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The a priori of public leadership: Social attributions to public and private leaders in different performance contexts

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Abstract

Previous scholarship provides little insight into the differences between public and private leadership in people's a priori assumptions about leaders. We advance a socio-cognitive approach and examine how implicit social attributions to leaders are contingent on sector and performance cues. Participants completed the Semantic Misattribution Procedure to reveal implicit associations of traits with leaders in contrasting scenarios. Results show that sector cues affect such attributions, which in turn influence behavioral intentions, but only so in interaction with performance information. We conclude that public leaders earn fewer credits for success or failure than private leaders.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Public administration (PA) scholarship has long paid only scant attention to the phenomenon of leadership. In his review of the then available literature, Van Wart (2003) arrived at the conclusion that the field severely lagged behind leadership studies in the business sector, where the conceptual and empirical variety had begun to grow much earlier. In search for an explanation for this neglect, a predominant narrative is that the public sector provides more “substitutes for leadership” (Kerr & Jermier, 1978) than the private sector: Public organizations are characterized by a denser web of rules and regulations, which provide firm guidance for organizational members and thus inhibit or neutralize the influence of leadership. Moreover, public organizations have a role to play in the implementation of policies and the enforcement of law, which implies that many programs and activities are determined by external bodies and are thus beyond the scope of administrative leadership. Under these constraints in the

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organizational structure and environment, public leaders' room for maneuver is limited, as is their responsibility for organizational performance. In turn, leaders in the public sector cannot be held accountable for success or failure to the same extent than their counterparts in the business sector.

Recently, research on leadership in the public sector has gained considerable momentum (Crosby & Bryson, 2018; t'Hart & Tummers, 2019; Vogel & Masal, 2015). Few scholars and practitioners would disagree that public leaders can make a difference for the better of public organizations and beyond. However, if and how public and private leadership differ, and if and how such differences matter, is still an unsolved puzzle. This is an important knowledge gap because the vast majority of leadership studies is still carried out in private organizations, and the transferability of results to PA remains in question as long as sector differences in leadership are unclear. Previous research provides only piecemeal evidence in this regard, with few scholars studying how public and private leaders differ in terms of personality traits (Andersen, 2006; Judge et al., 2002), ascribed roles (Hooijberg & Choi, 2001; Tummers & Knies, 2016), or behavioral patterns (Hansen & Villadsen, 2010). Consistent with the view that leadership "is in the eye of the beholder" (Jacobsen & Bøgh Andersen, 2015), most studies in this stream use perceptual measures and ask followers for their a posteriori ratings of leaders. This approach leaves open whether differences in such ratings result from cues that indeed emanate from variations in leaders' personality, roles, or behaviors, or if the mere context of public or private sector organizations triggers followers' a priori attributions that are independent from leader-related characteristics.

Scholarship in social cognition suggests that leadership attributions might originate from individuals' perception and cognitive processing of contextual cues, rather than from observable characteristics of a target person. The socio-cognitive approach to leadership has shown that people bring their implicit conceptions of leadership to social situations and to the categorization of actors therein (Lord et al., 2020). Such "implicit leadership theories" (ILTs; Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Epitropaki et al., 2013; Junker & van Dick, 2014; Lord et al., 2020) are organized in a hierarchical system with the broadest possible category of a "leader" at the top and more nuanced conceptions of leaders in particular social spheres (e.g., societal sectors) at lower levels. These mental representations of prototypical traits are important drivers of attributions to leaders; a categorization process that largely occurs at subconscious levels (Epitropaki et al., 2013). It follows from this line of reasoning that people may approach public and private leaders differently in the first place and independently from observed personal or behavioral characteristics. In this case, the sectoral affiliation of an organization (i.e., public vs. private sector) is a contextual cue leading to social attributions to leaders that might differ in both strength and kind.

Among the insights provided by the socio-cognitive approach is the observation that people tend to overestimate the influence of leadership (Meindl et al., 1985). More precisely, they ascribe organizational success to leaders even if the success is beyond leaders' influence and, for instance, the result of mere luck. This phenomenon, called the "romance of leadership" (Meindl et al., 1985), is likely to interfere with the attribution process when people are exposed to public or private leaders. In the case of public organizations, limited responsibility for success and failure might be part of individuals' mental heuristics that structure their sense-making. The public sector is thus likely to be a less romantic setting than the private sector, resulting in other, and potentially weaker, trait attributions to leaders. Accordingly, the public-private distinction might matter more for social attributions to leaders once people additionally receive and process contextual information on performance.

Previous scholarship in PA has not explored if and how ex ante attributions to leaders, as triggered by contextual cues, differ. We address this gap and pursue the following research question: "Do social attributions to leaders differ depending on sector (i.e., public vs. private) and performance cues (i.e., success vs. failure), and if so, how and at which strength?" We tackle this question in an online scenario experiment with a total of $n = 734$ German employees. To account for the implicit dimension of social attributions, we apply the Semantic Misattribution Procedure (SMP; Imhoff et al., 2011), thus extending the range of implicit methods in PA research (e.g., Marvel & Resh, 2019; Ngoye et al., 2018) and responding to calls to "roam more freely through the disciplines and experiment with a variety of methods" (Crosby & Bryson, 2018, p. 1265). Results of linear mixed modeling (LMM) show that followers' social attributions to leaders vary mainly as a result of interactions between the sector and performance

context. A successful performance context triggers higher attributions of leadership traits to private leaders than contexts of failure, whereas no such effect appears for trait ascriptions to public leaders. This pattern replicates for traits clustered in three dimensions of ILTs (i.e., rule abidance, tyranny, and achievement orientation) and suggests that people tend to romanticize only private leadership. We conclude that the public–private distinction is relevant to social attributions to leaders only when combined with further contextual information, suggesting that context matters for public leadership in complex ways.

The contributions of our study reside at the crossroads of three developments in scholarship on public leadership and beyond. First, the issue if and how public leadership is different from other forms of leadership, notably from private leadership, is subject to an ongoing debate (Getha-Taylor et al., 2011; Ospina, 2017; Tummers & Knies, 2016; Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021). By further deepening a socio-cognitive approach to public leadership (Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021), we shed new light on this issue and explore if such differences exist in traits that people attribute to leaders *ex ante* and in the absence of observational cues from personal or behavioral characteristics. Second, while there is large agreement that “context matters” in the study of public leadership (Crosby & Bryson, 2018; Hartley, 2018; Ospina, 2017; Van Wart, 2013), scholarship still provides only sparse empirical evidence for this claim. By focusing on the sectoral context and situational performance information, we consider interactions between multiple contextual cues in the social construction of public leadership. Third, an emerging stream in PA scholarship shows that implicit associations with the public sector shape people's evaluations of attitudinal objects. While available studies have investigated this effect for attitudes toward service delivery (Marvel, 2016) and professional groups (Willem, 2020), we extend this line of inquiry to implicit associations with public leaders.

2 | THEORY

2.1 | The a posteriori of public leadership

Almost 20 years since Van Wart's (2003) empathic call for more research on leadership in the public sector, the community of PA scholars has broadly acknowledged the crucial role of public leaders (Van Wart, 2013; Vogel & Masal, 2015). Yet, the distinctive characteristics of public leadership remain a puzzle in the burgeoning literature. On the one hand, advocates of a genuine approach consider the public context a focal determinant and essential dimension of public leadership, making it distinct from leadership in the business sector in important respects (Getha-Taylor et al., 2011; Tummers & Knies, 2016). On the other hand, proponents of the generic approach assert that sector contingencies of leadership should not be overemphasized and that the same concepts can grasp essential aspects of both public and private leadership (Ospina, 2017; Vandenabeele et al. 2014).

