

The Effect of Optimism and Belief in the Law of Karma on Transformational Leadership

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***Abstract.** This paper reports an empirical study that looked at the relationship between leader's optimism, leader's belief in the law of Karma, and transformational leadership. It was hypothesized that leader's optimism enhances the strength of the relationship between transformational leadership and leader's belief in the law of Karma. Data were collected from supervisor-subordinate dyads in four information technology organizations in India. Results show that transformational leadership is significantly positively related to leader's optimism and leader's belief in the law of Karma. The hypothesized moderating effect of leader's optimism did not obtain support. This study is one in a growing line of research that attempts to draw relationships between core beliefs of Indian philosophy and transformational leadership.*

Transformational Leadership has become a topic of great interest because in today's ever-changing world, most organizations must undergo transformations in order to adjust to the new environment. Thus the need for leaders who will guide an organization along the path of transformation is a pressing one in the 21st century. In order to succeed today, organizations need leaders who are willing to change the status quo, to envision new horizons, and lead by example to motivate their teams to achieve their goals (Robbins, Judge & Sanghi, 2009).

Andrea Jung of Avon, Richard Branson of the Virgin Group, A.G. Lafley of P&G, James Houghton of Corning, Tina Brown of The New Yorker, and Jim McNerney of Boeing are all considered transformational leaders. Transformational leaders have a lasting and stronger impact on followers, leading to more effective and inspirational leadership. They are leaders of leaders – a culture any ambitious organization will aspire to inculcate.

Knowing the antecedents of transformational leadership thus is important to recognize and train potential transformational leaders. Optimism is a positive psychological trait that has often been linked to better performance and we study it here as a possible antecedent of transformational leadership. In an Indian context, this study adds even more value as it seeks to examine the relationship between a belief in the Law of *Karma* – a core value of Indian culture – and transformational leadership.

Theory and Hypotheses

Karma

The word '*karma*' comes from the Sanskrit root *kri*, which means doing, affairs or activity and includes all actions that a person performs whether they are of body, speech, or mind.

Karma means an action that is taken or to be taken. *Karma* is the concept of action or deed in Indian philosophy understood as that which causes the entire cycle of cause and effect (Parvesh Singla, 1998). It originated in ancient India and although it has been mentioned in Hindu, Jain, Sikh and Buddhist philosophies, it is the basis of almost all the religions of the world – because the theory of good deeds and bad deeds are fundamental in any religion. Christianity, for example, teaches it as the Law of Cause and Consequence/Effect.

In Hinduism, God plays a role as the dispenser of the fruits of *karma* or as exercising the option to change one's *karma* in rare instances. Buddhism considers the natural laws of causation sufficient to explain the effects of *karma* (Singla, P., 1998).

Karma has been a part of Indian philosophy for centuries. Indian philosophy states that every person has his or her own *karma*. This *karma* was based on prior decisions and actions one has made or intends to make. *Karma* is not punishment or retribution but is simply an extended expression or consequence of natural acts. The effects experienced are also able to be mitigated by actions and are not necessarily fated. More simply put, *Karma* is the effect of all deeds actively created by our past, future and present experiences. It's almost as if it says, "*Do good work and I'll decide when you'll get good results – they will come when you need them, and not when you want them*" (Singla, P., 1998).

Thus we are responsible for our own life, including the pain and joy it brings. Another way of looking at *karma* is through the law of cause and effect. For every cause there is an inevitable effect. What one does not want done to oneself, they should not do to others.

The logical ethical consequence of the law of *karma* is to behave responsibly. As a mechanism, it functions like a judge of one's actions. As Paul the Apostle states: "*man reaps what he sows.*"

Researchers have attempted to study the effect of a belief in the law of *karma* and the effect it has on behavior. The extent of belief in *karma*, operating largely through its impact on long-run orientation, moderates (decreases) the effect of disconfirmation sensitivity on expectations. These findings suggest that it is important to tailor advertising messages by matching them with customer expectations and their cultural determinants (Kopalle, Lehmann & Farley, 2010).

