

**The Romance Lives On:  
Contemporary Issues Surrounding the Romance of Leadership**

Michelle C. Bligh  
Claremont Graduate University  
School of Behavioral and Organizational Sciences  
123 E. Eighth Street  
Claremont, CA 91711  
Tel: 909-607-3715 Fax: 909-621-8905  
[Michelle.Bligh@cgu.edu](mailto:Michelle.Bligh@cgu.edu)

Birgit Schyns  
University of Portsmouth  
Portsmouth Business School  
Richmond Building  
Portland Street  
Portsmouth, UK P01 3DE  
Tel: 0044 23 9284 4664  
[birgit.schyns@port.ac.uk](mailto:birgit.schyns@port.ac.uk)

With the passing of James R. Meindl in 2004, the leadership community lost a preeminent scholar, leader, and very dear mentor and friend. In the current paper we explore key elements of Jim's legacy, with a particular focus on continuing research streams and ongoing questions regarding the romance of leadership. In addition, in recognition of the increased attention to follower-centered approaches to leadership that Jim helped inspire, we offer a number of challenges to leadership researchers that in our view have yet to be met. We begin by briefly reviewing Jim's romance of leadership perspective and a selection of his seminal empirical work before exploring how the romance of leadership and his emphasis on followers and followers' perceptions has been enacted in a multitude of ways and new research streams. For example, Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich's (1985) paper alone has been cited over 160 times in other scientific articles. In addition, research streams referring to Meindl's work have emerged in at least 11 different countries (e.g., USA, Canada, the Netherlands, Australia, Israel) and the romance of leadership perspective has been utilized across 16 different disciplines (most notably in management, psychology, and public administration). The current paper concentrates on the impact the romance of leadership approach has had on leadership research in the past 20 years, giving rise to a number of ongoing questions and challenges that remain open to future research to address.

According to the romance of leadership view, people tend to overuse and glorify leadership as a causal category, due primarily to a psychological need to make sense of complex organizational phenomena. In addition, empirical research has demonstrated that this tendency is strongest for more extreme situations, such as very high or low levels of organizational performance. Meindl et al.'s (1985) empirical work confirmed that people

tend to over attribute organizational outcomes to leadership, and that this tendency increases with the magnitude of such outcomes. More specifically, Meindl et al. (1985) found that, when presented with extreme positive or negative outcomes of an organizational event, observers across three experiments were more likely to attribute causality to the leader of the organization than to equally likely alternative sources (i.e., subordinates and external causes). Using Meindl's (2004, p. 464) own words to describe this approach, "the romance of leadership involves a psychology that highlights the benefits of attributing outcomes to leadership. The faithful belief in leadership is itself beneficial in providing a sense of comfort and security, in reducing feelings of uncertainty, and in providing a sense of human agency and control."

This romanticized conception of leadership thus emphasizes the proactive efficacy of leadership, suggesting that leaders have the ability to control and influence the fates of the organizations in their charge, regardless of external forces or situational conditions. Ultimately, this assumption of control and responsibility can be a double-edged sword, for it not only implies that followers give leaders credit for positive organizational outcomes, but that they also attribute blame to leaders for negative results. The romance of leadership thus points out that people commonly believe leaders are directly responsible for organizational outcomes (Meindl et al., 1985), and that through this process of socially constructing organizational realities, the concept of leadership has been elevated or inflated to an often unwarranted status and significance. The corresponding symbolism, imagery, mythology and stories associated with the concept of leadership are evidence of the mystery – or near mysticism – with which leadership has been imbued, and these socially constructed artifacts of leadership are worthy of study in

their own right, due to their potential insights into the followers' needs, mindsets, and anxieties.

This latter assertion about the research “worthiness” of the social construction of leadership has taken two primary forms within the leadership literature. First, a number of researchers have explored the implications of Meindl’s (1995, p. 332) assertion that “reports made by followers regarding their leaders are treated as information regarding the constructions of followers, not information about the qualities and activities of the leader as with more leader-centric approaches.” Thus, the romance of leadership perspective treats correlated perceptions or ratings of leadership as a revelation into the thought systems and ideologies of followers (Meindl, 1995), as well as evidence of social contagion effects that focus attention on the ongoing interactions amongst followers and the influence of these interactions on leadership ratings (Pastor & Mayo, 2006).

