covariates but were not found to have strong moderating effects. Limitations and future recommendations are discussed.

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Introduction

Situational leadership theory is one of the most popular leadership models used in organizational leadership (Thompson & Glasø, 2018). While the model is intuitive, it suffers from a lack of empirical validation. Since its inception, multiple researchers have attempted to validate the model, but results have been mixed at best (Cairns et al., 1998; Graeff, 1997; Johansen, 1990; Papworth et al., 2009; Thompson & Glasø, 2015, 2018; Thompson & Vecchio, 2009; Vecchio et al., 2006). Moreover, numerous model revisions have caused confusion for both practitioners and researchers, thus limiting both its utility and validation efforts (Graeff, 1997).

Situational Leadership Theory was first proposed in the late 1960s by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard. This model expands on earlier situational theories by including leadership behavior styles in the leadership effectiveness dimension, instead of focusing solely on leader attributes and traits. The model proposes four behavior styles that a leader would use depending on the follower's level of readiness concerning a specific task. In other words, the follower's readiness at the task level (e.g., completely unready to completely ready) is used to determine which leadership style is most appropriate and effective in that particular situation. As the follower's level of readiness for the specific task increases, the leader would adjust their leadership style accordingly (Hersey, 1984).

In the original model, the four styles of leadership are broken into four quadrants: telling, selling, participating, and delegating. Each style is a combination of task and relationship behaviors the leader would provide to the follower depending on the follower's readiness to execute a specific task (Hersey, 1984). For example, the

leadership style “telling” involves high task and low relationship leadership behavior, where the leader would take a more directive, and less supportive approach for a follower who is demonstrating a low level of readiness. As the follower begins to demonstrate a higher level of readiness for the specific task, the leader would adjust their levels of task and relationship leadership behaviors (Hersey, 1984). See Table 1 for a full explanation of the four leadership behaviors.

Followers are rated on their readiness level from low (i.e., R1) to high, (i.e., R4), which measures their ability, confidence, and willingness to complete a task. For instance, low follower readiness represents a follower who is unable (i.e., does not have the required knowledge, skill, or ability) and unwilling (i.e., is insecure or unmotivated) to complete the task, whereas high readiness represents a follower who is able, confident, and willing. The quadrant in which the follower is placed corresponds with the leadership style that is deemed most appropriate to address the follower’s readiness level. Low to moderate (i.e., R1 and R2) follower readiness levels correspond with the leader-directed leadership styles (i.e., telling and selling), and moderate to high (i.e., R3 and R4) follower readiness levels correspond with the self-directed leadership styles (i.e., participating and delegating). The model states that if the leader uses the appropriate style it will result in increased follower success (i.e., task and job performance and follower satisfaction with the leader and the job, Hersey, 2009).

Table 1*Situational Leadership Theory Follower Readiness and Leadership Styles*

Quadrant	Leadership Style	Follower Readiness and Leadership Behavior
S1	Telling	<p>Follower has low levels of performance readiness. Follower does not have the knowledge, skill, or motivation to complete the task.</p> <p>High Task and Low Relationship Leadership Behavior:</p> <p>Leader gives direct and specific instructions on the “who, what, when, where, and how” and provides little supportive behavior so follower knows there is no discussion in the decision-making process. (R1)</p>
S2	Selling	<p>Follower has low to moderate levels of performance readiness. Follower is still unable to complete the task but is willing to learn.</p> <p>High Task and High Relationship Leadership Behavior:</p> <p>Leader provides direction and guidance, but explains and clarifies the “why” so the follower “buys into the decision” (R2)</p>
S3	Participating	<p>Follower has moderate to high levels of performance readiness. Follower has gained the knowledge and skill needed to complete the task but is still insecure or unmotivated.</p> <p>Low Task and High Relationship Leadership Behavior:</p> <p>Leader facilitates and encourages follower’s input and involvement. (R3)</p>
S4	Delegating	<p>Follower has high levels of performance readiness. Follower has the necessary knowledge, skills, confidence, and motivation to complete the task.</p> <p>Low Task and Low Relationship Leadership Behavior:</p> <p>Leader gives the follower the responsibility for decision-making and implementation of the task. (R4)</p>

Adapted from Hersey (2009) *The Situational Leader*

Model Revisions

In the early 1980's, Blanchard and Hersey separated their research, with Hersey retaining the original theory and Blanchard revising the model to create a new, separate version called Situational Leadership II (Blanchard et al., 1993). Blanchard's revised version, SLTII, is remarkably similar to the original, with the most significant changes involving the label names and descriptions of the various concepts, as well as giving more focus to the prescriptive nature of the model. For example, Blanchard replaced the terms "task behavior" and "relationship behavior" from the leadership dimensions in the model with "directive" and "supportive" behavior dimensions to provide clarity to leaders that both dimensions are not independent of one another (Blanchard et al., 1993).

Blanchard's SLTII also updates the first three leadership behavior styles from selling, telling, and participating to directing, coaching, and supporting. Blanchard suggested that the original labels were confusing for leaders and also did not align with the updated leadership dimension labels (Blanchard et al., 1993). The new labels helped clarify to leaders what behaviors they should engage in when leading the follower. As Blanchard notes, "selling", for example, was often misinterpreted to mean "manipulating". However, the term "directing" removed the negative association and provides leaders with a better description of the appropriate leadership behavior (Blanchard et al., 1993). The fourth leadership style, delegating, remains the same for both models.

Blanchard also updated the follower dimension from follower readiness level (i.e., ability and willingness) to follower development level (i.e., competence and commitment). Whereas the original model measures the follower's readiness level on a

scale from low to high readiness, Blanchard's SLTII, measures the follower's development level on a scale from developing to developed. According to Blanchard, the verbiage revisions provide clarity on the meaning of the terms "ability" and "willingness" so the model is better understood by practitioners and can be generalized across cultures (Blanchard et al., 1993).

Finally, Blanchard operationalizes the four levels of follower development differently than the original model. Blanchard's decisions to change the way the follower dimensions were defined were due in part to his own experience and the experience of the managers that he worked with, stating that in practice, the follower development levels looked different than the way the original model initially described (Blanchard et al., 1993). For instance, the lowest level of follower readiness in the original model states that the follower is unable and unwilling (or insecure) to perform the task. As Hersey (1984) notes, this would be an employee who is "completely unready" which would require that the leader must "tell" the follower exactly what steps to take to complete the task. However, Blanchard (1993) posits that someone brand new to a task is also likely to be brand new to a position, and therefore, highly motivated to learn the skills needed to complete the task. Therefore, instead of being low in both ability and willingness, as described in the original theory, the follower at the lowest development level is more likely to be low in competence, but high in commitment. Blanchard also disagreed with the original definitions of the second and third levels of the follower dimension and changed level 2 from "unable but willing" as described in the original model to "some competence, but low commitment", and level 3 from "able, but unwilling" to "high competence, but varied commitment" (Blanchard et al., 1993).

SLT versus SLTII

Although much of the initial research was based on Hersey's model (i.e., SLT), most current research is focused on Blanchard's SLTII version. This has created inconsistencies in the attempt to validate either version of the model. Additionally, some studies do not provide clarity as to which version of the SLT model is being used, which further muddies the ability to compare results across studies. Since the two models have varying, but similar concepts and verbiage, it does not allow for a clear flow for studies to build upon one another.

Thus far, no published research has been able to fully validate or generalize either version of the model. For example, Cairns et al. (1998) attempted to generalize the original situational leadership theory model (SLT) to a population of senior executives in service and manufacturing sectors of an organization but did not find significant support for the model. The SLT model conceptualizes the interaction between the follower's readiness level and the leadership behavior style and its impact on the follower's job performance. Cairns et al. (1998) found no statistical support that this interaction of the independent variables (i.e., leadership style, measured as initiating structure and consideration, and follower readiness level) and the outcome (i.e., job performance) exists. Overall, there was no statistically significant differences in the omnibus tests on the variables; however, there was partial support found in the partitioned tests on the variables. In the partitioned tests, there was no statistical differences for low or moderate follower readiness levels in either performance or leadership satisfaction outcomes. For high follower readiness, there were statistically significant mean differences, however, those differences were not in the direction that is proposed by SLT. In other words,

performance and satisfaction outcomes were significant when there were mismatches in the leadership style used with the follower readiness level.

Vecchio et al. (2006) attempted to replicate the SLT model in a military setting. They found no significant evidence that an interaction occurs between the leadership styles and follower readiness and noted that the study found no practical utility in the military setting. Other studies have found partial support for the model. Vecchio (1987) researched SLT in a high school education setting. He found support for the lower follower readiness levels, but not for the moderate and high levels, meaning that the model was only accurate for newly hired teachers. However, Thompson & Glasø (2015) researched the SLTII version of the model using financial institutions and found that it predicted performance when there was leader-follower congruence only for participants whose job levels were considered moderate and high self-directed job types (i.e., follower readiness levels 3 and 4).

