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# Implicit Theories of Leadership and Followership: *A Qualitative Exploration of Research Gaps and Directions for Future Research*

## Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to identify research gaps and provide an integrative and comprehensive review related to implicit leadership theory (ILTs) and implicit followership theory (IFTs) in the last five years.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** Using a qualitative systematic review and the content analysis method, we analyzed, summarized, and categorized articles' recommendations to provide a comprehensive perspective of research gaps and directions for future studies.

**Findings:** Through analyzing 45 articles published in 2016-2021, we clarified the distinction between empirical and theoretical articles. In addition, the results of ILTs and IFTs research gaps were reported in four main categories, namely antecedents, consequences, measurement development, and the content and structure of ILTs and IFTs. Finally, we offered suggestions and directions for future research based on the research gaps identified.

**Originality/Value:** The growing interest in ILTs and IFTs as two of the most absorbing topics in leadership literature has led to the accumulation and dispersal of knowledge. This, in turn, prevents scholars from gaining a holistic and clear approach to theory development and related research gaps. To address the lack of coherence and clarity about ILTs and IFTs research gaps, we provide an integrative and comprehensive review of related research breaks in order to create a framework for future studies.

## Introduction

In understanding the concept of a leader, substantial efforts have been employed, yet how people perceive leaders and distinguish them from non-leaders has gained extensive popularity over the last several decades. According to recognition-based categorization, people hold a mental model or specific schema by which they perceive leaders (Lord et al., 1984). Schemas are cognitive structures, categories, or prototypes that facilitate information processing through coding, storage, and retrieval from long-term memory (Bartlett, 1932), providing a basis for implicit leadership theories (ILTs). Cognitive structures or prototypes are shaped by socialization processes and by the individual experiences of leaders in organizations which have enabled people to rate leaders' behaviours (Yip & Walker, 2021). In fact, ILTs represent a structural category that includes a set of common traits and behaviours (Lord et al., 2019). Previous studies have attempted to identify these specific traits of leaders (Jiang et al., 2019; Lord et al., 1984; Sharifirad et al., 2017; Vogel & Werkmeister, 2020).

Implicit leadership theory, emphasizing the leader-centric perspective has been criticized by many researchers (Kong et al., 2017) mainly because scholars concentrate on the recognition of leaders and ignore the role of followers. Such criticisms caused the follower-centric perspective to come to the attention of researchers (Alipour et al., 2017; Foti et al., 2017; Goswami et al., 2019; Sy, 2010; Yip, 2013). In this regard, many scholars argue that since leadership occurs in a dyad between leader and follower, focusing solely on leadership stymies the complete understanding of the leadership process (Baker, 2007; Junker & Van Dick, 2014).

The follower-centric perspective examines behaviours and characteristics of followers from the perspective of leaders (Chu & Zhang, 2020). That is, leaders utilize similar cognitive structures and information processing to identify followers and more fully explain their role in developing leadership (Junker et al., 2016; Tram-Quon, 2013). In this cognitive structure known as implicit followership theory (IFT), special behaviours and characteristics lead to the search for a matched schema, and when created, leaders perceive and classify a person as a follower (Grill et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2018).

ILT and IFT have made valuable contributions to the leadership literature which have expanded our understanding of leadership and followership processes in organizational settings (Epitropaki et al., 2013). For example, the emergence of leadership, according to Scott et al. (2018), highly depends on the cognitive structures which facilitate contributors' behavior and strengthen dyadic relationships such as trust and leader-member exchange among them (Petruş, 2018). Additionally, ILT and IFT can create bias in peoples' perceptions of leaders. Between 40 to 60 percent of bias in the rating of leaders and followers has been reported (Petruş, 2018) which, in turn, may have a powerful influence on followers' satisfaction, performance, and well-being (Martinko et al., 2017). Most importantly, ILT and IFT, through the sense-making process, enable people to understand and respond properly to leaders' and followers' behaviors (Riggs & Porter, 2017). This significant interference of implicit theories into leadership processes shows that after thirty years of attempts, interest in this field of research still remains strong (Epitropaki et al., 2013).

Despite extensive research on ILTs and IFTs, significant research gaps still remain which are evident throughout the literature – hindering researchers from developing a holistic and practical perspective on these theories. For example, the lack of a causal relationship between ILTs /IFTs and other variables is yet to gain meaningful attention (Yang et al., 2020). On the other hand, discovering implicit instead of explicit measurements to rate leaders (Derler & Weibler, 2014), utilizing longitudinal instead of cross-sectional studies which cause many rating problems (Magsaysay & Hechanova, 2017), and the role of context within which leadership occurs (Rehbock et al., 2019; Schyns et al., 2018; Shen, 2018; Zigan et al., 2019) deserve more consideration. In addition, there is no consensus on ILT dimensions, and depending on the context, ILTs factors may not be similar and/or equally important (Tavares et al., 2018).