Secondly, at a more indirect and collective level, the romance of leadership approach has focused increased attention on the role of the media and social constructions of leadership within a cultural group as worthy of study. Chen and Meindl (1991, p. 522) suggest that the media develop “constructions of leadership regularly and widely for our consumption . . . These images feed and expand our appetites for leadership products, appealing not only to our collective commitments to the concept but fixating us in particular on the personas and characteristics of the leaders themselves.” As Jackson and Guthey (2006) point out, Chen and Meindl’s work in this area was influential in highlighting the significance of the media in shaping and influencing ideas and beliefs about leadership, and for drawing attention to how visual images of CEOs and top leaders deserve close scrutiny as an important window into how business celebrity,

firm reputation, and corporate legitimacy are constructed and deconstructed in the media (Guthey & Jackson, 2005; Jackson & Guthey, 2006).

The current paper attempts to provide an overview for the reader of some of the research trends that have ensued since Meindl et al.'s (1985) formulation of the romance of leadership theory. While we have not attempted to exhaustively review all of the research that has been linked to the romance of leadership perspective, we have attempted to distill some of the ongoing research streams that have carried on this perspective, and we have organized each section by a "leading question" that various researchers have sought to address. In addition, we conclude with a number of questions that have yet to be addressed by existing research, which we provide as suggestions and challenges to future scholars in this area.

*What is the role of followership vis-à-vis leadership?*

It has become almost a cliché that "without followers, there can be no leaders," and there have been various calls within the leadership literature dating at least back to the 1930's suggesting that followers remain an overlooked variable in the leadership equation (Bjugstad, Thach, Thompson, & Morris, 2006). Despite periodic calls for greater attention to followership, Collinson (2005) recently points out that mainstream leadership studies continue to privilege and separate leaders from followers. In his paper, Collinson (2005) argues for the value of rethinking leadership as a set of dialectical relationships, in which leader-follower relations and practices are explicitly viewed as mutually constituting and co-produced. This approach serves to emphasize the inherent tensions, contradictions and ambiguities that often characterize leader-follower dynamics, and suggests that rather than replace a 'leader-centric' approach with a 'follower-centric'

approach, we should move toward a more dialectical understanding of the complex, interactional relationships between leaders and followers.

Jim Meindl would have agreed. These arguments are consistent with Jim's own beliefs that social constructionist processes do not *negate* or *repudiate* the often critical role of leaders and leadership. Meindl did not advance the follower-centric approach as "anti-leadership," or an effort to compete with or to replace the dominant leader-centric approach (Jackson & Guthey, 2006). In contrast, Jim proposed the romance of leadership perspective as "an alternative to theories and perspectives that place great weight on 'leaders' and on the substantive significance to their actions and activities" (Meindl, 1995, p. 330). Thus, Jim's work did not reject the importance of leadership, but simply attempted to draw attention to the fact that "it is easier to believe in leadership than to prove it" (Meindl, 1990, p. 161), and suggested that as researchers and as organizational and societal members we seemed to be particularly susceptible to believing in it, even in the absence of any scientific proof of its efficacy. However, Jim felt strongly that a counter follower-centric emphasis was necessitated by the overwhelming dominance of leader-centric approaches in leadership research, pointing out that more radical follower-centric perspectives were ultimately necessary to balance the equation. In sum, while Jim argued for the need to continually problematize the overarching emphasis on leaders to the detriment of followers, we think he would have echoed Collinson's assertion that we need more research to examine the "multiple, shifting, contradictory and ambiguous identities of 'leaders' and 'followers'" (Collinson, 2005, p. 1436).

Another interesting area of theorizing and research surrounds the social construction of followership, and specifically the role that the dichotomization of

leadership and followership may play in romancing leaders. de Vries and van Gelder (2005) introduced the idea of implicit follower theories which can be linked to romance of leadership. Referring to Meindl's (1990, 1995) work, de Vries and van Gelder explain implicit follower theories as a simplification of a complex world. They argue that followers will generally be perceived to have a high need for leaders and leadership (de Vries, Roe, & Taillieu, 2002). This underlines Meindl's romance of leadership from an alternate perspective: In contrast to leaders, followers are seen as passive and dependent. This way, the notion of the 'almighty' leader is supported and continually reinforced.

In a similar vein, Uhl-Bien and Pillai (2006) suggest that a corollary to the romance of leadership may be the 'subordination of followership,' and that this subordination occurs through the social construction of what followership means. They explore the meaning of followership relative to related concepts such as "subordinate," implicit theories of followership, and group-level social constructions, including social contagion and emergent norms. Uhl-Bien and Pillai suggest that future research should examine the ways in which individuals and groups enact followership, as well as the role of power distance in the social construction of followership. At the group level, for example, the idea of followership may lead to the development of social norms of conformity and compliance with the leader and strong pressure to not speak up about issues. This construction of followership is based on fear, subordination, strong conceptions of hierarchy, and pressure to not take initiative or step outside the bounds of what it means to be a follower. Alternate constructions of "good" or "courageous" followership, in contrast, may focus more on the proactive role that followers may take in the accomplishment of the group's or organization's goals. Clearly, future research is

necessary to examine the implications of the social construction of followership, and how this effect could potentially be amplified in cultures that are traditionally characterized as having high power distance.