Zigarmi and Roberts (2017), a group working in Blanchard's consulting firm, tested Blanchard's SLTII model using a new scale, The Leadership Action Profile (LAP), which was developed by Blanchard. The LAP scale was developed based on SLTII and measures the follower's perception of their leader's directive and supportive behaviors, as well as follower satisfaction with their manager and their organization (Benson et al., 2012). Much of the previous research on situational leadership uses the Leadership Behavior Description Questionnaire Form-XII (LBDQ-XII, The Ohio State Leadership Studies, 1962) as the preferred method to measure SLT's task and relationship leadership behavior styles. This instrument is widely used to measure the leadership behaviors of consideration and initiating structure, which correlate with the task and relationship

behaviors found in situational leadership theory (Zigarmi & Roberts, 2017). According to Zigarmi & Roberts (2017), the difference between the LAP and the LBDQ-XII is that the LAP focuses only on leader-follower interactions, whereas the LBDQ-XII includes elements of team interactions. They postulate that the usage of the LBDQ-XII in previous research could be a root cause to the model's validation problem. They suggest that the LAP is a more appropriate measure of the model. In the study's outcome, they found that leader-follower agreement regarding fit saw an increase in follower performance outcomes, whereas a mismatch saw no increase. This is the first study to find more than marginal support for the theory. It should be noted that the reliability of the LAP as well as its correlation to the LBDQ-XII were both results from unpublished, internal studies conducted in 2010 by Ken Blanchard Companies (Benson et al., 2012).

Thompson and Vecchio (2009) summarized the research on Hersey's version up to the date of their 2009 study. Their review found similar results across those studies, including statistical support for the lower to middle readiness levels, but not the higher readiness levels. In this same study, they were unable to find clear support of Hersey's original model, nor did they find any support for Blanchard's SLTII version. The results of their study of Blanchard's version actually had weaker results than the original version. Based on their results, this current research will focus solely on Hersey's original model of situational leadership to promote clarity and add to the many years of research already conducted on the original model.

Review of Previous Literature

While this present study is theoretically grounded in the Hersey's version (i.e., the original model), a review of previous literature would be incomplete without also

considering those that have utilized Blanchard's version in research. The following review considers notable past validation studies of situational leadership theory, regardless of the model version used.

Due to the logistical difficulties of conducting longitudinal studies in workplaces, researchers have been unable to successfully test and validate the full situational leadership model (Thompson & Glasø, 2018). Most, if not all, research to the present date has involved cross-sectional studies in limited arenas. Additionally, the model has multiple interacting sections that make validating the full model in one singular study exceedingly difficult. In recent years, several attempts have been made to validate individual portions of the model to build each piece into a full validation. For example, to specifically capture follower readiness, researchers have studied a variety of hypotheses, such as leader-follower congruence on both the leader's and follower's perceptions of follower readiness. Those that study leader-follower congruence, such as Thompson and Glasø (2015, 2018), use self-other agreement research to support their proposed hypotheses. They tested leader-follower congruence, proposing that both the follower and the leader should agree on the follower's development (i.e., readiness) level for the leadership style to be effective in predicting follower's performance.

There is quite a bit of general self-other agreements research which has implications that can be used to address some of the issues with the present situational leadership research. For instance, Harris and Schaubroeck (1988) noted in a meta-analysis that job type (i.e., professional/managerial versus blue collar/service jobs) was a moderator for self-other ratings, where supervisors and employees in blue collar jobs had stronger agreement in their self-other ratings than employees and supervisors in

professional jobs. Interestingly, job type did not moderate observer-only ratings (e.g., peer-supervisor), meaning that self-rater bias was potentially a confounding variable, particularly for more ambiguous jobs like managers and professionals. A self-rater is likely to inflate ratings pertaining to themselves and attribute good performance to their own merits and poor performance to factors outside of their control. Additionally, they note that any differences found in research could also be impacted by how much the rater had observed the employee's performance. The self-other agreement theory assumes that the leader is involved in or at least has knowledge of the follower's development (i.e., readiness) levels. However, depending on job type, location, etc., this might not be the case. While this research does not specifically relate to situational leadership theory, it is important to understand the potential implications it has for the follower's perceptions of their own readiness levels, particularly in professional jobs.

Ostroff et al. (2004) found that self-other agreement (i.e., leader-follower congruence) was significantly related to job performance, which supports Thompson and Glasø's (2015) hypothesis that the leader and follower must be in congruence with their ratings of follower development (i.e., readiness) level for the leadership style to predict follower performance. Finally, Atwater et al. (2005) found that culture can impact the relationship between self-other agreement and employee performance, with significant differences between the United States and European countries. In the United States, self-other agreement predicted performance, whereas in Europe, other-only ratings predicted performance. Thus far, Thompson and Glasø's program of related research on the SLT has been limited to mostly financial institutions in Norway.

The implications related to self-other agreement theory, or leader-follower congruence, are critical to the validation of situational leadership theory because both leader's and follower's perceptions of follower readiness could impact the behavior style chosen by the leader and the follower's preference and acceptance of the leadership behaviors received from their leader. Moreover, this relationship between both leader's and the follower's perceptions of follower readiness and leadership styles can be moderated by many extraneous variables, which need to be considered in validation research of situational leadership theory.

Researchers have also tried a variety of different methods to study situational leadership theory in general. Papworth et al. (2009) used the content analysis method to study the model. In their study, they analyzed supervisor/subordinate interviews to determine if the leadership style matched the follower readiness level. They also found mixed results, where the supervisors' level of speech behavior did increase with the less experienced employees, which is consistent with SLT where leaders will use a "telling" leadership style with followers who have a low readiness level (i.e., R1), but the results were marginal.

Salehzadeh, et al. (2015) used the Kano model to study situational leadership theory (SLTII). The Kano model (Kano et al., 1984, as cited in Salehzadeh, et al., 2015) was originally developed to assess how well the attributes of products or services will impact customer satisfaction. The Kano model considers five dimensions of product and service attributes, such as "must have", "attractive", and so on. Salehzadeh, et al. (2015) applied the same attribute dimensions to the SLTII leadership styles by having students rate various leadership behaviors and then categorizing those behaviors using the Kano model

dimensions. The student's readiness levels were determined by academic degree level (i.e., undergraduate, postgraduate, and PhD, along with demographic variables such as age, gender, and marital status. They found partial support for the fit between the theory's leadership styles and the leadership styles that students in various grade levels (e.g., undergraduate first-year students) expected. This is particularly interesting because this study did not focus solely on leader-follower congruence, as many of the previous research studies have, but also on the follower's expectations of the leader's behavior.

In a second study, they proposed a decision tree model approach to identify the differences in follower's leadership preference, again using demographic characteristics, such as marital status, academic degree level (Salehzadeh, 2017). Both of these studies present new techniques intended to improve the utility of the SLT model and they also find some implications that the follower's preference of leadership matches the prescribed leadership behavioral style in the SLT model. In both studies, follower's readiness is based on demographic differences within academic settings. Salehzadeh, et al. (2015) and Salehzadeh (2017) both found that as the academic level (e.g., undergraduate, postgraduate, doctoral) increased, so did the type of preferred leadership (e.g., directing, coaching, supporting). The fourth leadership style, delegating, was included in the study, however it was not a primarily preferred style among any of the three academic levels.

Other studies have attempted to improve the utility of situational leadership theory in spite of its lack of empirical support. Bosse, et al. (2017) developed a computational model that analyzes the followers' behaviors to determine the appropriate readiness level so it can then be matched with the leadership style proposed by situational leadership

theory. The computational model tracks the follower's body language, communication, and task performance, and then alerts the leader when a new leader behavior style is needed. This research was conducted with a singular simulation between PhD student and a professor. Since it is in its infancy, this approach will need to be tested with a much larger sample size to both improve its algorithms in terms of success and error rates, and to strengthen the proposition that it can increase the utility of the SLT model. Wright (2017) proposes a four-phase dialogic development typology as a method for leaders to develop their communication skills to better improve the utility of situational leadership theory. They suggest that a leader must develop the appropriate communication skills before they are able to successfully apply the SLT model. This is purely a narrative discussion and does not provide any empirical evidence for the proposed typology; however, it does present an idea that there is likely some level of communication and dialogue skills required before a leader can successfully implement SLT with their followers. While neither is a validation study, they both provide a method that could potentially make the SLT model more useful and easier to understand from the leader's perspective.

The wide variety of attempts to either empirically validate SLT (and SLTII) or improve its utility support the continuous theme in research that while SLT is intuitive and logical, it is extremely difficult to find statistical support for the model. Much of the early research attempted to empirically validate SLT through traditional research methods. In recent years, researchers have branched out by using creative techniques and methods in an attempt to validate individual pieces of the model. This present study follows a similar pattern of recent research by focusing on the follower's preference for

leadership, as well as offering a new method for measuring follower readiness levels at the task level.