Karma-Yoga, the technique of performing action such that the soul of the doer is not bound by the results of the action, constitutes the Indian work ideal (Mulla & Krishnan, 2008). *Karma-Yoga* was found to be related to some dimensions of empathy. Findings indicated that *Karma-Yoga* is very similar to altruism motivation in the Indian context. Individuals who are high on empathic concern and low on personal distress are more likely to take actions for the benefit of others rather than for their own benefit.

Studies have been conducted to relate beliefs in Indian philosophy and leader-effectiveness. Research has established that transformational leadership is enhanced by spirituality (Chatterjee & Krishnan, 2007). Moreover, a leader's duty orientation is related to their charisma and inspirational motivation (Mulla & Krishnan, 2009). Of the three *Gun*

described in the Vedic texts – *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas* – *Sattva* has been found to enhance transformational leadership while *Tamas* has been found to reduce it (Narayanan & Krishnan, 2003; Kejriwal & Krishnan, 2004).

Transformational Leadership

Leadership has been one of the most researched topics in the field of organizational behavior. A lot of research has been conducted on the different styles of leadership and many theories have been proposed. Yet, it still remains a tough concept to explain. How does one define it and exactly what are the factors contributing to it? These dimensions can still not be precisely stated.

Robbins, Judge and Sanghi (2009) defined leadership as the ability of a group to achieve a vision or set of goals. Leaders establish direction by developing a vision of the future; then they align people by communicating this vision and inspiring them to overcome hurdles.

The modern theories of leadership include charismatic leadership and transformational leadership. The term transformational leadership was introduced in 1978 by James MacGregor Burns in his analysis of political leaders. His conclusions centred on the differences between management and leadership. He communicated the two basic concepts of transformational and transactional leadership (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978).

Burns (1978) defined transformational leadership as a process where leaders and followers engage in a mutual process of raising one another to higher levels of morality and motivation. Transformational leaders raise the bar by appealing to higher ideals and values of followers. In doing so, they may model the values themselves and use charismatic methods to attract people to the values and to the leader.

Burns' (1978) view is that transformational leadership is more effective than transactional leadership, where the appeal is to more selfish concerns. An appeal to social values thus encourages people to collaborate, rather than working as individuals (and potentially competitively with one another). He also viewed transformational leadership as an ongoing process rather than the discrete exchanges of the transactional approach.

Bernard M. Bass (1998) concluded that transformational leadership leads to superior performance in organizations facing demands for renewal and change and fostering it will pay off in the health, well-being, and effective performance of today's organizations.

Transformational leadership has four dimensions (Bass, 1998) – *idealized influence* or charisma, *inspirational motivation*, *intellectual stimulation*, and *individualized consideration*. Idealized influence refers to the extent to which the leader's followers emulate them and seek to personally identify with them. Inspirational motivation is a leader's ability to motivate, energize and inspire their followers by communicating a positive vision of the future. Intellectual stimulation refers to a transformational leader's ability to encourage and inspire their followers to use their own potential. Individualized consideration refers to a leader's receptiveness and sensitivity to their followers' needs for growth, support and achievement.

Singh & Bhandarkar (1990) found that transformational leaders share the following 7 characteristics: (1) Sincerity of the leader; (2) Bonding – efforts to develop organization as a family by developing personalized relationships, showing concerns about the growth of individuals, remaining accessible, and encouraging social relationships; (3) Consultation and participation; (4) Collectivisation and team work; (5) Empowerment and support; (6) Serving as role model; and (7) Bringing in changes continuously while maintaining continuity and being innovative.