Lord et al. (2019) attempted to classify research gaps in order to provide a more thorough perspective in this regard, however, their work did not include all recent findings. In another study, Foti et al. (2017) offered future direction and an overview of the research which solely included the dynamic viewpoints of ILTs and IFTs, ignoring other aspects of the theories. Therefore, there is a lack of coherence and clarity related to research gaps as well as a comprehensive framework for future research direction which consists of all aspects of ILTs

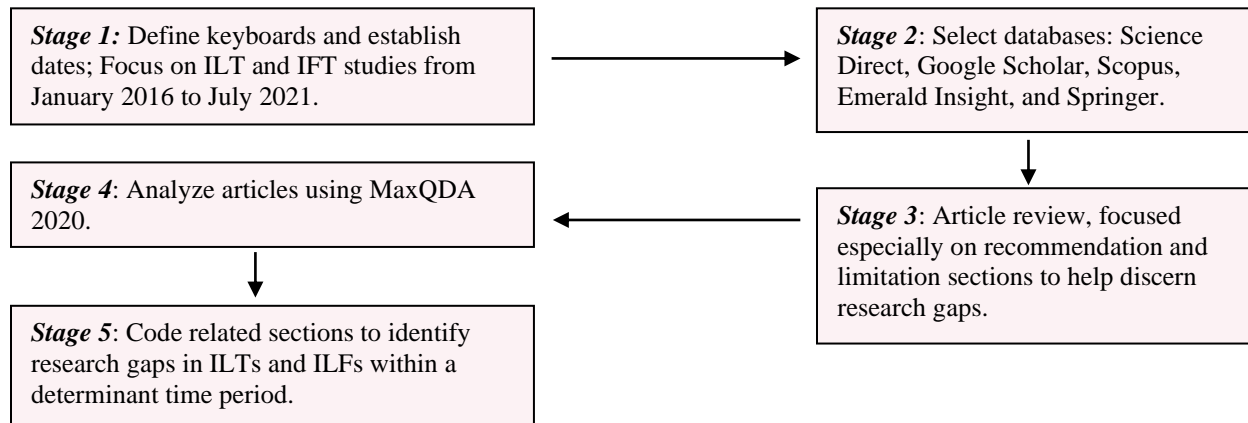
and IFTs. Furthermore, the current article provides a holistic demonstration of experimental and conceptual differentiation of ILT and IFT studies proliferated in the literature. To fulfill these purposes, a qualitative systematic review has been applied to provide a comprehensive viewpoint and coherent data in order to integrate and identify research deficits in the same study.

After an extensive search, 45 articles published within the last 5 years were extracted (*see Appendix*).

## Methodology

The main purpose of the current article is to pinpoint research paucities related to ILTs and IFTs, and to integrate them in the same study to provide a more comprehensive overview for future investigation. In order to synthesize existing findings within the literature, a method of review has been applied which uses a systematic process to identify and understand shortfalls within the existing literature (Armstrong et al., 2011). Through a qualitative and systematic method, data from qualitative sources (video, text, and audio) were collected (Kassarjian, 1977) and concepts, ideas, and experiences were objectively analyzed (Bhandari, 2020). The stages of content analysis are shown in *Figure 1*:

**Figure 1: The Stages of Content Analysis**

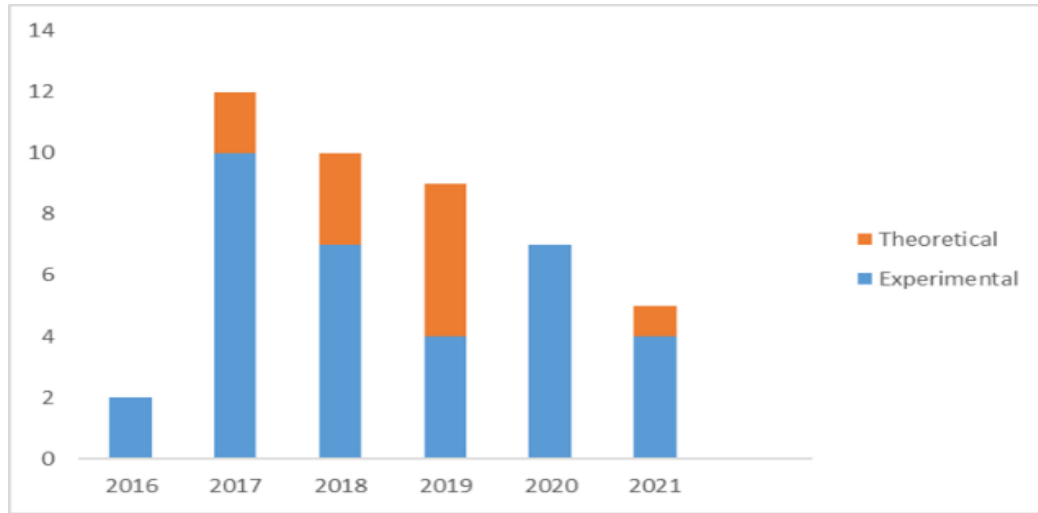


As Stage 1 denotes, keywords based on which search was conducted were provided, including implicit leadership theory, implicit followership theory, ILT, and IFT. Then, articles published from January 2016 to December 2020 were collected, and relevant articles published within the first six months of 2021 were subsequently added. This scope was determined to understanding whether the latest research gaps become fulfilled over time. In the second stage, five databases – including Science Direct, Google Scholar, Scopus, Emerald Insight, and Springer – were selected and searched relevant to the topic. In Stage 3, a thorough review of articles led to 45 selections in which ILTs and IFTs were highlighted (*see Appendix*). This required a consideration of abstracts, methods, and result sections, and more closely, the study of limitations and recommendations sections was conducted in order to discover deficits. These sections were analyzed, coded, and categorized, using the content analysis method via MaxQDA 2020 software (Stage 4). Finally, after analyzing and coding data, research gaps were identified in four main categories and one principal block (Stage 5). They are more fully discussed below.

## Results

This article examined research gaps of implicit leadership and followership theories. We accurately reviewed related articles which led to 45 article selections. The frequencies of articles by year and type (empirical vs theoretical works) are illustrated in *Figure 2*, showing 45 selected articles concerning ILTs and IFTs that were published from 2016- 2021, with 34 empirical and 11 theoretical papers. Considering the chart more closely, it is understood that the number of publications dramatically increased since 2016 (with two empirical studies), and peaked in 2017 with 12 research studies including two theoretical and 10 empirical.