*What are the factors associated with attributions of credit or blame to leaders in organizations?*

*Hierarchical status.* Another interesting extension of the romance of leadership focuses on attributions of causality relative to a hierarchical status and group membership. Gibson and Schroeder's (2003) study on attributions of credit and blame provides empirical and theoretical support for the notion that blame and credit are assigned differently depending on a leader's status in the organizational hierarchy, particularly in conditions of causal ambiguity. Their results demonstrate that blame tends to rise in hierarchies: observers in their study tended to blame upper level management to a greater degree than they blamed lower level employees for performance failures within the organization. However, when assigning credit, observers made little differentiation based on status. Contrary to the authors' predictions, upper levels were not credited with success to any greater degree than lower levels.

The authors also found a significant interaction between blame and credit attributions and hierarchy, in that upper level positions receive higher blame than credit for organizational events, while lower level positions receive higher credit than blame. Gibson and Schroeder (2003) also found that observers attributed significantly lower levels of credit and blame to groups than to individuals, although the manipulation of group versus individual attribution consisted solely of a change in labeling. This finding is consistent with social psychological research emphasizing that observers regard group



actions as less coherent, more diffuse, and less susceptible to internal attributions, resulting in lower attributions of responsibility than to individual leaders. Again, this research underlines the fact that the romance of leadership can be a double-edged sword for leaders, with the potential to dichotomize leaders into heroes or villains based on relatively little evidence beyond their position in the hierarchy, while equivalent “groups” or “teams” remain less susceptible to this effect.

*Leader prototypicality and congeniality.* Similarly, from Shamir’s (1992) research on the effect of prototypicality on the attribution of influence to a leader, we can conclude that different types of leaders may be more susceptible to the romance of leadership. Shamir found that participants attributed different degrees of influence to different types of leaders (one being more of a prototypical leader to his participants). It could be interesting to expand this line of research: for example, is the romance of leadership more pronounced when referring to certain types of leaders (e.g., sport coaches versus university deans)? The underlying question that has yet to be addressed concerns what other variables or contextual factors may influence the different attributions of influence in the romance of leadership. For example, analogous to the findings of gender congeniality of certain leadership roles (Eagly, Karau & Makhijani, 1995, p. 129), are there certain leadership roles that are more congenial to the romance of leadership? Or are contextual factors, such as hierarchical role and leader-follower distance, equally or more influential in shaping the attributions made?

*Leader-follower distance.* Interestingly, we are unaware of any research that specifically examines the role of leader-follower social distance (Shamir, 1995) on the romance of leadership. Given the evidence that the romance of leadership influences the

perception of an actual leader, the question arises, how might it influence the perception of a distant leader, a person most followers would hardly know? Collinson (2005) reviews a number of studies on leadership and distance that suggest the romance of leadership may be more likely in situations of greater distance. Specifically, Bogardus (1927) argued that social distance is fundamentally essential for leaders to maintain their influence and the respect of followers, and Katz and Kahn (1978) subsequently pointed out that top level leaders' distance from followers allowed them to sustain a 'simplified and magical image' more readily (cited in Collinson, 2005, p. 237).

Thus, attributions of success or failure may be more likely in situations of greater distance, where leaders can more readily maintain the persona of a 'great' leader with the ability to control outcomes. Similarly, Shamir (2005) theorizes that the romance of leadership phenomenon may *only* apply to situations of high leader-follower distance, as leaders can more readily invoke attributions of success and failure through impression management techniques, visionary rhetoric and behavior, and influencing organizational performance cues. It is thus plausible that the tendency to romanticize leaders increases as the perceived social, interactional, physical, and geographical distance between leaders and followers increases (see Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Followers with closer relationships and interactions with their leaders are likely more privy to the situational and contextual constraints that leaders face, and may make more realistic attributions about what leaders can and cannot influence. However, this proposition has yet to be empirically tested, suggesting an important question regarding the relationship between leadership romanticism and leader-follower distance.