Follower Readiness: Job Level versus Task Level

A main assumption in situational leadership theory involves follower readiness level. The model proposes that the leader should choose a leadership behavior style based on the follower's readiness to complete a specific task. It is crucial to consider how follower readiness at the task level should be operationalized for empirical study. Finding an appropriate method to research and measure this aspect of the model has been difficult and researchers have attempted to address it in multiple ways. Many studies have considered overall job experience as the measure for task-level readiness. For example, Vecchio (1987) used years of teaching experience to represent follower readiness in his study where participants included high school teachers and principals. Vecchio and Boatwright (2002) argued that "the present use of years of experience in one's current position provides a reasonable surrogate of task-relevant knowledge."

Several other studies have used similar instruments and techniques to measure variables such as leaders' ratings of followers' readiness levels, followers' self-rating of readiness levels, follower work experience, follower job level (e.g., entry, management, professional) and follower performance at the job level (e.g., Cairns et al., 1998; Papworth et al., 2009; Salehzadeh, 2017; Salehzadeh et al., 2015; Thompson & Glasø, 2015, 2018; Thompson & Vecchio, 2009; Vecchio et al., 2006; Vecchio & Boatwright, 2002; Zigarmi & Roberts, 2017). For instance, Thompson and Glasø (2015) tested situational leadership theory (SLTII) from three follower development (i.e., readiness) level perspectives: objective and subjective measures, job level, and leader/follower

congruence in terms of self-other ratings of follower development. Their study found that neither job experience nor job level made a significant difference in follower's job performance in the low or low to moderate development levels.

In many of these studies, job experience is either not well defined, or broadly defined by the amount of time a follower has been in a position. It is possible that the theory's ill-defined explanation of the term "experience", and previous studies using "time in a position" as the measure, could mean that the follower readiness level is not being accurately captured. Essentially, many of these measures and/or data analytic techniques are measuring follower readiness at the job level and not the task level. Although follower readiness is often captured at the job level instead of the task level, Situational Leadership Theory is intended to be utilized at the task level (Hersey, 2009). It is expected that when a new task is introduced at any job level, the leader will need to apply some form of the telling and selling task-oriented leadership styles until the follower is familiarized with the new task. For instance, someone in the same job for 10 years who is learning a brand new task, might need to receive a directive leadership style for that specific task. Measuring job experience (e.g., 10 years of job experience) does not adequately capture the dynamic nature of the follower's readiness level for each specific task. Therefore, these job-level measures used in previous studies are not appropriately assessing the model's intended predictive relationship between the leadership style, follower readiness, and follower success at the task level.

Another difficulty is that the dependent variable of follower success has been measured in terms of both follower performance (i.e., job and task) and follower satisfaction (i.e., leader and job). These variables have been operationalized and

measured in different ways, which makes study outcome comparisons difficult. Finally, much of the recent research has occurred in specific settings, which limits its generalizability due to the nature of each sample. Only a few studies have considered follower readiness at the task level (i.e., Bosse et al., 2017; Vecchio, 1987). This is most likely due to the difficulty with designing a field study that captures task level experience while also obtaining an appropriate sample size. This present study is focused on whether follower preferences of leadership style at the task level match the theory's predictions in the situational leadership model. This present study will measure follower experience by the individual task and not only the time in a position, which might bring a fresh perspective to the research and validation of the theory.

Follower Preference of Leadership Style

For successful application of the situational leadership theory model, there are certain requirements the leader is assumed to possess. First, leader must be able to accurately diagnosis follower readiness. Second, the leader must correctly match the behavioral style to the follower readiness level. Third, the leader must effectively apply the appropriate style. In addition to these assumptions, we also propose that there are certain requirements of the follower that are needed to ascertain a match in leadership style and follower readiness level. Previous studies have researched whether the follower can recognize their own readiness level through self-ratings (e.g., Thompson & Glasø, 2018). However, we suggest that followers must also be able to both recognize the various leadership styles, and the follower must also prefer the recommended leadership style for their readiness level. There have been very few studies that focus specifically on follower preference (e.g., Salehzadeh, 2017; Vecchio & Boatwright, 2002). Most studies

address follower readiness or leader-follower congruence. The present study seeks to discover whether followers prefer a specific leadership style, and if so – does it match the recommended leadership behavior style as predicted in situational leadership theory?

Vecchio and Boatwright (2002) considered the roles of employee maturity (e.g., age, years in current position, and education level) and gender differences in relation to follower preferences for leader consideration and leader structuring (which represent the task (i.e., S1 and S2) and relationship (S3 and S4) leadership behavior styles as described in situational leadership theory). The results of their study revealed that there was not a significant curvilinear relationship between any of the employee maturity variables and a preference for leadership consideration. However, there was a positive relationship between age and leadership structuring, as well as a significant inverse relationship between education and leadership structuring. Interestingly, older followers actually preferred leadership structuring more than younger followers. In terms of gender, Vecchio and Boatwright (2002) found statistical significance that females preferred leader consideration more than males, however, there was no significant evidence that males preferred leader structure more than females. Overall, these results suggest that certain aspects of both the follower's maturity and gender impact the follower's preference for leadership style, and therefore, individual attributes could potentially play a role in the chosen leadership style. Although, it is important to note that this study did not consider follower leadership style preferences at the task level, which excludes a fundamental aspect of situational leadership theory.

Salehzadeh (2017) also considered follower preference as determined by the follower's demographic variables such as academic degree level (undergraduate,

postgraduate, PhD), major, marital status, and gender in relation to follower readiness to see how followers prefer leadership. Using the decision tree approach, they found that the degree level correlated with the stages of leadership styles (i.e., undergraduate followers prefer most directive leadership and upper degree levels prefer more supportive leadership). These findings agree with those of Vecchio and Boatwright (2002), providing further support that a follower's level of education does impact the follower's preference for leadership. Salehzadeh (2017) also found that additional follower characteristics, such as gender and marital status have an impact on the follower's preference of leadership. Using path analysis, they found a total of twenty-seven rules that consider the various combinations of follower's demographic characteristics, which would assist a leader when choosing an appropriate leadership style. This suggests that better matches are made when the follower's individual attributes and leadership preferences are considered as part of the follower's readiness level (e.g., ability, willingness, and confidence to complete a task).

In both studies, degree level (e.g., job level) is used to measure follower readiness. Neither study measures follower preference for leadership at the specific task as intended by situational leadership theory. The present study builds from these two studies by continuing to research the follower's preference of leadership style; however, it also attempts to capture the task level, instead of the job level. Additionally, it expands on the idea that the follower's individual characteristics impact the follower's preference for leadership, thereby also impacting the follower's readiness level. The present study moves beyond demographic variables by considering certain personality characteristics of the follower.

The main goal of this present study is to ascertain whether followers prefer a certain leadership style. At each readiness level, the follower should prefer the recommended leadership style that coincides with that readiness level. In other words, does the follower recognize the leadership style, and does their preferred leadership style match what is recommended by the model? Ultimately, this study seeks a better understanding of the follower's expectations in how they want their leader to behave, and whether this will help the leader be more effective in terms of the style of leader behavior they choose.

Hypothesis 1

When measured at the task level, followers with a low (R1) performance readiness level will prefer the “telling” style of leadership behavior.

Hypothesis 2

When measured at the task level, followers with a low to moderate (R2) performance readiness level will prefer the “selling” style of leadership behavior.

Hypothesis 3

When measured at the task level, followers with a moderate to high (R3) performance readiness level will prefer the “participating” style of leadership behavior.

Hypothesis 4

When measured at the task level, followers with a high (R4) performance readiness level will prefer the “delegating” style of leadership behavior.

In review, situational leadership theory has not been fully supported in research. At best, it is partially supported, although the results are mixed. It appears that while it is intuitive, there are many confounding variables as well as limitations (e.g., measuring

follower readiness at the job level instead of the specific task level.) Also, due to the two versions and many revisions of the theory, past and present research is disorganized and muddled. This present study will use Hersey's original model of situational leadership (SLT) to consider whether follower's have a preference of leadership style and will measure follower's experience at the task level instead of the job level, or length in a particular job or position.

Personality Covariates

In review of previous literature, personality characteristics have not been fully considered or studied, presumably because the theory is based primarily on the follower's readiness of the situation. However, just as demographic differences have been shown to impact follower readiness, it is possible that other individual differences, such as personality, play a role in the follower's readiness to complete a task. This present study expands the previous research concerning the follower's preference for leadership by focusing on task-level scenarios, while also considering certain follower personality characteristics that might function as confounding variables.

While no known studies have directly measured personality in relationship to situational leadership theory, several studies are relevant to this present research. For instance, employees are prone to inflate self-ratings, therefore in self-other agreement research, it is imperative to consider other confounding variables such as self-esteem (Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988). When considering a follower's preference of leadership, the follower's perceptions of their readiness for a particular task is similar to a self-rating. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that personality factors are also critical in the

relationship between a follower's perceived level of readiness and their preference for leadership styles.