Previous empirical studies on public–private differences are still too sparse to provide clarifications to this debate. The few available findings emanate from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds (Kellerman & Webster, 2001) and address different aspects of public leadership, including personality traits as well as leadership roles, styles, and behaviors (Chapman et al., 2016). For example, results indicate that the prevalence of personality traits in leaders of business and government organizations varies in two out of the big five personality dimensions (i.e., openness and conscientiousness; see Judge et al., 2002). Public leaders also seem to be less materialistic than their counterparts in the private sector (Boyne, 2002). The dissimilar job contexts might also explain why public leaders engage more in participatory and less in directive leadership styles than private leaders (Hansen & Villadsen, 2010). Leaders and followers in the public and private sector also have different role expectations toward effective leaders (Hooijberg & Choi, 2001). Consistent with this insight, scholars have developed and validated instruments to measure how specific roles allow public leaders to master challenges that particularly arise from the public context, among them rule-following and political loyalty (Tummers & Knies, 2016; Vogel et al. 2020).

Most of these and further studies build on observational data from *ex post* assessments and ratings of leaders, using questionnaires in which followers evaluate particular leaders with whom they have a leadership relationship

for varying spans of time. This research thus improves the scholarly understanding of the “a posteriori of public leadership,” that is, insights into the differences between public and private leaders that are derived from followers’ observations of characteristics and behaviors of leaders and expressed in deliberative judgments. However, less is known about the “a priori of public leadership,” that is, the generalized images that people have about public and private leaders and that they bring into a leadership relationship in the first place, independent of observable characteristics and behaviors of a specific leader and often operating at levels below consciousness. This is an important yet neglected dimension of the social construction of public and private leadership, as the ex-ante assumptions about and expectations toward leaders might be an important source of variation in ex post ratings of particular leaders. A socio-cognitive approach to leadership accounts for this a priori dimension.

2.2 | The a priori of public leadership

A socio-cognitive approach to leadership explores how the emergence and outcomes of leadership are determined by social cognition, that is, the cognitive processes that guide how humans perceive, process, store, and subsequently retrieve information in social situations (Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Lord et al., 1984). Three principles of social cognition are of particular relevance for the socio-cognitive approach to leadership. First, individuals’ behavior in a social situation is not solely a function of generalized stimulus–response reactions but rather the result of automatic cognitive processing of incoming information, targeted at determining the most adequate and effective response (Cohen & Lefebvre, 2005; Fiske & Taylor, 2017). A central feature of implicit information processing is the grouping of perceived information into cognitive categories, which structure peoples’ implicit, abstract knowledge of a field, and provide a framework for appropriate sense-making (Fiske & Taylor, 2017; Rosch, 1983). ILTs (Eden & Leviatan, 1975) are cognitive categories that comprise implicit knowledge on leadership, encoded in trait taxonomies that describe an abstract prototype of a typical or ideal leader (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004; Lord et al., 2020).

Second, driven by an internal desire to find causal explanations for the world that surrounds them, humans use their leadership categories as mental heuristics to make sense of organizational leadership (Cronshaw & Lord, 1987). Automatically triggered by contextual cues, the implicit matching process of leadership categorization involves the encoding of novel information into the most matching leadership category on the one hand, and the retrieval of information encoded by that category on the other hand (Lord et al., 1982). Leadership categorization results in the classification of a person as a leader or nonleader (Lord et al., 1982, 1984) and the attribution of unobserved, but ILT-inherent traits to that person (Cronshaw & Lord, 1987). As a consequence, people’s a priori conceptions of leadership affect tangible outcomes of the leadership situation. For example, leaders that do not match followers’ ILTs will be rated less favorably by their followers; this mismatch will also negatively affect followers’ attitudes and behaviors, such as leader-member-exchange, engagement, and well-being (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Junker & van Dick, 2014).

Third, since socio-cognitive processes are largely based on heuristics, they are not always accurate. That is, individuals’ a priori implicit constructions of leadership bias their sense-making of, and causal attributions to, leaders in a given situation. For example, the ILTs that people bring to the leadership situation can be stronger predictors of their leadership ratings than the actual behavior of the rated leader (Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Rush et al., 1977). In addition, individuals might infer leadership from the mere perception of organizational outcomes, that is, high or low organizational performance, and consequently attribute leadership qualities to the next likely causal agent in a situation (Lord and Maher 2002). Such unsubstantiated attributions of influence and potency to leaders at the neglect of other influencing factors, such as structures or mere chance, have also been referred to as “romance of leadership” (Meindl et al., 1985). The likelihood of “romanticizing” leaders increases with the magnitude of organizational events, peaking at very positive and negative organizational outcomes (Bligh & Schyns, 2007; Meindl et al., 1985).

2.3 | A socio-cognitive inquiry of public versus private leadership

The aim of this study is to detect differences between public and private leadership that are not covered by followers' ex-post assessments. In order to do so, we build on the particularities of leadership categorization.

While ILTs are generalized, abstract conceptions of leaders' typical traits, the categorization process decomposes into separate effects of the single traits constituting the cognitive category, which means that not all of the trait dimensions weigh equally in the process of forming an impression of a leader (Tavares et al., 2018). Instead, some ILT dimensions are more informative or important to distinguish a leader from a nonleader (Hanges et al., 2000; Rosch, 1983). However, a dimension's relative importance in leadership categorization is also a function of the context (Lord & Shondrick, 2011; Shondrick et al., 2010). Cognitive salience refers to an ILT dimension's relative probability to differentiate leaders from nonleaders in a certain context (Fiske & Taylor, 2017). The higher the salience of a dimension in a given context, the more likely will it be activated by cues of this context. For example, ILT dimensions that are more informative for the recognition of public leaders will be more salient, that is more prone to be activated by cues indicating publicness, than dimensions that are less decisive. It needs to be noted, however, that dimensions that are particularly important for the recognition of leaders in the context of public organizations might also become salient in a private context. In this case, the dimension is equally important to distinguish public and private leaders from public and private non-leaders.

Drawing on these principles, we explore which leadership associations arise in the context of public versus private organizations and investigate how sector differences manifest in individuals' social constructions of leadership. Doing so, we apply an implicit priming method, which allows us to tap into the implicit components of people's ILTs that are not captured by explicit rating scales (Bargh, 2006; Ngoye et al., 2018).

Beyond the mere differentiation between public and private leaders, the analysis of employees' implicit social attributions has central implications for our understanding of the organizational significance of leadership (Bligh & Schyns, 2007; Meindl et al., 1985). It follows from a socio-cognitive approach that leaders' potential to motivate and mobilize followers is limited by the degree to which organizational members attribute leadership to them (Lord et al., 2020; Lord & Hall, 2003). Exploring how followers causally link leadership to organizational outcomes in public and private organizations, and which ILT dimensions become salient in such attributions, reveals which of the differences between public and private leadership actually matter for organizational outcomes. To arrive at a more finely grained understanding of how public and private leadership differ, we explore how followers' trait attributions to public and private leaders interact with contextual information on team success and failure.

Lastly, followers' implicit social attributions to leaders matter to the extent to which they mediate followers' perceptions of leadership cues and their attitudinal and behavioral responses to leadership. So far, however, little is known about the implications of followers' leadership categorization of public and private leaders for their behavioral intentions. We therefore investigate how individuals' context-contingent implicit attributions to leaders translate into commitment and support toward leaders in different contexts.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Semantic misattribution procedure

With minor adjustments to our research context, we adopted the SMP from Imhoff et al. (2011) and Sava et al. (2012). The SMP is a semantic variant of the affect misattribution procedure (AMP; Payne et al., 2005) and the most reliable implicit method regarding internal consistency and robustness (Znanewitz et al., 2018). The 'S' in SMP (i.e., semantic) refers to the kind of primes that are used in the procedure. While the AMP uses visual cues

(i.e., pictures) as primes, the SMP uses semantic cues (i.e., single words or short phrases). In our study, the attributes of leaders, as organized in ILTs, are the semantic primes (e.g., “innovative,” “compassionate,” “loyal to the state”). The SMP is thus a priming method, building on the general phenomenon that exposure to certain stimuli influences subsequent judgments, attitudes, and behaviors (Bargh, 2006). Priming roots in the principle of spreading activation within neurological networks, wherein the activation of one concept (e.g., team performance) results in the automatic activation of semantically related concepts in close proximity (e.g., leadership; McNamara, 2005). This principle even holds when primes are presented only for extremely short spans of time in which information processing largely resides at a subliminal level.