This assumption can be placed into the context of information processing as well. Basically, two sorts of information processing exist: automatic and controlled/elaborated information processing (Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977). In automatic information processing, individuals apply the information they have stored in their memory (e.g., stereotypes, implicit leadership theories) to a target (i.e., the interaction partner; for the example of leadership see Lord, 1985; Medvedeff & Lord, 2006). Although the application of stereotypes may lead to wrong conclusions about others, it is a simple strategy to reduce cognitive load. Conversely, elaborate information processing, as it comprises gathering of information about a target, is more time consuming but may lead to a more realistic picture of the respective target (i.e., the leader). We can expect that the more distant a leader and the less information about a leader available, the more implicit theories likely play a role in the perception of that leader. In addition, the motivation to gather information in order to gain an accurate image of a leader may also be lower, as when a leader is distant little interaction is expected. Consequently, distant leaders may be regarded with an even more romantic view than more proximal leaders.

*Is the tendency to attribute outcomes to leaders dispositional? What are the antecedents of the romance of leadership?*

Meindl (1990) suggested that some individuals exhibit a dispositional tendency to attribute outcomes to leaders across situations; the Romance of Leadership Scale (RLS) was developed to measure this tendency (Meindl & Ehrlich, 1988). According to Ehrlich, Meindl, and Viellieu (1990), persons with high scores on the RLS are more likely to

attribute responsibility for outcomes to leaders and perceive them as influential and charismatic. Initial work on the scale found that dispositional factors such as locus of control and age predicted RLS scores.

Surprisingly, very little research so far has focused on other personal antecedents of the romance of leadership. To our knowledge, only Felfe (2005) has examined personality characteristics in their relationship to the romance of leadership. Assuming that constructions of leadership may be similar or related to constructions of the self, Felfe examined the relationship between the Big-Five, as well as achievement, power and affiliation motives, self-efficacy, need for structure, and need for leadership and participants' ratings on the Romance of Leadership Scale (RLS). He found that occupational self-efficacy, self-esteem, extraversion, conscientiousness and dominance are positively related to the romance of leadership, and neuroticism is negatively related to the romance of leadership. Participants' tolerance for uncertainty, need for structure, and need for leadership were not related to the romance of leadership. This is, of course, only a first step in examining the relationships among traditional personality variables and the romance of leadership.

While the romance of leadership has often been conceptualized as a dispositional tendency (see Awamleh & Gardner, 1999), Meindl (1995, p. 335) also emphasizes potential situational input factors for the romance of leadership, suggesting "the underlying assumption is that certain contextual features, quite independently of the personal attributes of followers, alter the nature of emergent leadership constructions." He goes on to specify performance cues and perceptions of crisis as potentially relevant situational factors. Therefore, additional research is necessary to uncover the extent to

which the romance of leadership represents a “state-like” versus “trait-like” tendency to attribute outcomes to leaders. Bligh, Kohles, and Pillai (2005) theorized that scores on the RLS could potentially be influenced by an individual’s perceptions of a current state of crisis. Their findings suggest that such a strong situational effect may override the dispositional tendencies (or lack thereof) to romanticize leadership. In other words, the effect of a situation may also strongly cue increased attributions of leadership, regardless of an individual’s dispositional tendencies.

Thus, additional research is necessary to explore whether or not the romance of leadership is more situationally influenced than Meindl originally theorized. In Awamleh and Gardner’s (1999) study, as in the Bligh et al. (2005) study, situational performance cues were more influential in accounting for leadership outcomes than dispositional factors measured by the RLS. Taken together, these results suggest that future research may benefit from examining the extent to which scores on the RLS are impacted by various aspects of the situation. Specifically, situational and contextual influences might be combined with longitudinal RLS measures to assess the extent to which different situations create different degrees of follower tendencies to attribute positive and negative performance outcomes to leadership. This line of research could increase our understanding of how aspects of the situation and followers’ dispositions potentially interact to predict leadership attributions.

In terms of antecedents in general, other possible factors related to RLS scores may be industry and occupational differences, cultural differences, and gender differences, to suggest a few examples. Similarly, the tendency to attribute outcomes to leadership may diminish over an individual’s career tenure and as he or she reaches

higher hierarchical levels within the organization, or gains accumulated experience with resource, role, and political constraints (see Stewart, 1976) that may temper or inhibit their belief in the personal efficacy of leaders.