**Figure 2: The Number of ILT and IFT Articles Published from 2016- 2021**

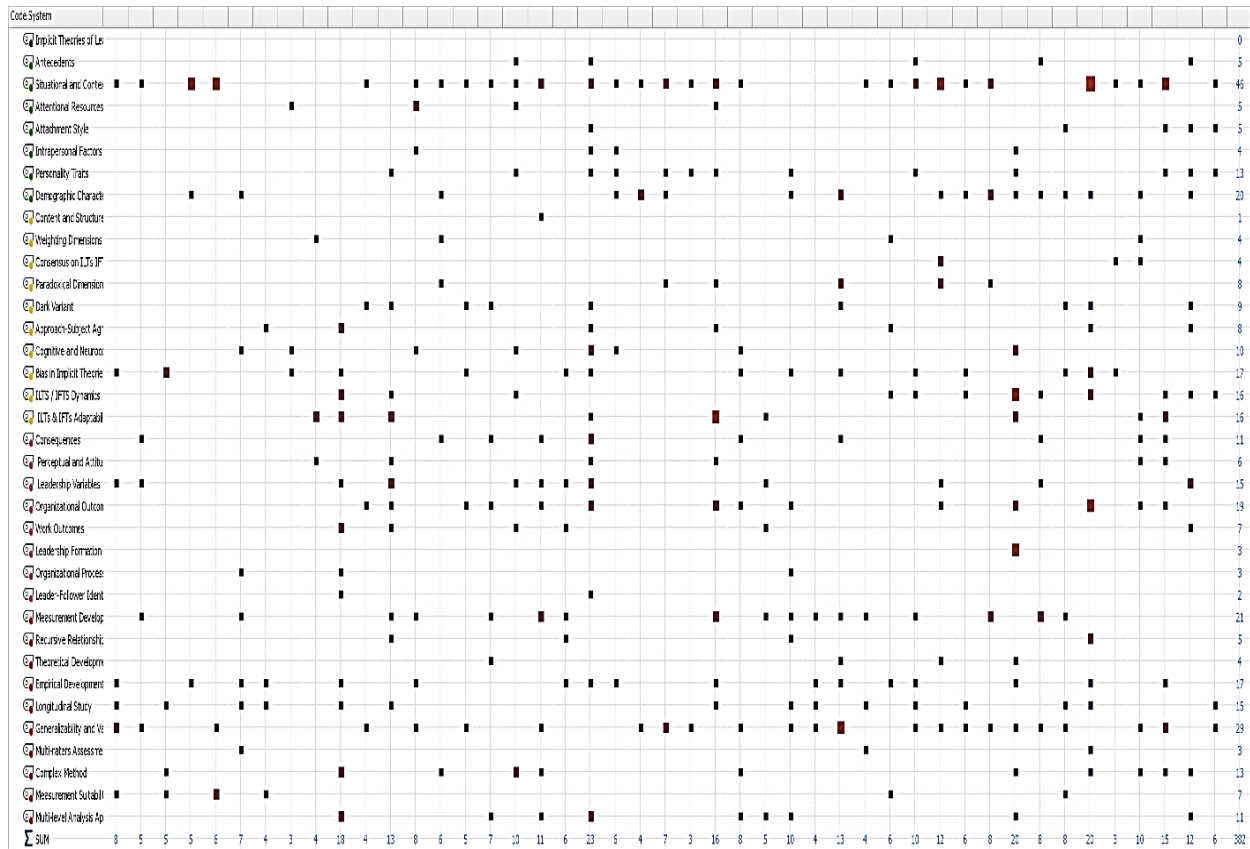


After this year, the number of publications began to decrease in number until 2020 with just seven empirical papers. In the first half of 2021, five articles had been published. For understanding research gaps of ILTs and IFTs, we considered the *limitations and suggestions for future research sections* of papers. Since those sections are considered as qualitative data or texts, we applied the Content Analysis Method for analysis and summary, using MaxQDA 2020 software. The Content Analysis Method consists of two main steps for identifying research gaps: open coding (which consists of two stages itself) and axial coding (Saldana, 2009). In the open coding stage, first fundamental concepts from semantic units (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) are extracted followed by initial codes from semantic units. As a result, 35 initial codes with 382 frequencies were identified. According to the Content Analysis Method, code frequencies do not represent the importance of code. Still, scientific contents and the Shannon formula, which are illustrated as square in the MaxQDA Matrix, value the codes based on frequencies (see *Figure 3*).

According to the code frequencies generated by the Shannon formula, the initial code of “Situational and Contextual Factors” with 46 frequencies is the most important and the initial code of “Content and Structure” with only one frequency has less utility. The validation of qualitative sampling refers to the difference of extracted codes between documents which should be 20 or less; if so, the qualitative sampling would be information-based and fulfill the target because this represents that documents are relevant and congruent (Neuman, 2014). In this research, Lord’s et al. study (2019) with 23 frequencies of initial codes and Densten and Borrowman’s study (2017) with three codes have respectively displayed the maximum

and minimum initial codes, and the difference between them show that all documents are predominantly relevant and congruent.

**Figure 3: MaxQDA Matrix, the Frequencies of Initial Codes**



The second stage of open coding is creating the more abstract category. In fact, when some initial codes are semantically related, they are placed in the same category (Charmaz, 2006). This stage could have two different methods: a) creating a new category and incorporating some related initial codes within it and b) setting a more abstract initial code as a category and placing related initial codes within. *Table 1* illustrates this classification.