The “M” in SMP (i.e., misattribution) exploits the phenomenon that individuals possess only limited ability to identify the (true) source of their emotions or cognition (Wells & Loftus, 2003). As a result, they wrongly attribute (i.e., *misattribute*) this emotional state or cognitive evaluation to a “neutral” target that has, in fact, not caused it. For example, walkers crossing a suspension bridge may mistake their own physiological arousal resulting from the bridge’s instability for sexual attraction to a stranger (Dutton & Aron, 1974). The SMP uses a Chinese character as a neutral, ambiguous target of misattributions because it has no meaning to those who do not speak Chinese. Participants rate this character as significantly more pleasant if it is preceded by a pleasant, subliminally presented prime (Payne et al., 2005). In contrast, participants rate the same character as more unpleasant if it is preceded by an unpleasant prime. Without being aware of it (i.e., implicitly), individuals misattribute their quasi-automatically triggered associations with the prime to the evaluation of the Chinese character (Payne et al., 2005). Since any systematic shifts in the evaluation of the otherwise ambiguous Chinese character can be considered an effect of the preceding semantic prime, participants’ evaluation of the character reveals their implicit associations with the semantic stimulus of interest (Sava et al., 2012). We maximized the ambiguity of the target by enforcing a dichotomous judgment of the Chinese character (i.e., fit or no fit; Payne et al., 2005).

The advantage of implicit methods in general and the SMP in particular is that they are less prone to response biases (such as social desirability; Payne & Lundberg, 2014) than explicit methods. Implicit methods reduce participants’ explicit information processing in order to access subconscious contents and processes. Accordingly, they are useful to delve into those parts of implicit public leadership theories (IPLTs) that are not accessible to introspection and reflection (Epitropaki et al., 2013) and account for the fact that a substantial part of human information processing occurs below the level of consciousness in the manner of associative recognition (Evans, 2012; Kahneman, 2013). By introducing the implicit measurement method of ILTs, we respond to calls from the field of general leadership studies (Epitropaki et al., 2013). Our methodological choice ties in with the recently increasing acknowledgement of implicit methods in PA (Ngoye et al., 2018) and successful cases of their application (Marvel & Resh, 2019).

3.2 | Experimental procedure

Our experiment followed a fixed sequence of different assessment methods, including survey elements, case scenarios to vary the context, a practical exercise in the implicit tool, and the SMP itself. Figure 1 gives a schematic illustration of the procedure and Supporting Information Appendix A provides a more detailed description of each step.

3.2.1 | Step 1: Survey

At the beginning of the experiment, participants completed control questions. Participants who did not match our filter criteria—at least 1 year of employment and/or inability to identify neutral targets (i.e., to read Chinese characters)—were excluded.

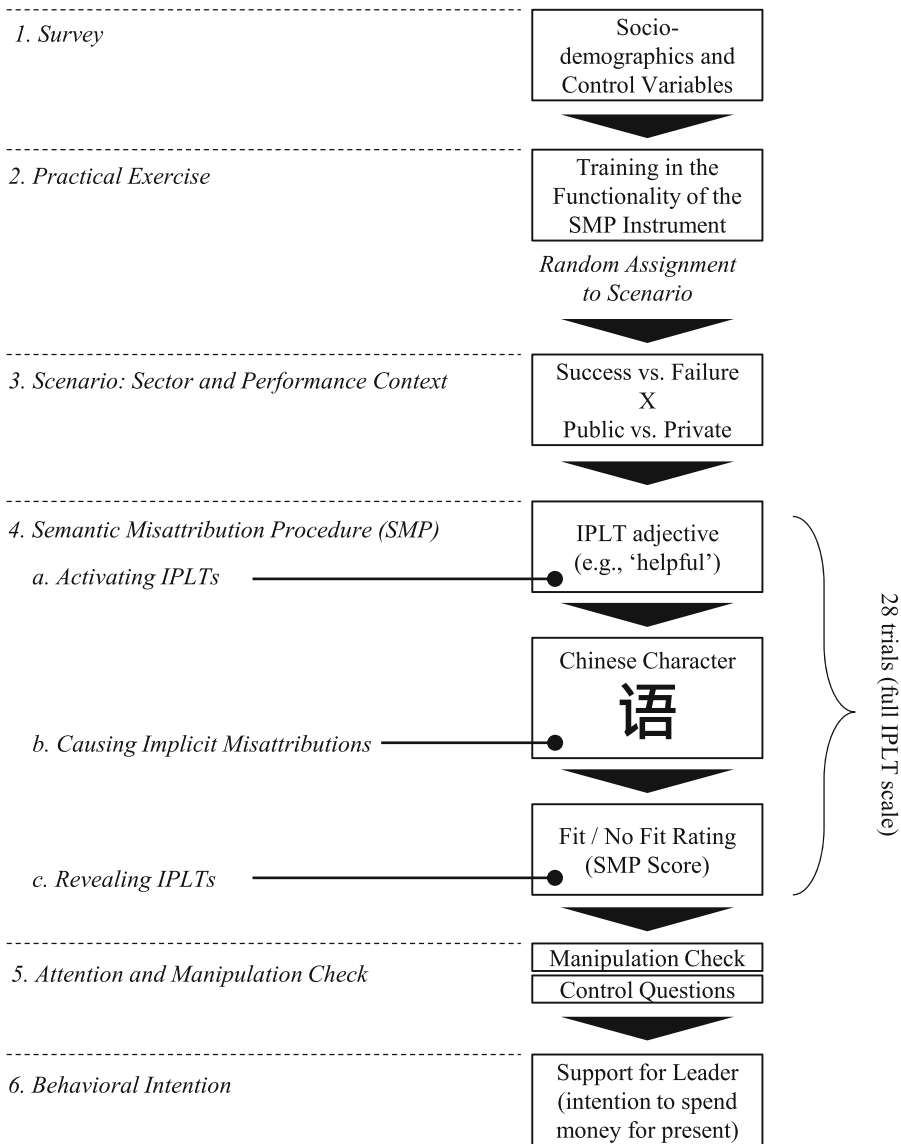


FIGURE 1 Overview of experimental procedure

3.2.2 | Step 2: Practical exercise

Participants then completed a practical exercise to learn about the technical handling of the SMP and to get used to the answering principle. This training leveled out potential effects of inter-individual differences in the understanding and handling of the SMP.

3.2.3 | Step 3: Team performance scenarios

Hypothetical, yet realistic scenarios are a popular method to activate participants' experiences with leadership by putting them mentally into a leadership context (see e.g., Haslam & Ryan, 2008). To examine how performance and

sector context influence leadership perceptions, we assigned respondents randomly to one out of four high-contrast scenarios, corresponding to one cell of our 2×2 design. While none of the scenarios described the leader's traits or behaviors directly, the contextual information provided in the scenarios varied along the two factors sector and performance manipulation. To manipulate the sector context, the scenarios described either a public or a private leader and utilized sector specific terminology (e.g., "agency" vs. "company"). The performance context was manipulated by describing a leader in the context of either team success or team failure and supplementing the information with a graphic performance forecast (Haslam & Ryan, 2008; see Supporting Information). The scenario corresponding to the public organizational success condition is provided in Supporting Information Appendix A.