*What effect does romanticizing leaders have on perceptions of actual leaders?*

While few studies have examined antecedents of the romance of leadership, quite a bit of research has focused on the question of how a romantic view of leadership impacts the perception of actual leaders (e.g., Awamleh & Gardner, 1999). However, the results of this research have so far been mixed. Meindl (1990) provides evidence that perceptions of charismatic leadership are likely to be greater in followers who attribute outcomes to leaders. Awamleh and Gardner (1999), however, found that the RLS was not significantly related to perceptions of leader charisma or effectiveness, providing no support for Meindl's (1990) assertion that generalized leadership beliefs account for variance in perceptions of leadership. However, they state that "Meindl's basic assertion that people generally tend to romanticize leadership by overattributing organizational outcomes to leadership was supported" (1999, p. 362). So, while some studies find a positive correlation between the romance of leadership and transformational / charismatic leadership (Al-Dmour & Awamleh, 2002; Awamleh, 2003; Meindl, 1990; Shamir, 1992), others find no relationship at all (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Bligh et al., 2005; Schyns & Sanders, 2004). In addition, these same studies have reported varying results concerning the relationship between the romance of leadership and leadership effectiveness. One prominent question therefore concerns whether or not we can more precisely clarify why the results found across these various studies do not concur. In a recent meta-analysis, Schyns, Felfe, and Blank (in press) found a positive relationship

between the romance of leadership and the perception of transformational leadership/charisma. They examined whether the following variables could serve as moderators of this relationship: Field/employees vs. experimental/student samples, region of origin, and type of assessment of transformational leadership. Region of origin proved to be a significant moderator in this study; however, due to outliers, there is need for further research to confirm this finding. A test of other potential moderators (such as the dispositional and situational variables discussed above) could help to shed light on when and under what circumstances there is a significant relationship between the romance of leadership and ratings of transformational/charismatic leadership and leader effectiveness.

In addition, up until now, transformational/charismatic leadership has been the primary focus (perhaps in line with Meindl's (1990) assertion that the prevailing emphasis on transformational/charismatic leadership represented a hyper-romanticization in itself). However, it would be interesting to examine how far the perception of other leadership styles could be affected by the romance of leadership as well. For example, could there be a general tendency of individuals to regard leaders more positively on a wide variety of dimensions when they romanticize leaders? In other words, is there a generalized halo/horns effect when individuals romanticize leadership, in that once leadership is established as the preferred explanation for either positive or negative outcomes, leaders are either angelized or demonized accordingly?

In a similar vein, Gardner (2003) explored the following question: will individuals who tend to romanticize leadership view a leader who is revealed to have a reputation for honesty (deception) as more (less) morally worthy than other persons? In a test of this

more “follower-driven” perspective, the RLS was administered to ascertain the extent to which participants’ generalized leadership beliefs influenced their perceptions of leadership, including charisma and effectiveness. The findings suggest that high RLS individuals perceived the leader to be most effective when delivery was strong and least effective when delivery was weak. As Meindl (1990) originally asserted, high RLS individuals are inclined to infer strong leadership when exposed to evidence of high performance and weak leadership when presented with evidence of low performance. In contrast, the ratings of low RLS persons are not expected to vary as a function of performance cues, as low RLS individuals (in general) assign less significance to leadership as a causal category. In Gardner’s (2003) study, if strength of delivery is considered a performance cue, the reported interaction is consistent with Meindl’s (1990) predictions. Thus, Gardner (2003) concludes the RLS is “a potentially useful individual difference variable that merits consideration when examining perceived leadership...however, because the effects of RLS only emerged in combination with other factors, it is important for future researchers to search for meaningful RLS interactions.”

*How does the romance of leadership influence attributions of charisma and augment the heroic status of leaders?*

A number of important questions remain regarding the romance of leadership and the phenomenon of charismatic or heroic leadership. Meindl et al. (1985, p. 78), described the phenomenon of charisma as “elusive and enigmatic”, suggesting that its “direct potency ... on organizational outcomes has vastly outstripped reality.” Meindl’s perhaps healthy skepticism of charisma was rooted in his approach to charisma as a



socially constructed, attributed phenomenon that had as much to do with the needs of followers to understand complex and ambiguous events as it had to do with actual charismatic characteristics of the leader. Chen and Meindl (1991) pointed out that the romance of leadership was a powerful force in leading external observers, employees, and the media to create a romanticized and even heroic view of leaders. Tourigny, Dougan, Washbush, and Clements (2003) subsequently suggest that the initial success of an organization can “actually accelerate and empower efforts to construct a heroic image of a CEO.” Performance cues are used to make attributions regarding the charismatic qualities of the CEO, and explanations that identify the leader as the cause of organizational outcomes serve to maintain a simplistic and idealistic perspective that hinders sound executive performance assessment (Chen & Meindl, 1991; Meindl et al., 1985; Tourigny et al, 2003).