Studies have been conducted showing the relationship between transformational leadership and variables like gender, values, morality, goal difficulty, ethical preferences, and personality traits (Turner & Barling, 2002; Bono & Judge, 2004; Simola, Barling & Turner, 2010; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005; Whittington & Goodwin, 2001). Studies have also viewed transformational leadership from an Indian cultural perspective. Chatterjee & Krishnan (2007) found that transformational leadership is enhanced by spirituality. Mulla & Krishnan (2008) concluded that a leader's duty orientation is related to their charisma and inspirational motivation. Thus studies have been conducted to relate beliefs in Indian philosophy and leader-effectiveness.

Although many studies have been conducted on transformational leadership, there has been little empirical research on what determines or predicts transformational leadership (Peterson, Walumba, Byron & Myrowitz, 2009). In the present study we aim to establish a relationship between a belief in the Law of *Karma*, and transformational leadership to further help support a model of Indian transformational leadership.

To start with, the cause-effect chain implicit in a belief in the Law of *Karma*, implies a long-term orientation as it establishes that any action cannot escape the appropriate consequences in the future. This, in turn, implies that instead of looking for short-term and fleeting gains, a longer-term outlook can enhance overall welfare. Therefore, we propose that a stronger belief in *Karma* leads to a longer term and more ethical orientation towards life, which, in turn, makes a leader adopt a balanced and transformational style of leadership. We think that transformational behaviour portrayed by a leader will be enhanced if they believe in *Karma*. Such a person would be seen as more transformational than one who does not believe in the law of *Karma*. Thus we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 1: Perceived transformational leadership is positively related to a leader's belief in the Law of *Karma*.

Optimism

Psychology treats optimism as a cognitive characteristic in terms of generalized positive outcome expectancy or a positive causal attribution. The positive impact of optimism on physical and psychological health and the accompanying characteristics of perseverance, achievement, and motivation leading to success are well documented. Similarly, pessimism is known to lead to passivity, failure, and in extreme cases, depression and mortality.

Modern psychology treats optimism as an individual difference variable, that is, people have varying degrees of optimism. Seligman uses the terms explanatory style to depict how individuals habitually attribute the causes of failure, misfortune or bad events.

Optimists and pessimists differ in the explanatory styles they use to explain negative experiences and events (quoted from Luthans, 2005):

1. Pessimists make internal ("it's my fault"), stable ("things will always stay like this"), and global ("I will never do well") attributions.
2. Optimists, on the other hand, make external ("It's not my fault"), unstable ("this is just a temporary setback!"), and specific ("This was a one off case. I usually do well!") attributions.

Research has uncovered that optimists are higher achievers, more motivated and persevering. They also have better overall health. More optimistic workers are also found to be more successful workers and aspire higher. Lyle M. Spencer and Signe M. Spencer (1993) found that competent managers displayed an optimistic explanatory style – they attributed

their failures to a correctable mistake and then persevered. Optimism has also been linked to leadership theory. Optimism is a significant contributor for conduct and might motivate a person to persevere in achieving challenging goals (Chemers, Watson & May, 2000).

A study conducted by Peterson, Walumba, Byron & Myrowitz (2009) revealed that positive psychological traits of CEOs (including hope, optimism and resiliency) are positively related to transformational leadership behaviour. They also found that transformational leadership mediates the relationship between positive psychological traits (including optimism) and firm performance. The present study attempts to study the relationship between optimism and transformational leadership ratings in an Indian context.

Operationalizing the variable. Of the many positive psychological constructs that have been identified, we choose to focus on optimism. We consider optimism here as a trait – “individuals’ enduring stable and cross-situational tendencies to experience such capabilities,” rather than as a state, “individuals’ experiences of such capacities during particular times, events or contexts” (Luthans, 2005).

Optimistic people generally believe that good, rather than bad things, will happen. They do not brood on their failures and make external attributions for unpleasant and undesirable outcomes while making internal attributions for desirable outcomes (Seligman, 2005). Thus, optimistic leaders build positive expectancies that motivate them to achieve their goals and make it easier for them to engage in coping behavior.