Vecchio and Boatwright (2002) findings suggested that "followers with greater levels of education should have higher job-relevant self-confidence". They also found that younger followers actually prefer less directive/task supervision, suggesting that both self-confidence and "the desire for independence" play a role in the follower's preference for leadership style. In other words, personality characteristics such as self-confidence and independence impact follower preference for leadership and the value that the follower places on each specific leadership style.

Vecchio and Anderson (2009) studied the impact of demographic and personality characteristics of managers, such as social dominance and social sensitivity, on self-other agreement ratings of leader effectiveness. Their results are similar in that both types of characteristics were associated in both self and other ratings. It is reasonable to assume that if the manager's personality characteristics impact self-other agreement between managers and followers, then the follower's personality should also impact that relationship, and thus impact the follower's preference for leadership style and its match with the preferred leadership style as predicted by situational leadership theory.

It is possible that situational leadership theory has been so difficult to validate, even though it's an otherwise intuitive model, because personality also influences the follower's preference of leadership style. While many personality traits could potentially impact the follower's preference for leadership style, this present study focuses on three personality characteristics in particular: generalized self-efficacy, work locus of control, and narcissism.

Generalized Self-Efficacy

Generalized self-efficacy is defined as one's belief in their ability to broadly accomplish tasks and reach goals. This is different than self-efficacy, which is limited to one's belief regarding a specific task (Judge et al., 1998). According to situational leadership theory, follower readiness is predicted to change as the follower becomes familiar with a task (Hersey, 2009). It is possible that a follower's level of generalized self-efficacy could impact the follower's perception of the leadership behavior needed to complete any particular task. For instance, an individual with a high level of generalized self-efficacy would likely perceive that they are generally capable of using their resources (e.g., cognitive, motivation, etc.) to complete any reasonable task. Therefore, it seems logical that the level of generalized self-efficacy one has could moderate the preference of leadership, particularly with the task-directive leadership styles.

Research Question 1

Does a follower's level of generalized self-efficacy have any moderating effects on their preference of leadership style?

Work Locus of Control

A second potential covariate in this study is work locus of control. Locus of control is the belief in one's ability to control outcomes in life through their own actions (i.e., internals) versus life outcomes resulting from external forces (i.e., externals). Work locus of control applies this same concept specifically to work events (Spector, 1988). The concept of work locus of control impacting a follower's preference for leadership has been studied by several researchers since the 1970s. For instance, while Runyon (1973) did not specifically study situational leadership theory, he did study the relationship

between the work locus of control of the follower and leadership styles that are very similar to those prescribed in situational leadership theory. He found that internals preferred participative leadership more than directive leadership, while externals preferred directive over participative. Since internals believe in personal control over their situations, they also tend to pursue more information related to the task and are more likely to resist conformity than externals (Spector, 1982). In a meta-analysis, Ng, et al. (2006), found that since internals have a stronger perception that effort leads to desirable outcomes, they are more highly motivated, which within the work domain means that internals should have a higher motivation to learn and a stronger sense of empowerment. It stands to reason that internals may hold less value in the task-directive related leadership styles and prefer more supportive behaviors regardless of their follower readiness level.

In a different meta-analysis, Wang et al., (2010) studied work locus of control, general locus of control, and their respective relationships with work-related criteria (e.g., job performance, interpersonal relationships at work, and perceptions of supervisor competence) and general criteria (e.g., life satisfaction and problem-focused coping). Overall, work locus of control was more strongly related to the work-related criteria than was general locus of control. Although the correlations between work locus of control and work-related criteria were weak to modest, ranging from $r = -.09$ to $.45$, there is evidence that work locus of control is related to certain work-based criteria that may impact the follower's interpersonal relationship with the leader and their perceptions of supervisor competence, both of which may impact their preference for leadership styles. Thus, based on this previous research, it is expected that one's preference for certain

leadership styles could be related to whether they have an external or internal work locus of control.

Research Question 2

Does a follower's work locus of control have any moderating effects on their preference of leadership style?

Narcissism

The third and final potential covariate this present study will measure is narcissism. As with the previous two measures, narcissism will also be controlled for as an indicator of participant's confidence level and feelings of competence. Narcissism is the excessively positive view of oneself and one's abilities (Konrath et al., 2014). Similar to the Dunning-Kruger effect, it is expected that a narcissist with low follower readiness might overestimate their ability to complete a task. Since this present study relies solely on self-reported data, it is possible that an individual's estimation of their own abilities to complete a task are different than their actual ability to complete such a task. However, their preference for leadership behavior should still match their perception of self-ability, even if it is skewed. High levels of narcissism could negatively impact this study because it would color how a participant perceives desired leadership behavior at any level.

Research Question 3

Does a follower's level of narcissism have any moderating effects on their preference of leadership style?

Methods

Design

This study tested the situational leadership model (Hersey, 2009) by comparing the follower's readiness at the task level and their preferred leadership behavior style. This study used a between-subjects design with four conditions. The four conditions, which were the independent variables, were the four follower readiness levels (i.e., R1, R2, R3, R4) represented in the situational leadership theory model (Hersey, 2009). The dependent variable was the follower's preference for leadership style which was operationalized by ratings of twenty-five total leadership behaviors, or four subscales of behaviors pertaining to each of the four leadership styles (i.e., telling, selling, participating, delegating). Random assignment was used to place participants into one of the four conditions. Participants had the option to choose an option to be randomly assigned to a different condition if they were unable to think of a task that matched their original assigned condition. Followers provided demographic information and also completed self-rating measures on the three potential covariates: generalized self-efficacy, work locus of control, and narcissism.

Participants

Participants were recruited using Prolific Academic, an online research platform, which when compared to similar services, has been shown to attract more diverse participants and produce higher quality data (Peer et al., 2017). Participation was voluntary and participants were required to consent to the research study. Consent was discontinued at any point in the study at the participant's request. Participants were compensated \$3.50 upon successful completion of the study.

Participants were recruited from the United States Prolific participant pool and had to be at least 18 years old, speak English fluently, have a full-time job working at least 30 hours per week under a supervisor, and have at least 1 year of work experience. Of the 301 participants who passed the prescreening requirements and consented to the study, 253 participants passed the manipulation check and were included in the analysis. The sample was 65.2% female, 32.8% male, 1.2% non-binary, and 1 participant choose not to state their gender identity. The sample was 78.3% White, 5.9% Black, 2.4% Hispanic, 6.7% Asian, and 6.7% identified themselves as more than one ethnicity. The average age of participants was 38.25 years ($SD = 9.74$). Additional demographic information was collected on participants including career level (i.e., individual contributor (40.7%), entry-level supervisor (23.3%), middle manager (32%), executive (3.6%), or self-employed (.4%), job classification (i.e., professional (45.1%), technical (22.1%), administrative (9.9%), sales (6.7%), customer service (8.7%), or other (7.5%)), length of time in current position ($M = 6.25$ years, $SD = 5.70$), and pay type (e.g., hourly (35.6%), salary (62.5%), other (2%)). See Appendix A for the minimum requirements and demographic questionnaire.

Scenarios

Participants were asked to describe a scenario they have personally experienced at work that matches their assigned treatment condition (i.e., the independent variable). See Appendix B for the scenario activity. The advantage to having participants write their own scenarios versus using experimenter created scenarios is that their scenario descriptions were used to elicit their perceptions of their ability and confidence levels of a specific and familiar task that matches the assigned condition, and also the leadership

style they would prefer their leader to use in that scenario. Additionally, a follower typically only stays in the R1 readiness level category for a short time as they begin to learn the task. Once a task is assigned to the follower, they will not be completely unready, unfamiliar, and unable to complete the tasks for very long. Due to the nature of this readiness level, previous research has found it difficult to fully test this quadrant in the model (Thompson & Glasø, 2015, 2018; Thompson & Vecchio, 2009). Therefore, asking participants to recall and write a situation when they were in this readiness level will help to directly test this quadrant. The dependent variable is the follower's preference for leadership ratings of twenty-five total leadership behaviors, each corresponding to one of the four leadership styles (i.e., telling, selling, participating, delegating).

Measures

Follower's Preference for Leadership Style

To measure participants' preferences for leadership styles of task-oriented (i.e., telling and selling) and relationship-oriented (i.e., participating and delegating) leadership, a measurement scale (Appendix C) was developed using twenty-five of the leader influence behaviors adapted from the situational leadership model (Center for Leadership Studies, 2006). Each of the twenty-five leadership behaviors matches one of the four leadership styles and is recommended by the model as an appropriate leadership behavior for the follower's readiness level. Each style has between four and eight behaviors represented in this measure, which created four subscales. The subscale for the telling leadership style had five items ($\alpha = .85$), the subscale for the selling leadership style had 8 items ($\alpha = .86$), the subscale for the participating leadership style had 4 items

($\alpha = .76$), and the subscale for the delegating leadership style had 8 items ($\alpha = .79$). These behaviors represent the follower's ability and confidence, but does not include willingness, as it is difficult for a participant to acknowledge their unwillingness to complete a task.