3.2.4 | Step 4: SMP

Following the scenario, participants read that the leader should receive a poster presenting a Chinese character as an appreciation gesture (success condition) or a means to increase motivation (failure condition). This information introduced participants' main task in the SMP, which consisted in deciding whether a selection of Chinese characters would be a suitable print for the appreciation or motivation poster. To measure participants' implicit leadership schemas, we applied the complete set of 28 items from Vogel and Werkmeister's (2021) IPLT scale (Table 1 and Supporting Information Appendix B). In each of the following 28 main SMP trials, participants saw an IPLT adjective (semantic prime) for 200 ms, followed by a blank screen (125 ms). The blank screen was followed by a Chinese character (200 ms) with a neutral emotional valence, as validated in former studies (Hensel, 2020). In a speeded-choice task, participants rated whether the Chinese character fit or did not fit the leader described in the scenario. They indicated a fit or misfit by pressing the "A-key" or "L-key" on the keyboard as fast as possible. From these responses,

TABLE 1 Implicit public leadership theories (IPLT) model dimensions and corresponding items (Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021)

Dimension	Items
<p><i>Achievement orientation</i> The drive to pursue and implement organizational goals and tasks even under pressure and against resistance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Handles stress • Assertive • Self-confident • Well dressed
<p><i>Tyranny</i> The abuse of power to achieve own goals through oppression, penitance, and coercion of employees.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commanding • Narrow minded • Power hungry • Dull
<p><i>Kindheartedness</i> Feeling of affection, grace, and compassion for others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affectionate • Compassionate • Merciful • Kind
<p><i>Progressiveness</i> Drive and openness for new entrepreneurial ideas and innovation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovative • Future oriented • Creative
<p><i>Righteousness</i> Drive to establish the common good and justice rather than realizing interests.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common good oriented • Impartial • Unselfish
<p><i>Rule abidance</i> Commitment to the observance of rules and loyalty to the state.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rule oriented • Loyal to the state

we calculated the SMP score as the average “fit”-rating across all items in each dimension. This score served as our dependent variable to answer our first research question.

3.2.5 | Step 5: Attention and manipulation check

After completion of the 28 SMP trials, participants answered a number of questions to validate both their correct understanding of the scenario and to explore their perception of the presented leader.

3.2.6 | Step 6: Behavioral intentions

In order to examine the relevance of IPLTs beyond cognitive processes, we finally asked for respondents' support for the leader presented in the scenario (i.e., “If you were to contribute money to the poster, how many euros would you be willing to spend?”). This measure addresses a more consequential outcome than cognitive attributions.

3.3 | Data

With the support of an online panel data provider, a total of $n = 812$ German employees were recruited. All participants had at least 1 year of work experience to ensure that their cognitive leadership schemata had established (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). We excluded participants who did not meet our quality criteria. We excluded observations from the initial sample based on two criteria: First, we checked the SMP ratings and considered a rating invalid if not falling within the conventional response time range of 100–10,000 ms for implicit tests (Greenwald et al., 2003). We excluded participants with ratings outside this time range in more than 10% of the trials, and those who did not recall the team performance correctly. The final sample consisted of $n_{\text{final}} = 734$ participants. Randomization checks with univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) and chi-square tests showed that experimental conditions did not differ substantially. While men were slightly overrepresented in our sample, this was true across experimental conditions so that overall, we expected no sampling bias. The average reaction time per SMP trial was 420 ms. Table 2 provides a full overview of the demographic variables grouped by condition.

3.4 | Data analysis

Due to the repeated-measures design (i.e., one participant completed several SMP trials), our data yield a significant amount of within-variance (i.e., shared variance of SMP ratings stemming from the same participant). Since standard univariate procedures such as ordinary least square regression or (between-subject) ANOVA are not robust to violated assumptions of independent and identically distributed data points, we applied LMM. In addition to fixed effects, which capture the population-level average effect of an independent variable on the dependent variable and essentially resemble model terms from a standard regression model, LMM allows to control for stochastic variability that roots in grouping factors (random effects, i.e., within-person variance). We calculated LMMs that modeled SMP scores by experimental conditions and interactions between them as fixed effects. In addition, we specified random intercepts in each model to account for data dependencies that resulted from idiosyncratic response patterns. All independent variables were dummy-coded. Analyses were conducted with RStudio (R Core Team, 2014).

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics on demographic variables grouped by experimental conditions

Sector context	Public			Private			Total	
	Success (n = 183)			Failure (n = 177)			Failure (n = 182)	
	Value (%)	Mean (SD)		Value (%)	Mean (SD)		Value (%)	Mean (SD)
Gender								
Female	95 (43.1)		73 (41.0)	85 (44.0)		65 (36.0)	299 (40.7)	
Male	125 (56.8)		104 (59.0)	107 (56.0)		117 (64.0)	435 (59.3)	
Sector affiliation								
Public	91 (50.0)		85 (48.0)	88 (46.0)		98 (54.0)	362 (49.3)	
Private	92 (50.0)		92 (52.0)	104 (54.0)		84 (46.0)	372 (50.6)	
Leadership position (yes/no)	54 (29.5)		52 (29.3)	56 (29.1)		54 (29.6)	216 (29.4)	
Age	44.3 (11.9)		47.6 (11.7)	45.0 (11.7)		44.0 (10.9)	45.6 (11.9)	
Work experience	22.02 (12.83)		24.6 (13.0)	22.6 (12.5)		21.2 (12.1)	23.0 (12.8)	

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Leadership attributions to public versus private leaders

To address our research question, we present the results of two LMMs testing the effects of organizational context on the overall SMP score in Table 3. Model I yields no significant main effects of the context manipulation. However, the significant interaction effect in Model II shows (Model II; $b = -0.08$, $p < 0.024$) that the effect of *sector context* is contingent on the *performance context*. Figure 2 illustrates the estimated means of the total SMP score adjusted for experimental conditions and demonstrates the interaction between *sector context* and *performance context*. In the private condition, the SMP score is significantly higher in the context of team success than in the context of team failure. In the public context, however, participants' trait attributions do not vary as a function of the performance context.

4.2 | Dimensional effects

In a post hoc analysis, we examined whether participants attributed leadership traits (IPLT dimensions) differently to public and private leaders in different performance contexts. Supporting Information Appendix C lists the marginal means for each dimension, grouped by experimental condition. Tables 4 and 5 present six additional LMMs that specify each IPLT dimension's SMP score by experimental conditions (Model I) and interactions between the experimental conditions (Model II). Significant interactions between *sector context* and *performance context* appear for *achievement orientation* (model II_{ACH}; $b = -0.11$, $p = 0.023$), *rule abidance* (Model II_{RA}; $b = -0.21$, $p < 0.001$), and *tyranny* (Model II_{TYR}; $b = -0.10$, $p = 0.034$). As Figure 3 illustrates, performance information on team success leads to significantly higher ascriptions of *achievement orientation* to leaders in the private context. In the public context, however, no significant differences between leaders of successful and unsuccessful teams emerge. For both *tyranny* and *rule abidance* (Figures 4 and 5) we find significant cross-level interactions. While participants attribute significantly higher levels of *tyranny* and *rule abidance* to private leaders of successful than of unsuccessful teams, the opposite pattern appears in the public condition, where participants attribute significantly higher levels of *tyranny* and *rule abidance* to leaders of unsuccessful than of successful teams.

TABLE 3 Results of linear mixed model; DV: total Semantic Misattribution Procedure (SMP) score

	SMP score			
	Model I		Model II	
	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Fixed effects</i>				
Intercept	0.50	<0.001	0.46	<0.001
Sector context (<i>d</i> ; 1 = public)	-0.02	0.277	0.06	0.018
Performance context (<i>d</i> ; 1 = success)	0.02	0.168	0.02	0.521
Sector context * performance context			-0.08	0.024
<i>Random effects</i>				
τ_{00}	0.05 _{ID}		0.05 _{ID}	
R^2	0.210		0.210	

Notes: Bold values *p*-values on an $\alpha = 0.5$.