Previous research has shown that optimism is positively related to high motivation, and others’ assessment of an individual’s leadership skills (Chemers, Watson & May, 2000). Optimism has also been proved to be a powerful indicator of important organizational outcomes (Kluemper, Little & DeGroot, 2009). Moreover, optimism can be validly and reliably measured and has a recognized impact on workplace behavior (Luthans, 2005).

In the present study, we examine optimism as a potential antecedent to transformational leadership. Transformational leaders are ones who inspire confidence, communicate a positive vision to their followers and enhance their followers’ strengths (Bass, 1985, 1998). More optimistic leaders are likely to conceive and communicate a positive vision of the future to their followers. Since this is in close proximity to the inspirational motivation dimension of transformational leadership (Bass, 1998), it seems likely that optimistic leaders will probably be transformational leaders as well. Based on this, we propose that leaders who are optimistic and think positively about what the future holds will be more likely to demonstrate a transformational style of leadership. Thus we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 2: Perceived transformational leadership is positively related to a leader’s level of optimism.

We thus hope to extend research on transformational leadership by studying optimism as one of its antecedents and also studying how a leader’s belief in the law of *Karma* affects their followers’ assessments of transformational leadership. Individuals who believe strongly in *Karma* are aware that their actions will have appropriately positive or negative outcomes. An optimistic individual, though, is inclined to having mostly positive views of the future. Thus, it is quite possible that for an individual who is highly optimistic, belief in the law of *Karma* will be viewed positively and not from a fatalistic perspective. So, the relationship between belief in *Karma* and perceived transformational leadership is likely to be stronger for individuals high on optimism than for individuals low on optimism. We thus hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 3: Belief in the Law of *Karma* and optimism interact, such that the effects of a leader's belief in the Law of *Karma* on perceived transformational leadership are stronger when optimism is high.

Method

Since our main constructs – optimism and belief in the Law of *Karma* are not variables that can be easily manipulated, we used the survey method instead of experimentation. We collected data from 34 leader-follower dyads. The followers (or subordinates) were given a questionnaire to assess their leader's transformational leadership behaviors. The leaders (or managers) were provided with two questionnaires – one to measure optimism and the other to measure their belief in *Karma*.

The sample comprised 30 employees currently holding or having held leadership positions across 4 Indian IT organizations, along with 34 of their followers. The “leaders” were those holding positions of Manager, Supervisor or Team Lead. The “followers” were current direct reports of the leaders. The response rate for leaders was 63.8% (26.7% females), they ranged in age from 25 to 32 years (Median = 26.5 years). The response rate for followers was 24.1% (50% females), ranging in age from 23 to 30 years (Median = 25 years). The number of followers who responded per leader ranged from 1 to 2 (Median = 1).

Each leader received an email invitation to participate. Each invitation contained a link to be sent to at least 3 followers by the leader. Each leader was asked to forward the link to 3 followers who had directly worked under them and preferably those who had worked under them most recently.

Measure of Transformational leadership

For the present study we used the rater version of Krishnan's Transformational Leadership Questionnaire – Form 9 (Krishnan, 2009). The questionnaire measures the four dimensions of transformational leadership (Bass, 1998) – idealized influence or charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.

The scale has 30 items. For each item, participants indicated on a 5 point Likert scale (0=Not at all; 1=Once in a while; 2=Sometimes; 3=Fairly often; 4=Frequently, if not always) the extent to which they agreed with each statement. Idealized Influence Attributed, Idealized Influence Behavior, Inspirational Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation and Individualized Consideration were measured by 6 statements each. The average of these 5 was calculated to give the transformational leadership score. In cases where there was more than 1 respondent (followers) for a leader, the ratings were averaged to give a single score for each leader. A higher score indicated higher perceived transformational leadership for each leader.