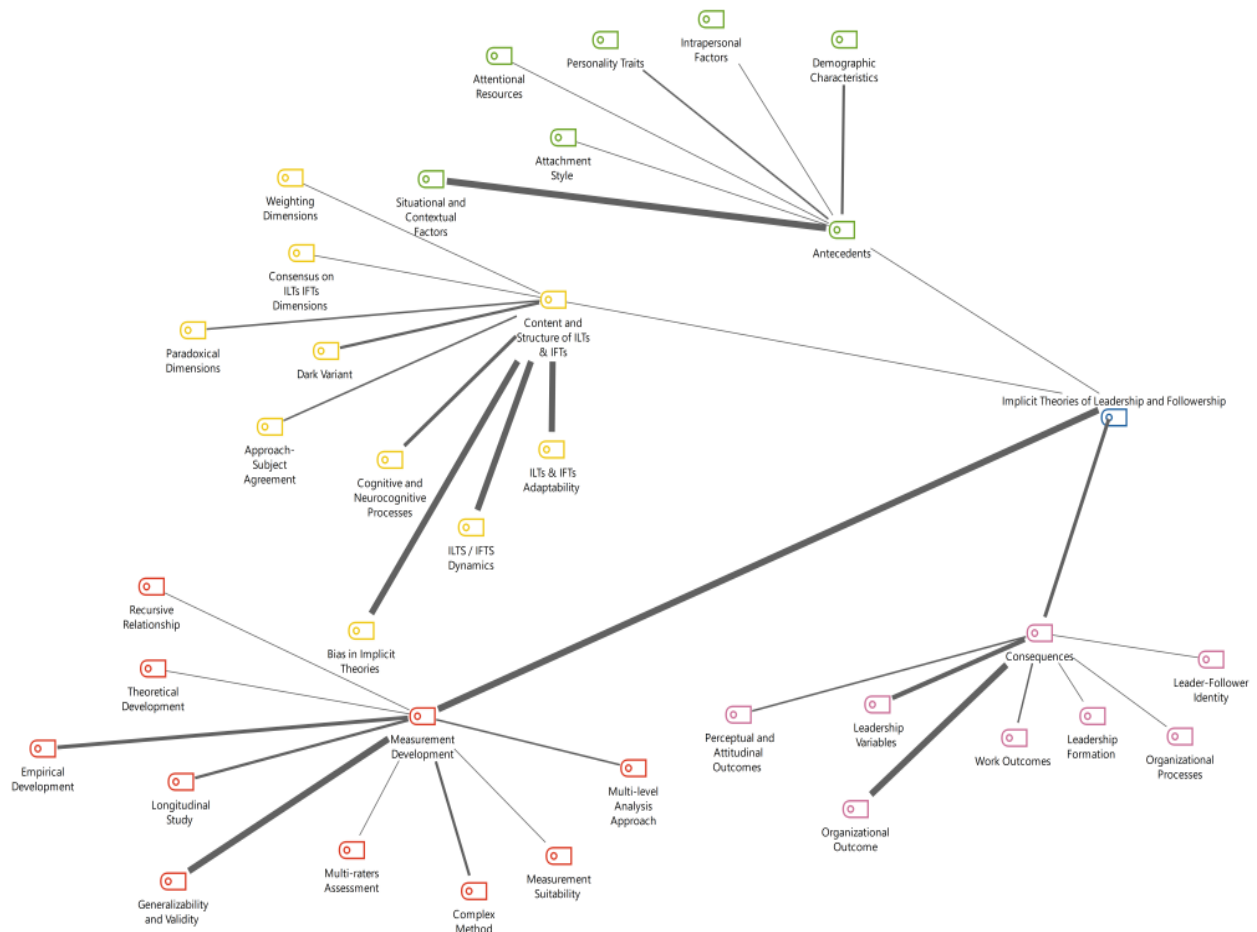
**Table 1: The Classification of Initial Codes and Categories**

Axial Codes	Open Codes (categories)	Initial Codes
Implicit Theories of ILLT and IFT	Antecedents	Situational and Contextual Factors Attentional Resources Attachment Style Intrapersonal Factors Personality Traits Demographic Characteristics
	Consequences	Perceptual and Attitudinal Outcomes Leadership Variables Organizational Outcome Work Outcomes Leadership Formation Organizational Processes Leader-Follower Identity

	<b>Content and Structure of ILT and IFT</b>	<b>Bias in Implicit Theories</b> <b>Weighting ILT Dimensions</b> <b>Paradoxical Dimensions</b> <b>ILT and IFT Dynamics</b> <b>Consensus on ILT and IFT Dimensions</b> <b>Dark Variant</b> <b>Cognitive and Neurocognitive Processes</b> <b>ILTs and IFTs Adaptability</b> <b>Approach-Subject Accordance</b>
	<b>Measurement Development</b>	<b>Recursive Relationship</b> <b>Theoretical Development</b> <b>Empirical Development</b> <b>Longitudinal Study</b> <b>Generalizability and Validity</b> <b>Multi-raters Assessment</b> <b>Complex Method</b> <b>Measurement Suitability</b> <b>Multi-level Analysis Approach</b>

In the next step, after extensive consideration of contents, scholars extract a more abstract code which is an axial code to create a block (Creswel, 2018). In our work, the axial code “Implicit Leadership and Followership Theories” is created which includes four categories and their associated initial codes. *Figure 4* shows the axial code with sub-codes, resulting in a conceptual block (*see Figure 4*).