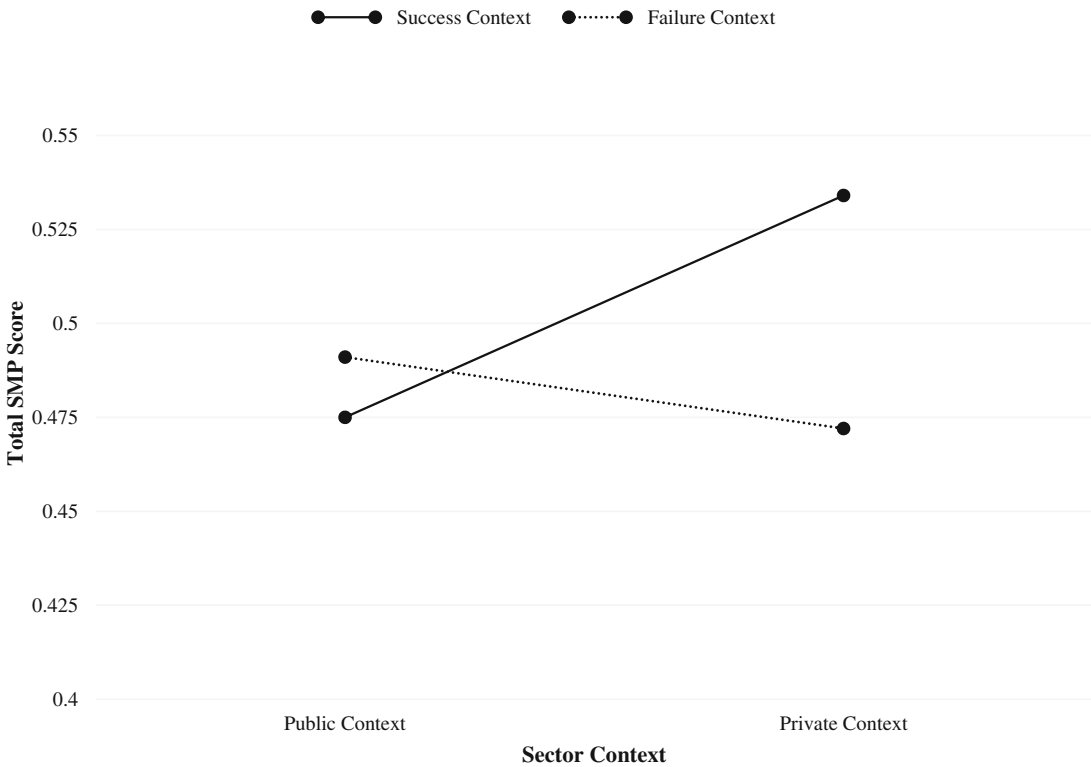


FIGURE 2 Estimated means of total Semantic Misattribution Procedure (SMP) score depending on sector context, adjusted for performance context

4.3 | Effect of sector affiliation

In addition, we explored the effect of participants' sector affiliation. Analyses reveal only a significant interaction effect between participants' *sector affiliation* and sector context on participants' attributions of *rule abidance* (Supporting Information Appendix B). Figure 6 illustrates how attributions of *rule abidance* to public and private leaders vary systematically between public and private employees. Public and private employees ascribe similar levels of *rule abidance* to private leaders. However, they differ significantly in their ascriptions of *rule abidance* to public leaders. Private employees associate significantly higher levels of *rule abidance* with public leaders than public employees do.

4.4 | Implications for behavioral intentions

We also examined whether participants' willingness to contribute financially to the poster depends on the context manipulation and the IPLT dimensions. We calculated a stepwise LMM (Table 6), with participants' reported financial contribution to the poster in euros (*EUR spent*, $M = €8.95$) as the dependent variable, *sector context* and *performance context* as dummy-coded categorical independent variables, and the SMP score for each IPLT dimension as metric, standardized independent variables.

The best fitting model accounts for 58.4% ($R_{\text{Marg}}^2 = 0.584$) of the total variance in *EUR spent*. The final model reveals that all of the six IPLT dimensions significantly predict the amount of *EUR spent*. The higher participants'

TABLE 4 Results of linear mixed model; DV: implicit public leadership theories (PLT) dimensions (I–III)

	Achievement orientation			Kindheartedness			Progressiveness					
	Model I _{AACH}	Model II _{AACH}		Model I _{KHN}	Model II _{KHN}		Model I _{PRO}	Model II _{PRO}				
	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>p</i>			
<i>Fixed effects</i>												
Intercept	0.57	<0.001	0.55	<0.001	0.43	<0.001	0.41	<0.001	0.63	<0.001	0.62	<0.001
Performance context (<i>d</i> ; 1 = success)	0.05	0.051	0.10	0.003	-0.01	0.720	0.04	0.291	0.05	0.126	0.03	0.467
Sector context (<i>d</i> ; 1 = public)	-0.03	0.288	0.08	0.381	-0.01	0.643	0.04	0.263	-0.03	0.297	-0.05	0.280
Sector context * performance context			-0.11	0.023			-0.06	0.260			-0.03	0.631
<i>Random effects</i>												
τ_{00}	0.10 _{ID}		0.10 _{ID}		0.12 _{ID}		0.12 _{ID}		0.17 _{ID}		0.17 _{ID}	
R^2	0.012		0.019		0.005		0.006		0.008		0.008	

TABLE 5 Results of linear mixed model; DV: implicit public leadership theories (PLT) dimensions (IV-VI)

	Righteousness			Rule abidance			Tyranny					
	Model I _{RHS}			Model I _{RA}			Model I _{TYR}					
	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>			
<i>Fixed effects</i>												
Intercept	0.46	<0.001	0.44	<0.001	0.53	<0.001	0.38	<0.001	0.33	<0.001	0.30	<0.001
Performance context (<i>d</i> ; 1 = success)	-0.00	0.990	0.05	0.224	0.07	<0.001	0.10	<0.001	0.01	0.798	0.05	0.090
Sector context (<i>d</i> ; 1 = public)	-0.02	0.543	0.06	0.102	0.00	0.961	0.17	<0.001	0.01	0.757	0.05	0.088
Sector context * performance context			-0.09	0.087			-0.21	<0.001			-0.10	0.034
<i>Random effects</i>												
τ_{00}	0.13 _{ID}		0.12 _{ID}		0.01 _{ID}		0.01 _{ID}		0.09 _{ID}		0.09 _{ID}	
R ²	0.001/0.997		0.005/0.997		0.372/1.000		0.250/1.000		0.000/0.998		0.006/0.998	