In this measure, respondents were first asked to describe a time when they were given a task that matches the follower readiness level (i.e., the condition) they were randomly assigned. For instance, for the low task readiness level (i.e., R1), a participant was asked to "describe a time when you had to complete a task that was brand new to you and you had no prior experience with it." Then, participants were asked to rate each of the twenty-five leader behaviors on the extent they would have liked their leader engage in the following behaviors based in the scenario they described. Participants rated each behavior using a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = to a very small extent and 5 = to a very large extent. The leadership behaviors were randomized to prevent an order effect. Scores for each subscale were calculated using the mean.

Generalized Self- Efficacy

To ascertain whether generalized self-efficacy is a moderator and to control for it as potential covariate, the eight item Generalized Self-Efficacy Scale (Judge et al., 1998) was included in this study (Appendix D). This scale correlated between self and significant-other ratings at $r = .55$ and explained 62% variance as a single factor in an exploratory factor analysis, showing that is a valid predictor of generalized self-efficacy (Judge et al., 1998). In this present study ($\alpha = .94$), participants rated each item on a 10-point scale, where 0 is "strongly disagree" and 10 is "strongly agree". Scores were calculated using the mean.

Work Locus of Control

The Work Locus of Control Scale (WLCS) was included in the study as a measure of work locus of control as a potential moderator and covariate (Appendix E). This is a 16-item scale ($\alpha = .86$) used to measure the extent an individual believes they have control over work decisions (Spector, 1988; Spector et al., 2002). High scale scores represent external work locus of control, whereas low scale scores represent internal work locus of control. Participants reviewed short instructions stating that the questions contained in this section are related to their overall beliefs about jobs and is not specific to their current job or in the scenarios presented in the study. The measure uses a 6-point Likert scale ($1 = disagree\ very\ much\ to\ 6\ agree\ very\ much$). This present study has a coefficient alpha of $\alpha = .82$ which is slightly lower than Spector's (1988) findings. Scores were calculated using the mean.

Narcissism

To measure participant's level of narcissism, the Single Item Narcissism Scale (SINS) was used (Appendix F). This is a single item scale developed by (Konrath et al., 2014). The item reads "To what extent do you agree with this statement: 'I am a narcissist.' (Note: The word "narcissist" means egotistical, self-focused, and vain.)" Participants rated their response on a 7-point Likert scale ($1 = not\ very\ true\ of\ me,\ 7 = very\ true\ of\ me$). This measure has high test-retest reliability (.79) and is significantly correlated ($r = .28\ to\ .50$) with other longer measures of narcissism (Konrath et al., 2014; van der Linden & Rosenthal, 2016). For this current study, this singular score was used to measure narcissism.

Additional Scales

Six additional items were to the Work Locus of Control Scale (Spector, 1998) to be used in future research, unrelated to this present study (Appendix G). Additionally, the Core Self-Evaluation Scale (Judge et al., 2003) was added at the end of the study (Appendix H). This is a higher order factor scale that encompasses self-esteem, locus of control, generalized self-efficacy, and narcissism. The data used for this scale was not considered or analyzed for this present study, but was collected for future, unrelated research purposes.

Procedure

Pilot Testing

Prior to the actual study, a pilot test was conducted to ensure the scenario instructions elicit responses that match the condition as intended and to estimate response times for the survey. Students from a graduate level Industrial and Organizational Psychology program as well as other volunteers from the relevant demographic served as pilot test participants. Their feedback was used to correct any issues that arise surrounding the scenarios, instructions, and wording. The pilot test was also used to identify any fatigue effects, although none were found, and the average time to complete the survey took about 15 minutes.

Manipulation Check and Quality Control

A captcha (i.e., are you a robot?) question was included at the very beginning of the study to reduce potential bot threats. Participants had to choose a series of correct pictures before continuing to the survey. If they failed the captcha, they were not allowed to participate. Next, participants were asked to verify they met the minimum

requirements. If they did not, they received a message regarding their eligibility and returned to Prolific.

A manipulation check was added after the scenario description to help ensure that participants provided a scenario that matched the assigned follower readiness condition. Participants were asked to answer the following question correctly: “Which of the following most closely describes the task in the scenario you provided?” Participants who failed to answer this item correctly were removed from the analysis.

Attention checks were also included in the survey in random locations within each scale to ensure validity of responses. Each measure contained an attention check for a total of five checks. Failed attention checks within the specific measures resulted in the data removed for that specific measure only. Participants were told if they failed more than three attention checks, their data will not be included in the study, and they will not be compensated. No participants failed more than three checks. A final question asking participants if they feel their data should be included in the study was presented at the end of the survey. If they responded no, their data was not included in the analysis. Participants were required to take at least four minutes to complete the survey for their responses to be included in the data analysis.

Initial survey instructions reminded participants of the importance of attentiveness and truthfulness in responses. The covariate scales were presented after the participant completed the scenario and leadership influence behavior scale. All manipulation and quality control checks are found in Appendix I.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via Prolific Academic platform, then presented with a survey created using Qualtrics. Participants completed an informed consent and were given instructions regarding the estimated time needed to complete the survey along with eligibility requirements. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. In total, 319 participants responded to the survey, however 18 participants did not meet minimum requirements and were removed from the study and returned to Prolific.

Initially, 77 participants were randomly assigned to condition 1 (i.e., follower readiness level 1), 75 were randomly assigned to condition 2 (i.e., follower readiness level 2), 71 were randomly assignment to condition 3 (i.e., follower readiness level 3), and 78 were randomly assigned to condition 4 (i.e., follower readiness level 4). However, 48 of these participants failed the manipulation check. Over half of those (25 participants) were assigned to either condition 1 or 2 and answered the manipulation check as the other condition (i.e., condition 1 responded to the manipulation check as condition 2 and vice versus). It is possible there was confusion as the response choices for condition 1 and condition 2 were somewhat similar. Of the 253 remaining participants, 66 were randomly assigned to condition 1, 58 were randomly assigned to condition 2, 54 were randomly assignment to condition 3, and 75 were randomly assigned to condition 4. The conditions are uneven due to the removal of participants who failed the manipulation check.

Next, participants were presented with the open-ended scenario description response activity and then the follower's preference for leadership scale. Participants did

not know which leadership style was represented, nor were terms specific to situational leadership used in the study. If participants were unable to think of a task related to their assigned scenario, they had the option to choose “I can’t think of a task” and be randomly reassigned to one of the remaining scenarios. Only one participant reported they were not able to think of a task in two different scenarios, and nine participants were reassigned to a new condition after being unable to think of a task. Of the nine reassigned, the initial assigned conditions were spread across all four conditions, meaning there was not a pattern of respondents being unable to respond to one condition more than the other conditions.

Once the scenario activity was completed, participants received instructions stating the next section is related to their general feelings and not specific to the previous scenario described. The three covariate measures were presented, in random order, for participants to complete, followed by the additional measure and the demographic questions. For all measures in the study, the items were randomized within each scale. Finally, participants were asked if their responses should be used in the study as a last quality control check before they were thanked for their time and debriefed.

RESULTS

Data Prescreening

SPSS version 29.0 was used to conduct all analyses. Data was screened to ensure that all minimum requirements were met, attention and manipulation checks were passed, and total time taken to complete the study exceeded four minutes. Next, missing data was identified and removed using the pairwise procedure. Frequencies were analyzed to ensure all data was accurate and there were no impossible scores. The normality assumption for all variables was checked using the variable skewness, kurtosis, and Shapiro-Wilk's tests. All variables were found to be normally distributed, except for two scale-level personality variables, narcissism (skewness = 1.68, kurtosis = 2.29) and generalized self-efficacy (skewness = -1.50, kurtosis = 2.67). Both were positively, right-skewed and contained outliers. Boxplots were used to identify extreme outliers. Narcissism had multiple outliers and extreme outliers. Generalized self-efficacy has multiple outliers and one extreme outlier. After reviewing each data point, it was determined to leave the outliers in the data analysis. These represent the participant's levels of each personality trait. To answer the three research questions as to whether personality is a potential moderator in the relationship between the follower's readiness level and the follower's preference for leadership, we needed to include the full scale of participant responses. Finally, the homogeneity of variance assumption was assessed on all scale level variables using Levene's test. All scale-level variables were found to be non-significant and of equal variances.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for the scale-level variables. The means for the Follower Preference for Leadership subscales show that across all four conditions (i.e., follower readiness levels), participants generally preferred the delegating style of leadership over the other three leadership style. Participants also tended to have a more internal work locus of control and low levels of narcissism. The mean for generalized self-efficacy was strikingly high indicating participants tended to be very confident. In comparison to the original Judge, et al. (1998) generalized self-efficacy scale validation study, three separate samples in that study had means ranging from 8.07 to 8.43.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Scale-Level Variables

Scale	Mean	Standard Deviation
FPLS: "Telling"	3.04	1.04
FPLS: "Selling"	3.04	.92
FPLS: Participating	3.10	.95
FPLS: Delegating	3.61	.76
Work Locus of Control	4.10	.62
Generalized Self-Efficacy	7.93	1.93
Narcissism (Single-Item)	1.91	1.27

Note: $N = 253$, FPLS = Follower Preference for Leadership Subscales, FPLS ranged from 1 (to a very small extent) to 5 (to a very large extent), WLCS ranged from 1 (disagree very much) to 5 (agree very much), GSE ranged from 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree), and SINS ranged from 1 (not very true of me) to 7 (very true of me).