In a similar vein, attributions of charisma increase the power of executives, as once a CEO’s image has been construed as positive, it can be resistant to change (Chen & Meindl, 1991), even if the leader is unlikely to be adaptive to changing environmental conditions (Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Consistent with the groupthink phenomenon (Janis, 1972), followers may subsequently filter cues accordingly, and leaders may manipulate language and symbolism so as to maintain their power and manage political processes even in the face of evidence that contradicts their efficacy. Of course, there are also numerous examples of highly positive leadership images that change quite dramatically (e.g., politicians Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, CEOs Bernie Ebbers of WorldCom, Dennis Kozlowski of Tyco International, and Richard Scrushy of HealthSouth). These quite drastic changes in the public’s perception of the leader may

occur in part precisely because of the initial tendency for followers to romanticize them, leading to greater disappointment and disillusionment as the leader cannot possibly live up to followers' expectations in the long term. According to Tourigny et al. (2003), dysfunctional behavior of leaders may be strongly influenced by and enabled by potentially dysfunctional behaviors on the part of followers as well (see also Clements & Washbush, 1999). In addition, from an ethical standpoint, the charismatic leader who can use imagery to enhance his or her mystical status and engage in impression management tactics can shift attention away from controversial ethical issues toward more socially desirable ends (such as profitability). Unless a major (and visible) ethical breach is uncovered, decisions made and the means used by leaders will not be investigated, thereby partially contributing to potentially unethical and illegitimate actions (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992). However, when major ethical breaches are revealed, the public backlash is often immediate and decisive.

Other researchers have explored the phenomena that charismatic leaders may be more likely to rise to prominence during a crisis (Beyer, 1999, Pillai & Meindl, 1991; Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl 2004). Charismatic leaders are often portrayed as prospective saviors or "white knights" promising to extricate an organization, social group, or nation from disaster (Bligh et al., 2005; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). As they take power, they may express confidence and articulate a vision necessary for an organization's turnaround. Yet, charismatic leaders may also benefit from the romance of leadership: Under pressure, followers' need for causal explanations (with both explanatory and predictive power) increases in an attempt to reduce feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty (Tourish & Pinnington, 2002). As Gemmill and Oakley (1992, p. 115) point out, "as

social despair and helplessness deepen, the search and wish for a Messiah (leader) or magical rescue (leadership) also begins to accelerate.”

Flynn and Staw (2004) suggest that followers’ attributions of charisma are often validated, at least in part, because an organization has successfully passed through a crisis period, even though there may be scant evidence that the change in organizational outcomes is due to the actions of the leader. Nonetheless, because of these overattribution processes, charismatic leaders may be perceived as ‘superhuman’ by followers (Deluga, 1995), given credit for events and outcomes they have not originated or even materially influenced.

In sum, Flynn and Staw (2004) argue that the power of charismatic leaders to guide and influence members of an organization during difficult times may be only “half the story.” Equally important may be external factors, such as the restoration of outsiders’ confidence in the organization. Through the use of strategic accounts and persuasion tactics, charismatic leaders may manipulate negative impressions that outsiders hold of an organization. Further, the mere presence of a leader who is deemed “charismatic” may remove collective doubts about the survival of a firm. Instead of critically evaluating the prospects of a firm, outside constituents may often simply accept the charismatic leader’s hopes for the future (Willner, 1983). As a result, the promises of the charismatic leader may be accepted “not because of [their] rational likelihood of success . . . but because of an effective belief in the extraordinary qualities of the leader” (Dow, 1969: 315), providing more evidence for the romance of leadership.

Through two separate studies, Flynn and Harris (2004) provide empirical evidence that in its extreme, a charismatic appeal appears to be capable of converting

perceptions of an economically difficult situation into perceptions of a positive situation. They suggest that although the majority of charismatic leadership research has focused on the attitudes and behavior of followers inside the organization, the romance of leadership perspective may also be applied to the symbolic actions and consequences of charismatic leadership that may be equally powerful beyond the borders of the organization. In other words, part of the effect of the charismatic leader may be due to that individual's ability to secure resources from outside of the firm, simply due to his or her charismatic reputation and the tendency for outsiders to (mis)attribute efficacy to the leader.