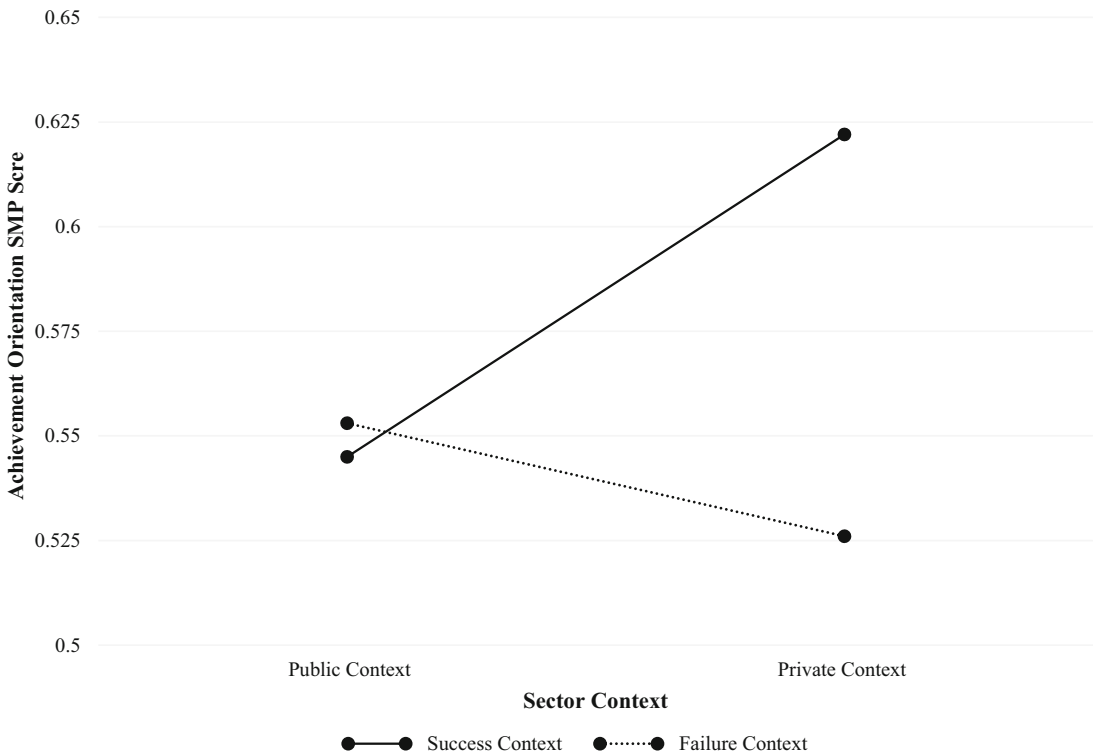


FIGURE 3 Estimated means of achievement orientation score depending on sector context, adjusted for performance context

SMP scores on *kindheartedness* ($\beta = \epsilon 0.99, p < 0.001$), *progressiveness* ($\beta = \epsilon 1.12, p < 0.001$), *rule abidance* ($\beta = \epsilon 1.06, p < 0.001$), and *righteousness* ($\beta = \epsilon 0.74, p < 0.001$), the more money they were willing to contribute to the poster for the fictitious leader. In contrast, the higher participants' attributions of *achievement orientation* ($\beta = \epsilon -2.61, p < 0.001$) and *tyranny* ($\beta = \epsilon -0.82, p < 0.001$) to a fictitious leader, the lower the amount of money they were willing to contribute. Overall, participants indicate a higher willingness to contribute money to the present of a public leader than of a private leader, as the significant effect of *sector context* reveals ($\beta = \epsilon 0.99, p < 0.001$). However, as a significant interaction effect of *performance context* and *sector context* ($\beta = \epsilon -2.74, p < 0.001$) indicates, the positive relationship between *sector context* and *EUR spent* is significantly smaller in the success condition.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The public–private distinction in leadership has been a recurrent issue in PA scholarship, but evidence on how public and private leadership differ is still sparse and inconclusive. In particular, previous research has been preoccupied with the judgments that followers in the two sectors make about their leaders a posteriori (Hansen & Villadsen, 2010; Hooijberg & Choi, 2001). Less is known about the a priori of leadership, that is, the implicit assumptions, attributions, and associations that people bring into their evaluation of public and private leaders in the first place. By addressing this issue, our study has advanced a socio-cognitive perspective (Lord et al., 1984, 2020), as has recently been introduced to the study of public leadership (Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021). This preliminary work has analyzed followers' typicality ratings of leaders to extract the structure and content of people's implicit public–in contrast to generic–leadership images (Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021). Taking the socio-cognitive perspective one

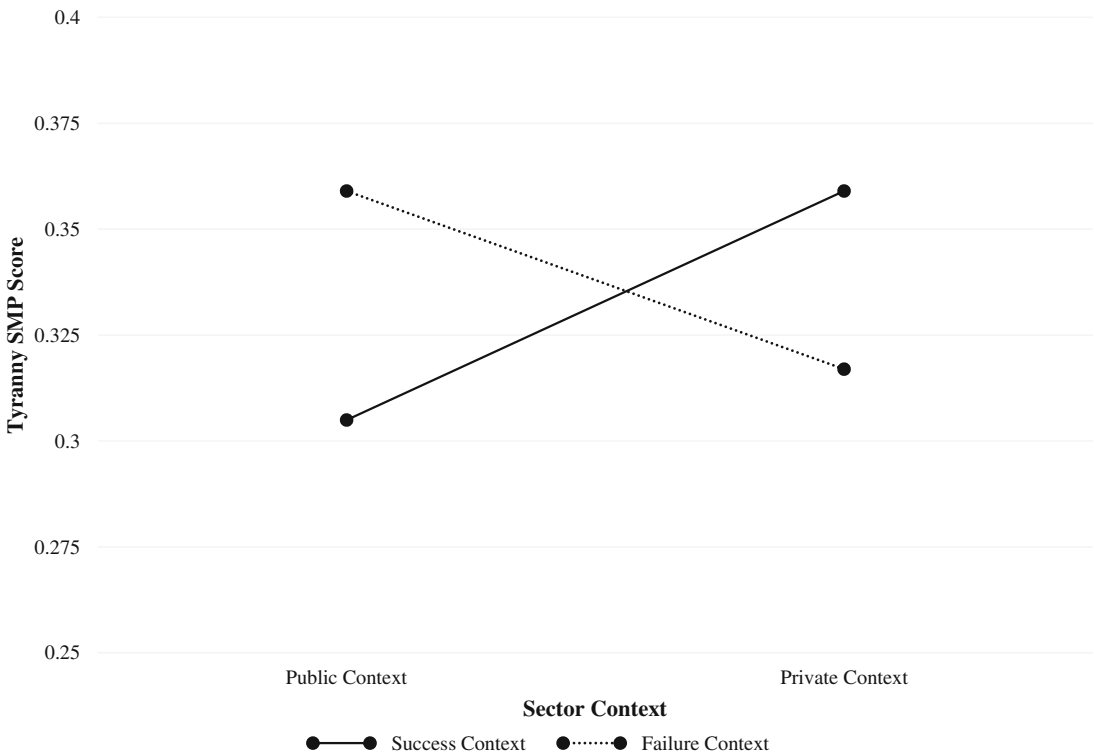


FIGURE 4 Estimated means of tyranny score depending on sector context, adjusted for performance context

step further, this study demonstrates how followers utilize their a priori public leadership images in implicit trait attributions to leaders in varying performance and sector contexts.

The results show that context matters for the social construction of public and private leadership, but that it matters in more complex ways than the simple public–private distinction suggests. We do not find that the sectoral context alone triggers fundamentally different implicit trait attributions to leaders. Everything else being equal, individuals do not attribute more or less leadership qualities to public than to private leaders. This most general finding applies to both the aggregate of all attributes (i.e., the total SMP score) and the particular dimensions of IPLTs in which these attributes cluster. These results do not necessarily contradict the concept of IPLTs, as Vogel and Werkmeister (2021) show that subjective constructions of public leadership evolve around a general core that they are likely to share with other forms of leadership. Furthermore, our study complements Vogel and Werkmeister's (2021) study in several ways. First, our focus is on the public–private distinction, whereas Vogel and Werkmeister (2021) contrast public with generic leaders (i.e., leaders for whom observers have no information on sector affiliation). Second, we investigate social attributions to a particular leader in a hypothetical yet concrete scenario, while Vogel and Werkmeister (2021) asked respondents for more abstract conceptions of leaders in terms of typicality. Third, Vogel and Werkmeister (2021) used an explicit scale for these typicality ratings, whereas we applied a “truly” implicit method (i.e., the SMP). These differences limit the comparability between the studies and suggest future research to elaborate the concept of IPLTs in terms of context-specific activation and measurement.

