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Adults' Event Representations: Categorizing Servant Leadership

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Abstract

Research in cognition and social psychology of organizations have explored perception of leadership. Yet, these investigations remain unconnected. The current study puts forth an approach to studying leadership cognition by 1) using leadership theory to define leadership behavior in an experimental context (in terms of Direction, Alignment, Commitment), and 2) using the Match-to-Sample task to test leadership categorization in adults. When presented with a 'sample' event portraying servant leadership followed by another pair of events (only one portraying servant leadership and the other portraying either: task leadership, social interaction, and virtuous interactions), adults (N = 330) selected the correct match event significantly above chance; $M=.57$ ($SE = .01$), $t(329) = 8.00$, $p < .001$. The findings have implications for cognitive theories by clarifying the nature of leadership representations, as well as for social organizational psychology by introducing a cognitive, non self-report measure of leadership understanding.