Table 3 shows the correlations for the telling, selling, participating, and delegating subscales of Follower Preference for Leadership Scale, as well as correlations with the three personality variables (e.g., narcissism, generalized self-efficacy, and work locus of control.) In the Follower Preference for Leadership subscales (FPLS), the “participating” and “delegating” scales were approaching acceptable levels of reliability, while all other scales had very good reliability.

Table 3
Correlation Matrix for Scale Variables

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. FPLS: Telling	(.85)	.809**	.772**	.365**	.014	-.053	-.022
2. FPLS: Selling	.809**	(.86)	.810**	.518**	.009	.020	-.014
3. FPLS: Participating	.772**	.810**	(.76)	.520**	-.080	.008	.015
4. FPLS: Delegating	.365**	.518**	.520**	(.79)	-.065	.169**	.124*
5. Narcissism	.014	.009	-.080	-.065	(-)	-.194**	-.124*
6. GSE	-.053	.020	.008	.169**	-.194**	(.94)	.506**
7. WLCS	-.022	-.014	.015	.124*	-.124*	.506**	(.82)

Note. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). Reliability estimate (i.e., Cronbach’s alpha) listed in parentheses. Narcissism is a single-item measure. GSE = Generalized Self-Efficacy. WLCS = Work Locus of Control.

A repeated measures ANOVA was performed to compare the effect of follower readiness level on follower preference for leadership style. A familywise alpha of .05 was used for all analyses. Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of sphericity had been violated, $\chi^2(5) = 113.30, p < .001$, therefore, degrees of freedom were corrected using the Greenhouse-Geisser estimates of sphericity. The results show there was a significant effect of leadership style on follower preference, $F(3, 250) = 9.002, \epsilon_{GG} = .757, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .098$). Pairwise comparisons on the mean difference were conducted using the Bonferroni correction. Participants in the follower readiness level R1 condition had no significant differences in preference for leadership style, meaning they did not significantly prefer the recommended telling leadership style more than the other styles. Therefore, hypothesis one was not supported. Participants in the follower readiness level R2 condition did not prefer the selling leadership style as recommended by the SLT model. Interestingly, they significantly preferred the delegating leadership style over all other styles. Hypothesis 2 was also not supported. Participants in the follower readiness level R3 condition had no significant preference in leadership style, thus hypothesis 3 was not supported. Finally, participants in the follower readiness level R4 condition significantly preferred the delegating leadership style over all other leadership styles, providing support for hypothesis 4. See Table 4 for estimated marginal means and table 5 for within-condition pairwise comparisons.

Table 4
Estimated Marginal Means

Condition	Leadership Style	Mean	Std Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	Telling	3.25	.122	3.01	3.49
	Selling	3.20	.103	3.00	3.40
	Participating	3.17	.112	2.95	3.39
	Delegating	3.49	.091	3.31	3.67
2	Telling	3.28	.130	3.02	3.54
	Selling	3.41	.110	3.19	3.63
	Participating	3.41	.120	3.18	3.65
	Delegating	3.93	.097	3.74	4.12
3	Telling	3.24	.135	2.97	3.50
	Selling	3.25	.114	3.02	3.47
	Participating	3.27	.124	3.02	3.51
	Delegating	3.47	.101	3.27	3.66
4	Telling	2.52	.114	2.30	2.75
	Selling	2.46	.097	2.27	2.65
	Participating	2.69	.105	2.48	2.90
	Delegating	3.58	.086	3.41	3.75

Note: Condition is the follower's readiness level.

Table 5

Bonferroni Pairwise Comparisons of preference for leadership style within readiness levels

Condition	FPLS(I)	FPLS(J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	95% CI	
				Lower	Upper
R1	Telling	Selling	.05	-.16	.25
		Participating	.08	-.15	.30
		Delegating	-.25	-.57	.078
R2	Selling	Telling	.13	-.08	.35
		Participating	-.01	-.20	.19
		Delegating	-.52*	-.79	-.26
R3	Participating	Telling	.03	-.21	.28
		Selling	.02	-.18	.23
		Delegating	-.20	-.49	.01
R4	Delegating	Telling	1.06*	.76	1.36
		Selling	1.11*	.88	1.35
		Participating	.89*	.64	1.14

Note: *significant based on a familywise alpha = .05; FPLS indicates leadership style.

Supplemental pairwise comparisons were conducted using the Bonferroni correction to compare between conditions. For the telling style of leadership, there were significant differences between follower readiness levels R1 and R4, where R1 had a higher preference for this style. R4 significantly had the lowest preference for the telling, selling, and participating styles compared with R1, R2, and R3 conditions. For the delegating leadership style, there were no significant differences between conditions R1, R3, and R4, such that all three conditions similarly preferred this leadership style. Surprisingly, there was a significant difference between conditions R2 and R4, where participants at the R2 readiness level preferred the delegating leadership style more than those in the R4 readiness level. See table 6 for pairwise comparisons.

Table 6

Bonferroni Pairwise Comparisons of preference for leadership style between readiness levels

Leadership Style	Readiness Level(I)	Readiness Level(J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	95% CI	
				Lower	Upper
Telling	R1	R2	-.033	-.507	.441
	R1	R3	.008	-.475	.492
	R1	R4	.725*	.281	1.170
	R2	R3	.041	-.457	.540
	R2	R4	.758*	.298	1.219
	R3	R4	.717*	.247	1.188
Selling	R1	R2	-.208	-.609	.192
	R1	R3	-.045	-.453	.364
	R1	R4	.737*	.362	1.113
	R2	R3	.164	-.257	.585
	R2	R4	.946*	.557	1.335
	R3	R4	.782*	.385	1.179
Participating	R1	R2	-.243	-.680	.193
	R1	R3	-.098	-.543	.347
	R1	R4	.480*	.071	.890
	R2	R3	.145	-.313	.604
	R2	R4	.724*	.300	1.148
	R3	R4	.579	.146	1.011
Delegating	R1	R2	-.442*	-.797	-.087
	R1	R3	.025	-.337	.388
	R1	R4	-.087	-.420	.246
	R2	R3	.467*	.094	.841
	R2	R4	.355*	.010	.700
	R3	R4	.112	-.240	.464

Note: * significant based on a familywise alpha = .05; FPLS indicates leadership style.

To answer research questions 1-3 regarding whether narcissism, generalized self-efficacy, and/or work locus of control had any moderating effects on the outcome of follower preference for leadership, separate repeated measure ANOVAs were conducted to separately include each of the personality variables. The results show that there were no significant effects of narcissism, $F(3,250) = .224, \epsilon_{GG} = .753, p = .224, \eta_p^2 = .006$), or of work locus of control, $F(3, 250) = .804, \epsilon_{GG} = .758, p = .462, \eta_p^2 = .003$) on the relationship between follower readiness level and follower preference for leadership. However, generalized self-efficacy did have an effect on this relationship, $F(3, 250) = 4.067, \epsilon_{GG} = .765, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .016$), although the moderating effect was not strong enough to change any of the follower preference for leadership outcomes.

Discussion

This study sought to partially validate the popular situational leadership theory in terms of follower preference for particular leadership behavior styles. Previous research has been unable to successfully find empirical support for situational leadership theory. In this present study, we considered whether followers preferred particular leadership styles and if so, did their preference match the recommended style in the SLT model. We argue that – for the model to effectively predict follower performance – followers must first recognize their readiness at the task level and the leadership behaviors that are needed, but also, they must prefer the same leadership behaviors in the context of their readiness level. It was hypothesized that the situational leadership theory would correctly (and significantly) predict follower preference for leadership behaviors at the task level for all four leadership behavior styles. In other words, at the task level, follower

preference for leadership style and the theory's recommendation of leadership style was expected to be statistically significant (i.e., match) for all four leadership styles identified in the situational leadership theory model (hypotheses 1-4). We found some support for our hypotheses, although only in the follower readiness condition R4, such that participants in this condition strongly preferred the delegating leadership style, which matches the model's recommendations for this readiness level. Interestingly, readiness conditions R1 and R2 also preferred the delegating leadership style, which is opposite of the SLT model's recommendations. The model recommends that followers in these readiness levels receive task-oriented (e.g., telling, selling) leadership styles. However, particularly in condition R2, followers prefer these styles the least.