Measure of Optimism

Most studies on optimism have used the Life Orientation Test (Scheier & Carver, 1985). The LOT is the most widely used measure of dispositional optimism, as a unidimensional measure of optimism (Robinson-Whelen, Kim, MacCallum & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1997).

For the present study, we measured trait optimism by using a six-item scale drawn from the Life Orientation Test (LOT-R) by Scheier and Carver (1985), using a 5-point Likert-type scale (with 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Respondents were asked to indicate their degree of general agreement “over the past year” with statements such as “I'm always optimistic about my future.”

Of the total 9 items, items number 2, 5, 6 & 8 were filler items and were not taken into consideration while calculating. Items 3, 7 and 9 were reverse items and the ratings were thus reversed to take this into consideration. The responses for all items were coded in such a way that high values imply high optimism.

Measure of Belief in the Law of Karma

Kejriwal & Krishnan (2004) conducted an experiment to observe the impact of the *Vedic* worldview on the magnitude of transformational leadership. "*Vedic* worldview" here was operationalized as an understanding of *Maya* and a belief in the Law of *Karma*. In their study, a belief in the Law of *Karma* (cause-effect chain) was checked through seven items that they had adopted from the salient features outlined by Chakraborty in his book "*Managerial Effectiveness and Quality of Work Life*" (1987).

For the purpose of the present study, we slightly modified the statements to be administered to the leaders instead of their followers. The questionnaire was created using a 5 point Likert scale. The items are statements that express beliefs embodied in the law of *karma* (for e.g., "I understand that what we do in the present will affect our future."). The respondents chose from 5 options to show the extent to which they agreed with the statement. The choices were: Strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree. The score on this questionnaire provided a measure of the respondents' belief in the law of *Karma*.

Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, medians and intercorrelations among variables. The Cronbach Alpha has been included along the diagonal (within brackets).

Table 1
Means, Medians, Standard deviations & intercorrelations among variables.

Variable	Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	1	2	3
1. Transformational Leadership	3.84	3.95	.53	(.92)		
2. Optimism	3.63	3.67	.48	.70**	(.70)	
3. Law Of Karma	3.60	3.71	.48	.54**	.28	(.58)

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To further explore the relationship between the variables, we ran a linear regression, the results of which are given in Table 2.

Table 2
Regression Analysis with Transformational leadership as Dependent Variable

Model		Coefficients ^a				
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-.01	.60		-.02	.98
	Karma	.40	.14	.37	2.96	.01
	Optimism	.67	.14	.60	4.81	.00

a. Dependent Variable: TL

The scale we used to measure transformational leadership consisted of measurements for the 4 dimensions of transformational leadership – idealized influence (we used the average of Idealized Influence Attributed and Idealized Influence Behaviour), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. We used regression to study the relationship between each of these dimensions and the independent variables.

Relationship between transformational leadership and optimism

In the present study we obtained a correlation of .70 between perceived transformational leadership and optimism. This correlation is significant at the 0.01 level. This conveys a strong positive correlation between the two variables.

Moreover, the Linear Regression model showed that of the 2 independent variables, belief in the law of *Karma* and optimism, the latter seems to exert a stronger influence on transformational leadership, with a Beta coefficient of 0.67 which is significant (Sig = .00) at the 0.01 level.

We also explored the relationship between optimism and the 4 dimensions of transformational leadership which together formed the construct of our dependent variable and found that optimism had a positive and significant relationship with all these dimensions - idealized influence (0.60), inspirational motivation (0.43), intellectual stimulation (0.58), and individualized consideration (0.48).

Relationship between transformational leadership and belief in the Law of Karma

We obtained a correlation of .54 between perceived transformational leadership and belief in the law of *Karma*. This correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

The Linear Regression model also showed that a belief in the law of *Karma* is positively related to the dependent variable – transformational leadership, with a Beta coefficient of 0.40 which is significant (Sig = .01) at the 0.01 level.