*How does the romance of leadership affect followers' expectations and performance evaluations of leaders?*

A highly romanticized view of leaders may also affect the expectations an individual has of his or her actual leader. Attributing all responsibility of company performance to leaders and seeing them as "powerful and almighty" may lead to exaggerated expectations when it comes to a leader using his or her influence for the benefit of individual employees. As a result, disappointments may be inevitable. An interesting study might focus on the effects of unrealistic expectations on the actual relationship development and cooperation between leader and follower, combining research on the romance of leadership with the longstanding research stream examining leader-member exchange (LMX). As leader-follower relationships often develop over time based on reciprocity and mutual trust (Sullivan, Mitchell, & Uhl-Bien, 2003; Sanders & Schyns, 2006), followers with a high tendency to attribute outcomes to leaders may – in response to their frustrated (and often unrealistic) expectations – refrain from

cooperating and may even in the end turn to destructive behaviors such as mockery, resistance, or outright sabotage.

We do not mean to suggest, however, that such follower resistance is necessarily destructive, or that all followers would necessarily engage in negative resistance. In fact, follower resistance and reactions to the romance of leadership may take highly constructive forms as well, such as voice behaviors, upward influence tactics, or sportsmanship and helping behaviors. In fact, taking a broader view that appreciates the potential importance of follower resistance may suggest that follower romanticism might be much less pervasive and automatic than the 'romance thesis' sometimes implies. For example, leader impression management techniques may be much less effective in securing follower consent and commitment than is often assumed, an important area for future research.

Schyns (2006) proposes an effect of mismatch between supervisors' and followers' implicit leadership theories and their perception of a leader; specifically, to the extent this mismatch occurs, evaluations of the leader's performance and promotion recommendations are likely to be negatively impacted. Besides the negative effects that the romance of leadership may have on cooperation with a leader or development of a high exchange relationship as outlined above, disappointed followers may also devalue their leaders in 360 degree feedback, if they turn out not to be 'almighty' after all. As Bradley, Allen, Hamilton, & Filgo (2006) point out, leadership ratings are based, at least in part, on followers' perceptual processes and the match between a perceived leadership schema and the individual being rated (Lord & Maher, 1991), and are potentially strongly influenced by social contagion processes (Borman, 1974; Meindl, 1995). As a result,

future research should include the romance of leadership as a potential factor in leadership evaluations, particularly in the realm of charismatic and transformational leaders.

*How does the romance of leadership relate to individual or team performance?*

Related to the question of the effect of the romance of leadership on cooperation, leader-member exchange relationships, and ratings of leader performance is the question of how the romance of leadership influences the performance of individual followers or groups of followers. Judge and Bono's (2001) meta-analysis shows that internal locus of control is slightly positively related to performance. With respect to the romance of leadership, we might assume an even stronger effect if individuals not only attribute externally but specifically to a leader and "leadership." As highly romanticizing followers with an external locus of control may expect that their performance has little or any impact on overall company performance, their efforts to contribute may be limited. Ultimately and in line with their own expectations, followers will then likely have lower individual performance. This could suggest that the romance of leadership may be negatively related to individual or group performance. On the other hand, the romance of leadership might also work as a positive self-fulfilling prophecy in organizations. Specifically, highly romanticizing followers may exert high effort (consciously or unconsciously) in order to make the leaders successful in line with their own expectations. This idea is similar to the so-called Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; for an application to leadership see Eden, 1990): High expectations may lead to high performance ratings of the leader and supportive behaviors that enhance performance possibilities and, over time, may lead to higher performance. Given these

two contradictory assumptions and the lack of research in this area, the impact of the romance of leadership on performance is an interesting topic for future research.

*Is there a shared romance of leadership in highly cohesive teams?*

Pastor's (1998) study demonstrates that individuals working closely together construct leadership in social processes. He viewed "individuals' representations of leadership [...] as cognitive networks composed of leadership and organizational concepts" (p. ii). In his empirical study, he indeed found that social networks (informal relationships between members) are positively related to the similarity in individuals' cognitive structures. In other words, we can say that the more employees are informally related to each other, the more likely they are to share a common view on leadership. In highly cohesive teams, for example, members may over time develop a shared or team-level approach to the romance of leadership.

Although there is very little existing empirical research on shared romance of leadership, we can draw on established theories, such as social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1982; see also Haslam, 2004) to outline some preliminary research questions and hypotheses. A key feature of social identity theory is that a person's identity consists largely of his or her "knowledge that he [or she] belongs to certain social groups, together with some emotional and value significance to him [or her] of the group membership" (Tajfel, 1982, p. 31). In order for individuals to identify themselves as a member of a group, the membership in that group has to be salient (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Belonging to a team at work is often salient in that sense that everybody reporting to the same leader is often by definition a member of a particular team.