Followers in readiness level R1 did not have a significant preference for a particular leadership style. The means across all four styles are very similar, although delegating is slightly higher. The model describes this type of follower as unable and insecure. A possibility for this lack of preference could be that the follower is not invested in the task as it is brand new. They do not have the knowledge, skill, or motivation to complete the task. With this in mind, the lack of preference of leadership style could simply be as a result of task introduction, the follower is seeking any and all types of leadership in an effort to make sense of the task.

Followers in readiness level R2 significantly preferred the delegating leadership style, even more than followers at the recommended R4 readiness level for this style. Results also show that followers in the R2 readiness level even slightly prefer participating (although not-significantly) over the task-oriented leadership styles. SLT theory describes R2 followers as unable, but confident and willing. While participants in

the R2 condition did not prefer the selling leadership style as recommended by the model, their preferences for leadership do align with the model's description of them. As indicated by the results, it appears that the confidence and willingness in R2 followers outweighs their inability to complete the task. In other words, they do not need to be persuaded or "sold on" the task, as they already appear to exhibit high levels of confidence. Followers in the R2 readiness level appear to prefer a more blended version of the leadership styles, with a heavier emphasis on the relationship-oriented leadership behaviors. However, they still need the task-oriented leadership behaviors as they have not fully learned or been trained on the task. We argue that followers in this readiness level still need the task-oriented behaviors, although they do not recognize this necessity, as indicated by the results. Therefore, instead of selling the task to the R2 follower, the leader should focus more on explaining how the task should be accomplished, and more specifically, explain to the follower why the task-oriented leadership behaviors are an important factor in the follower's success.

Another interesting outcome is that follower readiness level R3 did not have a preference of leadership style. Participants in this condition reported very similar preferences for all four styles on average. The readiness level is described as someone who has had training, but it's the first time they have completed the task on their own. These results indicate that followers in this situation desire their leader to provide task behaviors as much as relationship behaviors. In other words, the follower's confidence drops between readiness levels R2 and R3, as they are faced with doing the task on their own for the first time. This supports the theory's description of this readiness level as followers are considered able to complete the task, but insecure or lacks confidence.

However, the results of this study indicate that similar to followers in the R2 readiness level, followers in the R3 readiness level prefer a blend of leadership styles, as opposed to only the participating leadership style.

Follower readiness level R4 was the only group of participants that provided a clear match between the SLT model's recommendations and the followers' preference for leadership. Participants in this condition made it clear that they do not want to be led by any other style than delegation. These followers are able to complete the task and are confident in their ability.

Although this study does not find strong support for situational leadership theory, it should not be interpreted as an invalidation of the theory. Instead, it indicates that most followers may not recognize the leadership style they need. It could also mean that followers generally prefer a certain leadership style regardless of their level of task readiness. Perhaps followers perceive task-related leadership behaviors as micro-managing and do not understand the importance of these leadership behaviors in the development of the follower's task readiness. We argue that leaders are not the only group that needs training in situational leadership theory. Followers would also benefit from an explanation on how and why leaders choose appropriate styles. Involving followers might lead to a better understanding of the process, more cooperation, and better performance outcomes. This argument warrants further research beyond the scope of this present study and should be extended in future research.

Limitations

This study was intended to provide a fresh perspective to the previous research attempts to validate situational leadership theory. However, this present study expected

limitations. First, situational leadership theory is based on the concept of a progressive relationship between the situation (i.e., task), follower, and leader such that as the follower becomes more familiar and confident in the task, the leader will vary in the amounts of task and directive behaviors and relationship and supportive behaviors needed. Therefore, a cross-sectional study is not the most desirable method to validate the theory. Unfortunately, longitudinal field studies of this magnitude require significant sample sizes and enough time to capture the full progression of the task, leader, follower relationship, which is not feasible in most cases. Therefore, while this cross-sectional study attempts to capture the essence of that relationship, it is fully reliant on participants' perceptions of what they prefer versus how they would react in an actual situation.

Additionally, the study was limited because the manipulation requires participants to recall and write their own scenarios. Due to time constraints, the manipulation was confirmed through the participants responding to the question "Which of the following most closely describes the task in the scenario you provided?" and answering from four response options representing the four conditions. This manipulation check is used to validate that the participant was paying attention and wrote about a task that they perceived to be within their readiness level condition. During preliminary data screening, a potential issue with clarity in the manipulation prompts for Condition 1 and 2 resulted in the deletion of 25 additional participants in these two conditions due to failing the manipulation check. None of these participants failed any other quality control check, meaning it was more likely the result of unclear prompts. While this is a limitation in this current study, future research could involve trained reviewers conducting an in-depth

review of the participants' scenarios to determine if the participants' task (and their perceptions of task readiness) matches the follower performance readiness condition as operationalized by SLT.

Similar to Salehzadeh (2017) and Vecchio and Boatwright (2002), this present study only considered the followers' preference and its relationship (i.e., match with) to the recommended style of leadership. However, it does not consider the full interaction between the follower readiness level, follower preference for leadership style, the actual leadership style used, and follower's performance outcomes. Additionally, previous research has mostly been done at the job level, not the task level, so it is difficult to compare the results of the current study with the results of previous research studies.

Furthermore, it is thought that one reason this theory is so difficult to validate is the speed in which the progression of task readiness occurs. Some of the research has argued that followers do not stay in the lowest follower readiness quadrant for very long, and they either become more familiar with the task or they move on (or are removed) from the task (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009). On the other hand, once a follower becomes fully familiarized with the task, they reside in the highest follower readiness quadrant for a longer period of time. In normal jobs, it is assumed that new tasks are not often introduced into the job. Since this theory predicts leadership behavior at the task level, it is further complicated by how a leader would need to address a follower, who has received relationship-oriented leadership over a long period of time but is now being introduced to new tasks. It is also assumed that this theory is dynamic, and the style of leadership moves back and forth between quadrants depending on the task; however, this is impossible to measure in a cross-sectional study and is not captured by the present

research. Since there are not actual and true leader-follower relationships being analyzed, this study is unable to account for the progression speed, or the leader-follower dynamic that requires adjustments when new tasks are introduced.

Future Directions

While personality has not been fully considered in previous research, this present study expands upon the concept that individual differences must be considered when choosing a leadership style. The follower's personality characteristics may not only influence their preference for leadership styles, but also might influence both the follower's perceptions of and their actual readiness level, as well as the managers' perceptions of the follower's readiness.

Another aspect of this study regarded the concept of personality as a covariate in the relationship between follower readiness level and follower preference for leadership. We posited that certain personality characteristics could potentially moderate this relationship. For example, participants with high levels of narcissism and/or generalized self-efficacy, or an internal locus of control might more strongly prefer delegating leadership behaviors. However, results indicated that only generalized self-efficacy had moderating effects. It appears that these effects, while present and significant, did not cause a shift in preference between leadership style. Instead, it moderated the strength of preference within each leadership style. It is noteworthy that participants were both extremely confident and, regardless of follower readiness level, mostly preferred the delegating leadership style which has the least amount of directive leadership behaviors. This could be that followers generally find the more directive leadership styles aversive, or perhaps it could be a result of the Dunning-Kruger effect. It would be interesting to

conduct a similar study on samples with lower means of generalized self-efficacy to see if the moderating effects would cause a shift in leadership style preference, such that samples with a much lower generalized-self efficacy mean would have more variability in preferred leadership styles. There is very little literature regarding personality characteristics and SLT theory. Further research on the impact of personality characteristics on various aspects of this theory, or the theory as a whole could provide valuable insight and explanation about the conditions in which the theory does or does not hold true.

It is possible that participants overwhelmingly preferred the delegating leadership style, however, there was no significant consequence or situational pressure that could impact their job performance if their preference did not align with the recommended leadership style for their readiness condition. It would be interesting to add a performance element to study whether followers would choose a different style of leadership when there are clear consequences to performance outcomes.

Finally, factor analysis should be conducted on the recommended leader behaviors for each leadership style (i.e., the four subscales) that were adapted from Hersey's situational leadership model (Center for Leadership Studies, 2006) to confirm if the leader influence behaviors recommended for each of the 4 leadership styles load onto the leadership style in which they are assigned.

Conclusion

In summary, we have delivered a unique and fresh perspective on the follower aspect of situational leadership theory by considering the followers preference for leadership. We provided meaningful data that focuses specifically on task level follower

readiness. Additionally, we were able capture follower readiness level R1 and the “telling” leadership style. In previous literature, this readiness level has been very difficult to measure as most studies take place in the field and not many participants are in the “brand new to the task” stage. We sought to answer the question, “do followers have a preference for leadership style?” and that certain followers do have a clear preference, although it might not be the preferred style as recommended by the SLT model. Taken together, these results indicate that only followers with an R4 readiness level recognize and prefer the appropriate leadership style as recommended by situational leadership theory. These results are limited, however, and warrant further research to fully understand the dynamic relationship between the leader and the follower.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Minimum Requirements and Demographics

The following questions are minimum requirements for participation and were answered in multiple choice format. An incorrect answer to any of these questions resulted in the termination of the study. These questions were used to prescreen participants to narrow our applicable sample size. They appeared in the study exactly as they appear in Prolific's prescreening tool.