While exploring the relationship between belief in *Karma* and the 4 dimensions of transformational leadership, we found that the independent variable had varying relationships with the different dimensions. The results showed the following relationship of belief in *Karma* with the four dimensions: a positive and significant relationship with idealized influence (0.45), inspirational motivation (0.54), and individualized consideration (0.74). Its relationship to intellectual stimulation was not significant (0.36). It is to be noted here that a

leader's belief in the Law of Karma has a significant and rather high positive relationship with Individualized Consideration.

Interaction Effect between Independent Variables

In order to study the interaction effect, we created a third variable which was the product of the 2 independent variables – optimism and belief in *Karma*. Using 3 independent variables as the input this time, we ran a Linear Regression, results of which are included in Table 3.

Table 3
Regression Analysis for Testing Interaction Effect

Model		Coefficients ^a				
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-.47	2.92		-.16	.87
	Karma	.53	.85	.49	.63	.53
	Optimism	.80	.83	.72	.96	.35
	OptKarma	-.04	.24	-.20	-.16	.88

a. Dependent Variable: TL. optkarma=optimism * law of karma.

This interestingly revealed that when the product of the 2 independent variables is brought into the picture, the Beta coefficient for both increases (from 0.40 to 0.53 for belief in *Karma* and from 0.67 to 0.80 for optimism) but all the relationships are not significant. Moreover, though the two independent variable are positively related to the dependent variable, the product of the 2 is negatively related (-0.04) to transformational leadership. This shows that there is no interaction effect between optimism and belief in *Karma*.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect that optimism and belief in the law of *Karma* have on a leader's perceived transformational leadership. We also tried to see if optimism affected the relationship between belief in the law of *Karma* and transformational leadership.

We hypothesized that both optimism and belief in the law of *Karma* would be positively related to transformational leadership. The data support both hypotheses 1 and 2.

We found that optimism is strongly related to the transformational leadership dimensions of idealized influence and intellectual stimulation. This shows that since optimistic leaders exude positive emotions their followers are more likely to want to personally identify with them. Moreover, since optimistic leaders are themselves inspired and full of hope, this increases their ability to inspire their followers to use their own potential.

Belief in *Karma*, on the other hand did not contribute significantly toward intellectual stimulation but was highly and significantly related to individualized consideration. This is probably because being aware of the consequences of their actions and their influence on

their surroundings, leaders having a high belief in the law of *Karma* are much more receptive to the needs of their followers and do their best to support them.

This study contributed to our understanding of transformational leadership in two ways. First, it adds to a small but growing body of empirical research investigating the relationship between leader effectiveness and beliefs in Indian philosophy. The study focuses on a unique and integral aspect of Indian culture – the Law of Karma and establishes the effect it has on transformational leadership in the Indian context. Second, the study also helps identify one of the antecedents of transformational leadership – optimism. Third, the study breaks down the construct of transformational leadership to its four basic dimensions and explores how optimism and belief in *Karma* impact each of these dimensions.

This can be useful in recognizing and training potential transformational leaders. Moreover, though many studies have focused on the relationship between positive psychology variables and transformational leadership, none to our knowledge has done so in an Indian context.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

The biggest limitation of the present study is the lack of adequate data. Data could be collected for only 30 leaders, the biggest problem being the low response rate of followers. If more data could be collected, the findings would be more reliable and the results could be generalized.

Due to the low sample size, the Cronbach Alpha was low for the Karma scale. This further limits the reliability of the data. The leaders and the followers were not given any incentive to fill the questionnaires and it is quite possible that they were disinterested and filled it in a hurried manner. This would explain the low Cronbach Alpha. In future studies, it would be useful if some form of reward were to be presented to the participants.

We were unable to establish the effect of optimism on the relationship between transformational leadership and belief in the law of Karma. Future studies could get a larger sample size and determine the relationship between these variables.

In addition future research could focus on how other positive psychology variables like resilience, happiness and hope interact with belief in the Law of *Karma* to influence transformational leadership.

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