The role of the public–private distinction in social attributions to leaders gains more nuance with a closer look at respondents' sectoral affiliation to either the public or the private sector. Employees working in the private sector attribute significantly more *rule abidance* to public leaders, thus echoing prevailing and often stereotypical assumptions about bureaucrats as well as previous conceptualizations of public leadership suggesting that rule-following constitutes a distinct role of public leaders (Tummers & Knies, 2016). However, the results contrast findings from the

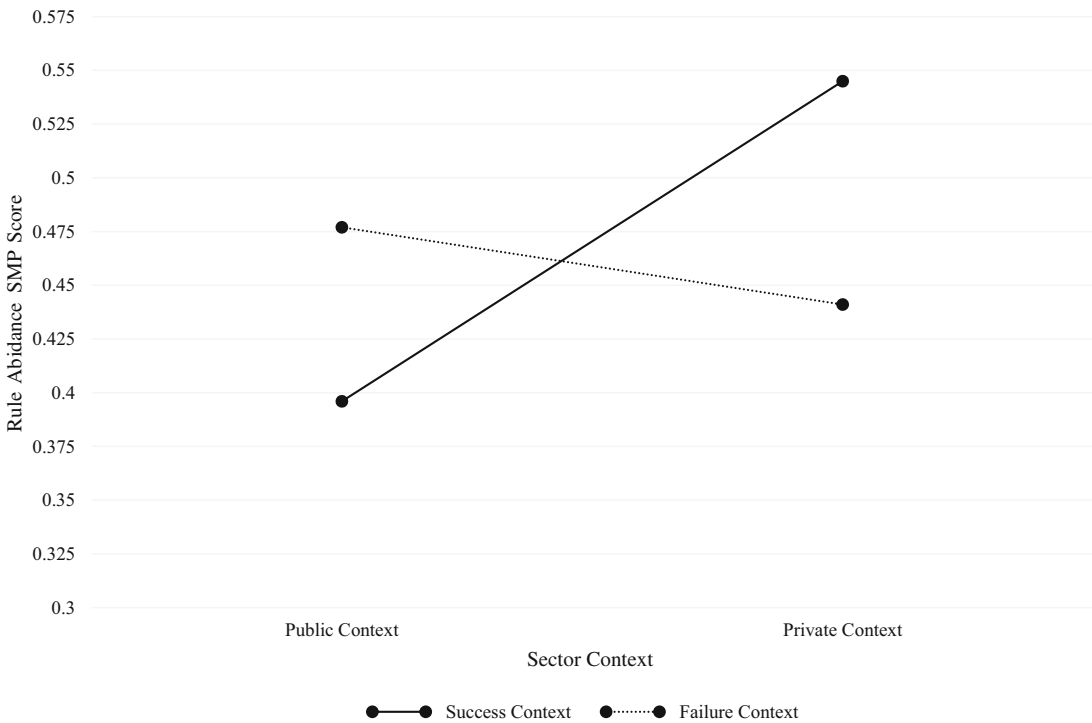


FIGURE 5 Estimated means of rule abidance score depending on sector context, adjusted for performance context

explicit assessment of IPLTs (Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021), where public employees placed higher priority on *rule abidance* than private employees, and thus point to the difference between IPLTs' mere content and their operation in the leadership situation. Public employees might be able to explicitly reflect upon how the prevalence of rules in bureaucratic organizations shapes their implicit expectations of leadership. However, in their automatic sense-making in the “actual” leadership situation, they might have internalized and “normalized” *rule abidance* and thus do not regard it as a particularly strong identifier of public leaders (e.g., Hattke et al., 2018).

The public–private distinction becomes much more relevant for the social construction of leadership when co-occurring with further contextual information on performance. While respondents' implicit attributions of traits to private leaders are contingent on performance information (i.e., team success and failure), the same does not apply to their attributions to public leaders. Respondents implicitly attribute stronger leadership qualities to private leaders of successful teams than to private leaders of unsuccessful teams, whereas no such difference occurs in the case of public leaders. We conclude from this finding that people ascribe more responsibility and agency for performance to private than to public leaders. This interpretation is in line with the assertion that leaders' capacity to directly promote performance in public organizations is limited by specific institutional and structural constraints, such as stronger political control by external bodies, more bureaucratic rules and regulations, and limited managerial discretion. While this “substitutes for leadership” argument is not new to the scholarly debate on the distinctiveness of public leadership (Javidan & Waldman, 2003), our results indicate that limited accountability for performance is reflected in peoples' everyday theories about public leaders, despite continuous efforts to “let leaders lead” in more entrepreneurial models of public leadership (Currie et al., 2008; Lane & Wallis, 2009; Osborne, 1993).

Our findings suggest that the public sector is a far less romantic place for leaders than the private sector. It is worth noting that all context effects occurred although the experimental scenarios did not contain any information about traits or behaviors of the leader. There were also no other cues as to whether and how the leader might have

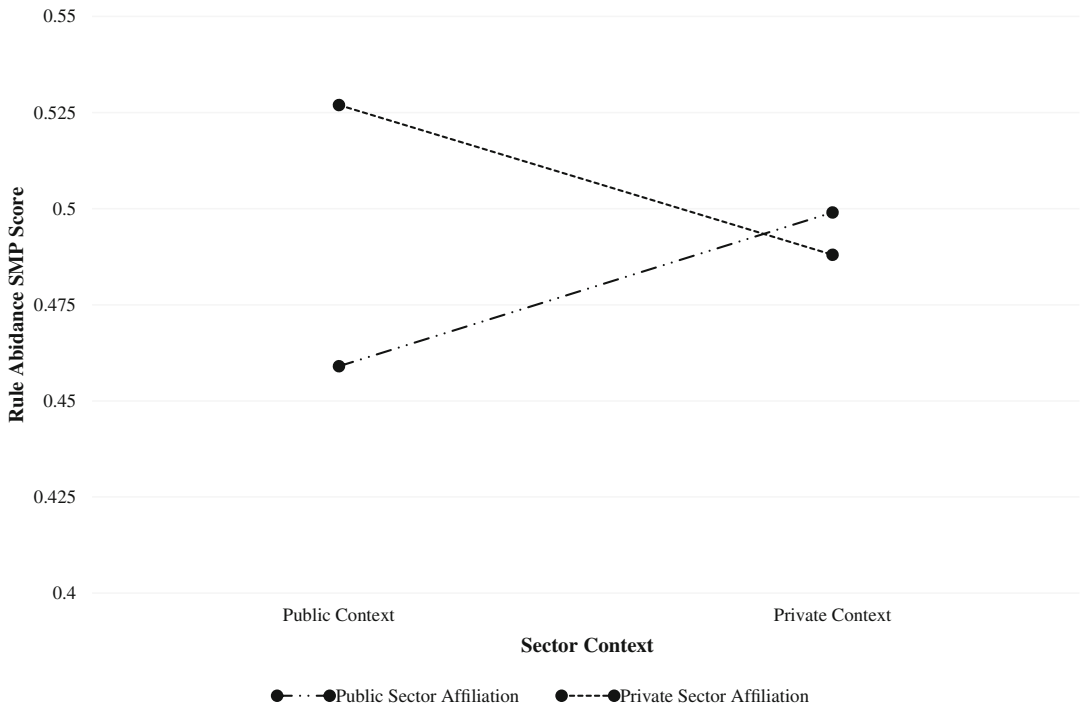


FIGURE 6 Estimated means of rule abidance Semantic Misattribution Procedure (SMP) score depending on sector context, adjusted for sector affiliation

TABLE 6 Results of linear mixed model; DV: money contributed to poster

Fixed effects	EUR spent	
	β	<i>p</i>
Intercept	8.95	<0.001
Achievement orientation	-2.61	<0.001
Kindheartedness	0.99	<0.001
Progressiveness	1.12	<0.001
Rule abidance	1.06	<0.001
Righteousness	0.74	<0.001
Tyranny	-0.82	<0.001
Performance context (1 = success)	4.56	<0.001
Sector context (1 = public)	0.99	<0.001
Performance context * sector context	-2.74	<0.001
τ_{00} ID	2.64	
Marginal R^2	0.584	

Note: Standardized coefficients are reported. Bold values *p*-values on an alpha = 0.5.

contributed to the team results. Nevertheless, success triggers much weaker implicit attributions to public than to private leaders, while no such differences between public and private leaders occur in the case of failure. In other words, private leaders earn more credits for success than public leaders, but they are not bigger scapegoats for

failure. The “romance of leadership” (Meindl et al., 1985), as suggested by the socio-cognitive approach to leadership and claimed also for the public sector (Nielsen & Moynihan, 2017), thus applies more to private than to public leadership. Mental models of “private leadership” and “performance” seem to be more tightly connected than models of “public leadership” and “performance.”