1. What is your current age in years? _____ (*fill in the blank*)
2. Which of the following languages are you fluent in?
 - a. English
 - b. I am not fluent in English
3. What is your employment status?
 - a. Full Time
 - b. Not Full Time
4. Please try to estimate: How many hours do you work per week?
 - a. Less than 31 hours per week
 - b. 31 – 40 hours per week
 - c. 41 – 50 hours per week
 - d. 51 – 60 hours per week
 - e. More than 60 hours per week
5. Do you have a direct supervisor at work?

- a. Yes
 - b. No
6. How long have you worked for your current organization?
- a. Less than 1 year
 - b. 1-2 years
 - c. 2-5 years
 - d. More than 5 years

The following questions are additional demographic variables and are used to capture the sample characteristics.

1. Which of the following best represents your ethnicity? Select all that apply
- White/Caucasian
 - Black/African American
 - Hispanic
 - Latinx
 - Asian
 - American Indian or Alaska Native
 - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
2. What is your gender?
- a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-Binary
 - d. Other
 - e. Prefer not to say

3. Which career level best represents your position at your current job?

- a. Individual contributor
- b. Entry-level supervisor
- c. Middle manager
- d. Executive
- e. Self-employed

4. What is your current job classification?

- a. Professional
- b. Technical
- c. Administrative
- d. Sales
- e. Customer service
- f. Other

5. What is the length of time in your current position (*in years*)?

_____ (*fill in the blank*)

6. Are you paid hourly or salary?

- a. Hourly
- b. Salary
- c. Other (*e.g., commission-based only*)

Appendix B

Scenarios

The following activity will ask you to recall a specific work task and describe that task in detail. First, think of the situation where the task occurred and then try to remember as many details about the task and situation as possible about it. It is very important that you are attentive, detailed, and truthful in your response, and that you choose a task that best represents the scenario given to you.

Stem: Think about a time at your job when your supervisor gave you a work task to complete....

R1: that was brand new to you and you had no prior experience with it.

Example: First time driving a car.

R2: that was new to you, and it was very interesting, and you were excited about taking on the new task.

Example: You've driven a car once or twice.

R3: that you have done many times, but it's a new situation and you weren't sure you were going to complete it correctly. In this scenario, you are trained, but it is a first solo performance where you had to step up and do something on your own.

Example: First time driving a car by yourself after drivers education training.

R4: that you have done many times on your own and you've done it well.

Example: You have been driving a car for many years on your own.

Please describe the task, including as many details as possible such as the specific situation, details about the task, your feelings about the task, etc.

If you cannot think of, or do not have, a task that fits this scenario, please choose "I can't think of a task."

**If the participant was randomly assigned to a condition where they do not have any task experiences that fit the assigned scenario, they were routed to a new, randomly assigned condition from the three remaining scenarios.*

Appendix C

Measure of Follower Preference for Leadership Style

Adapted From: Hersey, P. and Center for Leadership Studies. (2006)

Based on the task scenario that you previously described, to what extent would you want your leader to engage in the following behaviors in that specific scenario?

1	2	3	4	5
To a very small extent	To a small extent	To a moderate extent	To a large extent	To a very large extent

1. Provide task information in digestible amounts
2. Be sure not to overwhelm you
3. Reduce your fear of mistakes
4. Help you step-by-step
5. Focus on instruction
6. Seek your “buy-in” through persuasion
7. Check your understanding of the task
8. Encourage you to ask questions
9. Discuss details with you
10. Explore related skills
11. Explain “why” the task is being completed
12. Give you the task in incremental steps
13. Emphasize “how to” do the task
14. Make decision making a combined effort between leader and yourself
15. Determine the next step
16. Encourage and support you

17. Discuss your apprehension
18. Listen to your updates on the task
19. Resist overloading you with additional tasks
20. Encourage your autonomy to complete the task
21. Observe with an overall hands-off management style
22. Reinforce that communication be led by you
23. Provide support and resources for what is necessary to do the job
24. Delegate activities to you with little apprehension from the leader
25. Encourage freedom for you to take risks

Appendix D

Measure of Generalized Self-Efficacy

Judge, T. A., Locke, E. A., Durham, C. C., & Kluger, A. N. (1998).

Copied from: http://www.timothy-judge.com/core_selfevaluations_measure.htm

**Non-proprietary, free to use without permission or cost*

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements about yourself in general.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Strongly Disagree	10				Neither Agree Nor Disagree				Strongly Agree

1. I am strong enough to overcome life's struggles
2. At root, I am a weak person (r)
3. I can handle the situations that life brings
4. I usually feel that I am an unsuccessful person (r)
5. I often feel that there is nothing that I can do well (r)
6. I feel competent to deal effectively with the real world
7. I often feel like a failure (r)
8. I usually feel I can handle the typical problems that come up in life

*2,4,5,7 are reverse scored

Appendix E

Measure of Work Locus of Control

Spector, P. E. (1988)

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The following questions concern your beliefs about jobs in general. They do not refer only to your present job. To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements jobs in general.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Disagree very much	Disagree moderately	Disagree slightly	Agree slightly	Agree moderately	Agree very much

1. A job is what you make of it
2. On most jobs, people can pretty much accomplish whatever they set out to accomplish
3. If you know what you want out of a job, you can find a job that gives it to you
4. If employees are unhappy with a decision made by their boss, they should do something about it
5. Getting the job you want is mostly a matter of luck (r)
6. Making money is primarily a matter of good fortune (r)
7. Most people are capable of doing their jobs well if they make the effort
8. In order to get a really good job, you need to have family members or friends in high places (r)
9. Promotions are usually a matter of good fortune (r)
10. When it comes to landing a really good job, who you know is more important than what you know
11. Promotions are given to employees who perform well on the job
12. To make a lot of money you have to know the right people (r)
13. It takes a lot of luck to be an outstanding employee on most jobs (r)
14. People who perform their jobs well generally get rewarded
15. Most employees have more influence on their supervisors than they think they do
16. The main difference between people who make a lot of money and people who make a little money is luck (r)

*5,6,8,9,12,13,16 are reverse scored

Appendix F

Single Item Narcissism Scale (SINS)

Konrath, S., Meier, B. P., & Bushman, B. J. (2014)

To what extent do you agree with this statement: “*I am a narcissist.*” (Note: the word “narcissist” means egotistical, self-focused, and vain.”

1	2	3	4	5	6	
Not Very True of Me	7					Very True of Me

Appendix G

Additional Work Locus of Control Scale Items

New Items to be added to the end of the WLCS scale:

1	2	3	4	5	6
Disagree very much	Disagree moderately	Disagree slightly	Agree slightly	Agree moderately	Agree very much

1. The people you know will provide you with information about potential job opportunities
2. Maintaining relationships in my field will help me achieve more goals
3. Promotions can be gained using your network
4. Hearing about potential job opportunities is a matter of good fortune
5. Expanding my social connections has little effect on the number of job opportunities available to me
6. I believe the right people will find me without trying to create new relationships

**No items in this scale are reverse scored.*

Appendix H

Core Self-Evaluation Scale

Judge, T. A., Erez, A., Bono, J. E., & Thoresen, C. J. (2003)

Below are several statements about you with which you may agree or disagree. Using the response scale below, indicate your agreement or disagreement with each item by placing the appropriate number on the line preceding that item.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

1. I am confident I get the success I deserve in life
2. Sometimes I feel depressed (r)
3. When I try, I generally succeed
4. Sometimes when I fail, I feel worthless (r)
5. I complete tasks successfully
6. Sometimes, I do not feel in control of my work (r)
7. Overall, I am satisfied with myself
8. I am filled with doubts about my competence (r)
9. I determine what will happen in my life
10. I do not feel in control of my success in my career (r)
11. I am capable of coping with most of my problems
12. There are times when things look pretty bleak and hopeless to me (r)

*Items 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12 are reverse scored.

Appendix I

Manipulation and Quality Control Checks

At the beginning of the survey, a captcha question was added:

1. Are you a robot? (click pictures of...)

After the scenario writing activity, the following manipulation check was added:

1. Which of the following most closely describes the task in the scenario you provided?
 - a. It was brand new to you and you had no prior experience with it.
 - b. It was new to you, and it was very interesting, and you were excited about taking on the new task.
 - c. You have done the task many times, but it's a new situation and you weren't sure you were going to complete it correctly.
 - d. You have done many times on your own and you've done it well.

Five attention checks were placed within the survey, one within each of the 5 measures.

1. Please choose "to a small extent" to show you are paying attention. (*FLPS*)
2. Please answer "agree slightly" to show you are paying attention. (*WLCS*)
3. Please answer "2" to show you are paying attention. (*SINS*)
4. Please choose "8" to show you are paying attention. (*GSE*)
5. Please choose "disagree" to show you are paying attention. (*CSE*)

The last quality control check were placed at the end of the survey:

1. Should your responses be used in this study?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No