**Figure 4: The Conceptual Block of ILTs and IFTs**





## Discussion and Recommendation for Future Research

Similar to other research, our study has many strengths and limitations. The first strength was the study of ILT and IFT simultaneously and in integrated study, as some researchers had pointed to the need for this method (Braun et al., 2017; Foti et al., 2017; Stegmann et al., 2020) and considered it in “complex methods” code. Another strength was that using both Persian and English articles reduced, to some extent, language bias. Using MaxQDA allowed us to carefully summarize, synthesize, and code the contents of articles to find out the points that should be considered more extensively in ILTs and IFTs.

This research is not without limitations. Firstly, because the scope of implicit theories is very broad, many concepts such as prototypes, stereotypes, or perceptions relevant to the field could not have been included except those in which implicit theories are key to the research. Furthermore, the lack of time prevented the search of additional databases which might hold other related articles. We suggest that future researchers explore these fields in addition to more databases to gain a thorough perspective of ILT and IFT coverage shortfalls. Finally, the author was not able to offer an overview of ILTs and IFTs antecedents and outcomes discovered to date. Researchers could take this into consideration as a potential avenue for future investigation. The following are some suggestions for such endeavors.

According to *Figure 4*, one of the research gaps is “measurement development” (Kong et al., 2017) which requires identifying a different range of variables as moderators or mediators. Additionally, given the nature of ILTs and IFTs, they may be interjected into people’s role-playing efforts within an organization as a moderating influence (e.g., job satisfaction).

Another interesting area for “measurement development” is to integrate instrumental variables into regression models of ILTs and IFTs. These variables lead to identifying the hidden correlation and accurately measuring it against other variables. Some potential instrumental variables include physical characteristics (e.g., age), stable individual differences (e.g., personality), and geographical distance (Antonakis et al., 2010). These types of variables have already been applied in other forms of leadership (Vries, 2012). Future researchers could identify related instrumental variables and, if possible, enter ILTs and IFTs as instrumental variables in organizational models.

Although in recent years the number of experimental studies in implicit theories has increased (*Figure 2*), the impact of many antecedents such as situational (e.g., organizational climate Petruş, 2018), leadership formation (Scott et al., 2018), contextual factors (e.g., culture and socio-political processes, Da’as & Zibenberg, 2019), as well as the implications of ILTs and IFTs that have not been completely clarified (e.g., organizational behaviors, Lord et al., 2019). We collected “antecedents” and “consequences” as two separate categories with their own sub codes (*Table 2*) which need more empirical investigation (i.e., empirical development code).

ILT and IFT measurements suffer from many problems such as using explicit measurement instead of implicit (Martinko et al., 2017) considered as “measurement suitability,” and validity (Petruş, 2018) as “generalizability and validity” gaps in this paper. To identify precise measurement problems, we recommend that all measurements of ILTs and IFTs be gathered in one study and be considered critically with respect to the seven steps introduced by Churchill (1979) in order to develop and validate the scale. Additionally, some studies lacked generalizability due to a limited sample size (Jiang et al., 2019). In order to reach broader



applicability, future research should determine an adequate sample size using suitable software such as Sample Power or G power.

The “consensus on ILT/IFT dimensions” code (Chu & Zhang, 2020) in multiple cultures (Offermann & Coats, 2018) is also an interesting area of the research. Thus, future work could surface worldwide on social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to extract shared traits from all over the world. Some software such as MaxQDA applied in this study would be able to fulfill this purpose.

The “recursive relationship” code represents the need for recursive and non-recursive models of ILTs and IFTs. Despite research accomplished regarding the unidirectional, reciprocal relationship between ILT and IFT variables (e.g., reciprocal relationship between IFTs and culture) could provide a better perspective in this field (Braun et al., 2017). Future research should pay more attention to mutual effects.

The “longitudinal study” is useful in determining a research gap (Foti et al., 2017; Goswami et al., 2019) since measuring behaviors of leaders and followers can flourish over time (Yip & Walker, 2021). Utilizing experience sampling methodology (ESM) allows researchers for longitudinal study in which they sample experience immediately and in the natural environment, over a period of time, avoiding common method and memory bias (Beal, 2015). While some leadership studies have applied this method (Barnes et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2012; Sun et al., 2019), it would be fruitful to apply it in ILTs and IFTs.

## Conclusion

This study was conducted with the aim of finding research deficiencies and avenues for future research in ILTs and IFTs. Results illustrated that four main categories still remained for further investigation: antecedents, consequences, measurement development, and content and structure of ILTs and IFTs – together with 31 sub-codes. Future research should consider these four research areas to better understand the role of ILTs and IFTs in organizations and the relationship between followers and leaders.