Our conclusion that the public sector is a less romantic setting for leadership than the private sector does not imply, however, that people attribute more negative traits to public than to private leaders. Rather, the general attributional pattern across all dimensions of the IPLT scale replicates for sub-dimensions with both positive (i.e., achievement orientation) and negative valence (i.e., tyranny). In the success condition, respondents attribute destructive, oppressive traits more strongly to private than to public leaders, while the opposite effect holds for the failure condition. In concert with the differential attributions of *achievement orientation*, this pattern could point to the dark side of successful, goal-oriented leadership in private organizations. From the followers' perspective, particularly high levels of private leaders' goal-orientation might drive team success but also entails social dominance and emotional suppression of employees. Indeed, research has demonstrated that narcissistic leaders with grand self-esteem, above average power motifs, sense of entitlement, and achievement orientation tend to exert emotional manipulation, suppression, and exploitation of their co-workers as a means to attain organizational success (Higgs, 2009; Resick et al., 2009). The dark side of leadership might surface in particular in the private context, where more managerial autonomy and less structural and normative regulation might provide leaders with more leeway for toxic behavior and emotional power play. Evidence demonstrating that private leaders report higher levels of relationship and power orientation than public leaders point into this direction (Andersen, 2010; Hooijberg & Choi, 2001).

Our findings also demonstrate the relevance of social attributions of leader traits for follower responses beyond the cognitive sphere. We examined participants' willingness to contribute money to a present for a fictitious leader, arguably a gesture of benevolence with financial consequences. We find that this kind of support for a leader is indeed contingent on the sector and performance context as well as on the extent to which characteristics have been attributed to the leader. In this regard, participants' higher willingness to support a public than a private leader demonstrate the difference between followers' attributions of causal agency to organizational effectiveness and their own attitudes toward a leader. In addition, the drastic decline of financial support of successful public leaders indicates that positive behavioral intentions toward public leaders only unfold if they are confirmed by expectation-contingent performance. This is in line with broad evidence from the field of social judgment, which suggests that if performance expectations are violated by first impressions, they are met with negative evaluations and disliking (Biernat et al., 1999; Bond et al., 1992).

5.1 | Practical implications

Implications for management practitioners in PA unfold along two lines of reasoning. First, there is broad evidence that a match of perceived traits and behaviors of real leaders with followers' implicit trait attributions to leaders lead to favorable responses on the part of followers (Epitropaki et al., 2013; Junker & van Dick, 2014). Accordingly, the traits that followers attribute to leaders might serve as normative benchmarks for the selection and development of public leaders. This particularly applies to attributions in the success condition because they are more likely to reveal ideal (rather than typical) images of public leaders than attributions in the failure condition.

Second, and related to the previous point, training programs designed for public leaders might draw on IPLTs for reflection tasks. Leadership research provides broad evidence that self-awareness of leaders increases their impact through self-regulation and authenticity (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Hattke & Hattke, 2019). A better understanding of followers' implicit attributions to leaders implies a better understanding of the standards against which leaders are likely to be evaluated. This should facilitate leaders' reflections on how far they comply with these standards and where they deviate. To further encourage this self-reflection, taxonomies of leader attributes, such as IPLTs, might

become integrated into the toolbox of introspective practices of organizational and leadership development (e.g., Reave, 2005).

5.2 | Limitations and outlook

Some limitations of our study are worth noting and call for further research. First, our sample consists of individuals who have been socialized in a legalistic and corporatist administrative tradition (Painter & Peters, 2010). Social attributions might be different in other traditions, such as the Anglo-American, which emphasizes political over legal accountability, which especially affects the dimension of rule abidance. We therefore encourage replications in other countries to elaborate the cultural aspect of IPLTs. Second, we manipulated the sector and performance context as triggers of social attributions to leaders, but it is likely that manipulations in other domains will yield different attributions. Future studies could experiment with other manipulations of leadership contexts, such as the administrative field, the organizational hierarchy, or the social impact of public leadership, to learn more about how contextual stimuli trigger implicit attributions to leaders. Third, we used a limited pool of items because the SMP only allows for a limited number of trials. The initial study from which we adopted the item pool has a focus on characteristics that people consider as typical of leaders (Vogel & Werkmeister, 2021). Further research could include other items so as not to miss characteristics that may be desirable but untypical. Fourth, we need deeper explorations into the behavioral consequences of IPLTs. We made a first step into this direction by asking participants for the amount of money they were willing to spend to support the leader. However, given the robust evidence on the intention-behavior gap, especially for socially desirable behavior such as contributing money to a present (Sheeran & Webb, 2016), our results may overestimate the amount that people would actually donate. The behavioral impact of information processing should therefore be a key point on the research agenda of a socio-cognitive approach to public leadership.

5.3 | Concluding remarks

This study extends social constructionist developments in public leadership research (Ospina, 2017; Ospina & Sorenson, 2006) by moving further toward a socio-cognitive view. This perspective suggests that observed traits, roles, or behaviors of leaders are not the only source of variation in ratings of public and private leaders. People also hold assumptions about and expectations toward leaders that they have generalized from various sources, including their own experiences, others' narrations, and popular images conveyed in medialized discourses. These images often reside at levels below consciousness and trigger implicit attributions, often accounting for more variance in leadership ratings than the actual characteristics and behaviors of observed leaders (Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Rush et al., 1977).

How this “a priori of leadership” that people bring to their work and other social interactions differs between the public and private sector has not been researched so far. Our results show that the sector does not matter much as stimulus of social attributions to leaders when considered in isolation from other contextual cues. However, it strongly matters in combination with performance information, as attributions to leaders of successful and unsuccessful teams differ in both kind and strength between the public and private sector. The findings imply that context indeed matters for the social construction of public leadership, and that it matters in complex ways. Sector is only one, albeit important, cue in a web of contextual stimuli that unfold their attributional effects in interaction. Delving deeper into these contextual cues and their interdependence sets a rich agenda of future research for the socio-cognitive approach to public leadership.

The interaction of sector cues with performance information reveals a picture of the public sector as an unromantic place for leadership. Performance cues trigger weaker trait attributions to public than to private leaders

and also lead to weaker support intentions. However, this also implies that the public sector is less charged with the heroic pictures of leaders that many leadership scholars want to see overcome (Crosby & Bryson, 2018; Ospina, 2017; Vogel & Masal, 2015). Trait attributions to leaders at the absence of direct information about characteristics or behaviors as mere inference from team success is more likely to occur in the case of private leaders than in the case of public leaders. Accordingly, people might be less prone to attribution errors that lead to an overglorification when it comes to evaluate public leaders. Put differently, there might be a realism rather than a romance of public leadership.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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