However, in order for one's social identity to be drawn from this team membership, individuals within the same group must perceive similarity to the other group members.

Given the significance of the leader in often defining the group's function and membership in the first place, we can assume that views towards leadership are one important criterion for perceived similarity. Every team member likely has an opinion about leadership on an explicit level (concerning the specific leader of the group) and an implicit level (concerning implicit leadership theories). Consequently, the extent to which the group develops a shared social construction of leadership can become a significant aspect of the group's identity, and facilitate increased communication and performance. Alternately, the direction of the relationship can also be reversed: The more salient the groups' social identity, the more likely a shared view on leadership may develop (see Haslam et al., 2001, for this argument). We might thus predict that the lower the variance in the romance of leadership in a team, or to the extent that the tendency to romanticize leadership is shared, the higher the cohesion and satisfaction of team members, possibly resulting in higher performance.

*Are other organizational concepts susceptible to a "romance" effect?*

*The 'romance of teams' concept.* Borrowing the term from Meindl et al. (1985), Allen and Hecht (2004) introduced the 'romance of teams' concept, arguing that people tend to assume teams are 'high performance' even despite evidence to the contrary. Therefore, they argued that there is also a 'romance of teams' in organizations, which they defined as "a faith in the effectiveness of team-based work that is not supported by, or is even inconsistent with, relevant empirical evidence." Despite the semantic similarities, both Meindl (2004) and West, Brodbeck, and Richter (2004) argue that this concept



differs significantly from the original romance of leadership concept. The romance of leadership builds on the social psychology of attribution theory to explain how individuals make causal inferences, suggesting that leadership plays an important part in the way people attempt to make sense out of organizationally relevant phenomena. Through this sense-making process, leadership has assumed a romanticized, 'larger-than-life' role, in that people frequently overestimate the impact of leadership, and most strongly when identifying potential causes for extraordinary high and low performance. In contrast, West et al. (2004) suggest that Allen and Hecht's (2004) 'romance of teams' concept refers solely to peoples' general tendencies to have positive views about team performance. However, it remains an open question as to whether leadership occupies a unique niche in followers' attribution processes, or whether there are other organizational phenomena that may be subject to a "romance" effect as well.

### **Summary and Directions for Future Research**

Research into the romance of leadership now has an established history of over 20 years. It is safe to say that the phenomenon itself is an important and pervasive aspect of organizations, as demonstrated by research programs in different areas, countries, and contexts. However, this brief review of existing literature suggests that quite a few questions remain unanswered. In the following section, we summarize some unanswered questions that may serve to stimulate future research.

*Context and boundary conditions.* A number of questions surrounding the romance of leadership refer to the influence of situation and context: For example, beyond trait or personality characteristics, what are the situational and contextual variables that influence our tendency to romanticize leaders and leadership? Which of

these variables moderate the relationship between the romance of leadership and the perception of transformational leadership/charisma? It appears likely that hierarchy and perceived social distance of leaders in question enhances the romance of leadership, but these questions, as well as those concerning whether the romance of leadership is more pronounced in certain areas or domains (e.g., politics, sports, types of industries) have yet to be addressed. It may well be that in some areas and cultures the romance of leadership is more prevalent as more importance is attributed to leadership than in other contexts and cultures.

*The romance of leadership and followership.* In addition, although the romance of leadership is a follower-centered approach and recent research (de Vries & van Gelder, 2005; Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2006) has turned to the role of the social construction of followership, an interesting issue would be to examine the interaction between the two: Does the social construction of followership follow the construction of leadership or – in other words – does the romance of leadership lead to a diminished attribution of influence to followers and decreased appreciation for their contributions?

Finally, one of the largest remaining issues in romance of leadership research is the lack of focus on outcomes. In this paper, we have identified numerous potential outcomes that warrant further research, such as:

- a) Cooperation between leaders and followers;
- b) Leaders' performance evaluations;
- c) Promotion of leaders;
- d) Team and individual performance; and
- e) Follower identity.

Overall, we argue that although research on the romance of leadership has established itself as an important and fruitful area of scholarship in its own right, it is clear that work in this area has only just begun. The continuing interest in this phenomenon underlines its importance, and the time is ripe for more romance of leadership research due to the wide acceptance of followers' role in the leadership process in current scholarship. Therefore, we hope this paper will encourage future researchers to continue to focus on this promising "alternative to contemporary wisdom" (Meindl, 1990, p. 159), and further delineate the antecedents, contextual factors, and outcomes associated with our common desire as individuals and as collectives to steadfastly believe in the power and efficacy of leadership.

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