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## Appendix: Selected Articles from 2016 to 2021

Authors	Journal	Article Name
Trichas, Schyns, Lord, and Hall (2017)	<i>The Leadership Quarterly</i>	Facing leaders: Facial expression and leadership perception
Martinko, Randolph-Seng, Shen, Brees, Mahoney, and Kessler (2017)	<i>Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies</i>	An Examination of the Influence of Implicit Theories, Attribution Styles, and Performance Cues on Questionnaire Measures of Leadership
Riggs and Porter (2017)	<i>The Leadership Quarterly</i>	Are there advantages to seeing leadership the same? A test of the mediating effects of LMX on the relationship between ILT congruence and employees' development and leadership perception
Frost (2016)	<i>Applied Business</i>	Development of Implicit Leadership Theories Prior to Training or Employment
Petrus, (2018)	<i>Psihologia Resurselor Umane</i>	Construct Validity of the Ideal Implicit Leadership Theories and Implicit Followership Theories
Goswami, Park, and Beehr (2019)	<i>Business and Psychology</i>	Does the Congruence Between Leaders' Followership Theories and Their Perceptions of Actual Followers Matter?
Densten and Borrowman (2017)	<i>PLoS ONE</i>	Does the implicit models of leadership influence the scanning of other-race faces in adults?
Schyns, Kiefer, and Foti, (2020)	<i>Vocational Behavior</i>	Does thinking of myself as leader make me want to lead? The role of congruence in self-theories and implicit leadership theories in motivation to lead
Foti, Hansbrough, Epitropaki, and Coyle (2017)	<i>The Leadership Quarterly</i>	Dynamic viewpoints on implicit leadership and followership theories: Approaches, findings and future directions
Gao and Wu (2019)	<i>Social Behaviors and Personality</i>	Effect of leaders' implicit followership theory on subordinates' career success
Stegmann, Braun, Junker, and Dick (2020)	<i>The Journal of Applied Social Psychology</i>	Getting older and living up to implicit followership theories: Implications for employee psychological health and job attitudes
Knoll, Schyns, and Petersen (2017)	<i>Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies</i>	How the Influence of Unethical Leaders on Followers is Affected by Their Implicit Followership Theories
Leung and Sy (2018)	<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	I Am as Incompetent as the Prototypical Group Member: An Investigation of Naturally Occurring Golem Effects in Work Groups
Yang, Shi, Zhang, Song, and Xu (2020)	<i>Leadership and Organization Development Journal</i>	Implicit followership theories from the perspective of followers
Kong, Xu, Zhou, and Yuan (2017)	<i>Journal of Management and Organization</i>	Implicit followership theory to employee creativity: The roles of leader–member exchange, self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation



<b>Sharifirad and Hajhoseiny, (2018)</b>	<i>Iranian Journal of Management Studies</i>	Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs) and Change Behaviors: The Mediating Role of LMX
<b>Lord, Epitropaki, Foti, and Hansbrough (2019)</b>	<i>Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior</i>	Implicit Leadership Theories, Implicit Followership Theories, and Dynamic Processing of Leadership Information
<b>Offermann and Coats (2018)</b>	<i>The Leadership Quarterly</i>	Implicit theories of leadership: Stability and change over two decades
<b>Rehbock, Verdorfer, and Knipfer (2019)</b>	<i>Studies in Higher Education</i>	Rate My Professor: Implicit Leadership Theories in Academia
<b>Schyns, Schilling, and Coyle (2018)</b>	<i>International Journal of Sport Psychology</i>	In the eye of the public: Examining the content of implicit leadership theories about football managers across two contexts
<b>Alipour, Mohammed, and Martinez (2017)</b>	<i>The Leadership Quarterly</i>	Incorporating temporality into implicit leadership and followership theories: Exploring inconsistencies between time-based expectations and actual behaviors
<b>Khorakian, and Sharifirad (2019)</b>	<i>Psychological Reports</i>	Integrating Implicit Leadership Theories, Leader–Member, Exchange Self-Efficacy, and Attachment Theory to Predict Job Performance
<b>Biermeier-Hanson and Coyle (2019)</b>	<i>The Journal of Psychology</i>	Interdisciplinary and Applied Investigating Leader Role Congruity and Counterproductive Work Behavior
<b>Powell and Butterfield (2017)</b>	<i>Gender in Management: An International Journal</i>	Linking leader anti-prototypes and prototypes to gender stereotypes
<b>Tavares, Sobral, Goldszmidt, and Araújo (2018)</b>	<i>Frontiers in Psychology</i>	Opening the Implicit Leadership Theories' Black Box: An Experimental Approach with Conjoint Analysis
<b>Shen (2018)</b>	<i>Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies</i>	Personal and Situational Antecedents of Workers' Implicit Leadership Theories: A Within-Person, Between-Jobs Design
<b>Jiang, Xu, Houghton, and Manz (2019)</b>	<i>The Journal of Leadership</i>	Shades of grey in implicit effective leadership: Searching for clarity in the midst of paradox
<b>Grill, Pousette, Nielsen, Grytnes, and Torner (2017)</b>	<i>Empirical Research in Vocational Education and Training</i>	Supervisors and teachers' influence on expectations on empowering leadership among students in vocational education and training
<b>Junker, Stegmann, Braun, and Dick (2016)</b>	<i>Leadership and Organization Development Journal</i>	The ideal and the counter-ideal follower advancing implicit followership theories
<b>Scott, Jiang, Wildman, and Griffith (2018)</b>	<i>Human Resource Management Review</i>	The impact of implicit collective leadership theories on the emergence and effectiveness of leadership networks in teams
<b>Guo (2018)</b>	<i>Psychology</i>	The Review of the Implicit Followership Theories (IFTs)
<b>Thompson, Glasø, and Matthiesen (2018)</b>	<i>The Psychologist- Manager Journal</i>	The way I see you: Implicit followership theories explored through the lens of attachment
<b>Braun, Stegmann, Bark, Junker, and Dick (2017)</b>	<i>The Journal of Applied Social Psychology</i>	Think manager—think male, think follower—think female: Gender bias in implicit followership theories
<b>Chu and Zhang (2020)</b>	<i>Current Psychology</i>	What are postgraduates like in the eyes of their supervisors? The content, structure, and measurement of supervisors' implicit followership theories
<b>Sharifirad (2021)</b>	<i>Iranian Journal of Management Studies</i>	Who is an Ideal Organizational Leader in Iran? Examining the Content, Structure, and Consequences of Iranian Implicit Leadership Theories (IILTS)

<b>Walker, Reichard, Riggio, and Hansbrough (2020)</b>	<i>Research gate</i>	Who might support a tyrant? An exploration of links between adolescent family conflict and endorsement of tyrannical implicit leadership theories
<b>Sharifirad, Mortazavi, Rahim Nia, and Farahi (2017)</b>	<i>Human Resource Management in the Oil Industry</i>	Disclosure of the Context of Implicit Theories of Leadership from the Perspectives of the Employees of the National Iranian Oil Distribution Company of Kerman Region and Its Validation
<b>Hopton and Han (2020)</b>	<i>Industrial and Commercial Training</i>	Mommy and Me: Raising Implicit Followership Theories
<b>Zigan, H'eliot, and Le Gry (2019)</b>	<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	Analyzing Leadership Attributes in Faith-Based Organizations: Idealism Versus Reality
<b>Da'as and Zibenberg (2019)</b>	<i>Educational Review</i>	Conflict, control and culture: Implications for implicit followership and leadership theories
<b>Da'as, Ganon Shilon, Schechter, and Qadach (2021)</b>	<i>International Journal of Educational Management</i>	Implicit leadership theory: Principals' sense-making and cognitive complexity
<b>Veestraeten, Johnson, Leroy, Sy, and Sels (2021)</b>	<i>Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies</i>	Exploring the Bounds of Pygmalion Effects: Congruence of Implicit Followership Theories Drives and Binds Leader Performance Expectations and Follower Work Engagement
<b>Yip and Walker (2021)</b>	<i>International Journal of Human Resource Management</i>	Leaders mentoring others: the effects of implicit followership theory on leader integrity and mentoring
<b>Wang, Wu, Liu, and Wan (2021)</b>	<i>Social Behavior and Personality</i>	Leaders' positive and implicit followership theory and team creativity in a university scientific research team
<b>Vogel and Werkmeister (2020)</b>	<i>Public Administration Research and Theory</i>	What is Public about Public? Leadership Exploring Implicit Public Leadership Theories

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## About the Author

Shirin Karbalaei Ali holds a master's degree in human resource management from the University of Allameh, Tabatabaei, Tehran. Her dissertation for her master's degree centered on human resource office performance and investigated the impact of the involvement of line managers in human resource management processes. Her interests currently focus on the psychological aspect of organizational leadership, including analysis of implicit theories and empowerment in addition to team building.

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