Romancing leadership: Past, present, and future ☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a review of the romance of leadership and the social construction of leadership theory 25 years after it was originally introduced. We trace the development of this theoretical approach from the original formulation of the romance of leadership (RoL) theory as attributional bias through its emergence as a radical, unconventional approach that views leadership as a sensemaking activity that is primarily 'in the eye of the beholder.' We subsequently review research published in management and organizational psychology journals, book chapters and special issues of journals from 1985 to 2010. Three overall themes emerged from this review: 1) biases in (mis)attributions of leadership, including attributions for organizational success and failure; 2) follower-centered approaches, including the role of follower characteristics, perceptions, and motivations in interpreting leadership ratings; and 3) the social construction of leadership, including interfollower and social contagion processes, the role of crisis and uncertainty, and constructions and deconstructions of leadership and CEO celebrity in the media. Within each of these themes, we examine developments and summarize key findings. Our review concludes with recommendations for future theoretical and empirical work in this area.

> "It is easier to believe in leadership than to prove it.""The concept of leadership remains largely elusive and enigmatic."— James R. Meindl, *On Leadership: An Alternative to the Conventional Wisdom* (1990, p. 161)

When does leadership matter? How influential are leadership behaviors? What biases emerge in the perceptions of leadership? With the 'romance of leadership,' (RoL) James R. Meindl offered an unconventional, even radical approach that challenged us to critically examine the prevailing evidence for the importance of leadership. Twenty-five years later, we review empirical and theoretical developments since the romance of leadership phenomenon was first formulated, tracing its impact on the relative roles of leaders and followers in the leadership relationship. In the process, we highlight implications of the RoL theory, novel insights generated into well-studied leadership phenomena, critiques and limitations, and suggest new issues for future study.

In their initial development of the RoL, Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich (1985, p. 78) observed that the field of leadership has been unable to generate an understanding of leadership that is both "intellectually compelling and emotionally satisfying." They went on to cite general critiques of the leadership literature, including poor methodology, conceptual problems, definitional ambiguities, inappropriate focus, and lack of coherence.

It appears that as observers of and participants in organizations, we may have developed highly romanticized, heroic views of leadership — what leaders do, what they are able to accomplish, and the general effects they have on our lives. One of the principal elements in this romanticized conception is the view that leadership is *a central organizational process and the premier force in the scheme of organizational events and activities*. It amounts to what might be considered a faith in the potential if not actual efficacy of those individuals who occupy elite positions of formal organizational authority (Meindl et al., 1985, p. 79; emphasis added).

Although the authors did not go so far as to fully reject the importance of leadership, they argued that we are particularly susceptible to believing in it, even in the absence of any scientific proof of its efficacy. In later writings, Meindl (1990) went on to point out that in the face of many possible ways to make sense of organizational complexities, leadership represents a psychologically attractive, if biased, account of those successes and failures. In addition, he challenged us directly to consider the following: Can we generate a credible theory of leadership that does not highlight leaders as the most important object of study?

Twenty-five years after the development of the RoL, we continue to have highly romanticized, heroic views of leadership: we are continually fascinated by what leaders do, what they are able to accomplish, and the general effects they have on our lives. Leadership remains a favored explanatory category for understanding organizational, political, military, religious, economic and social outcomes. As observers faced with continually larger and ever more complex systems, there are many causal forces to consider that coexist in highly intricate and overlapping networks — each with multiple inputs and outputs and feedback loops — that are continually evolving in a dynamic state of flux. Faced with this ever-increasing complexity, total comprehension of the system appears impossible. As a result, the RoL highlights that sooner or later discussions of successes and failures, rights and wrongs, and past, present, and future outcomes will inevitably focus on *leaders*: their strengths and their shortcomings, what they did or did not do, should or should not have done, who they are, and perhaps most importantly, who we need them to be. As students and scholars of leadership, we both embrace and exacerbate this directed attention, fanning the flames of leadership mania and providing renewed energy to sustain it. The romance of leadership perspective reminds us of what is ignored or obscured in this ongoing symbiotic relationship.

Ironically, though, Meindl also pointed out that a heroic vision of what leaders and leadership are all about virtually guarantees that a satisfying understanding will remain beyond the grasp of the best scientific efforts, particularly since the primary goal of scientific inquiry is to systematically "solve" mysteries. In essence, he points out that we cannot have our proverbial cake and eat it too: in believing so completely in the efficacy of leadership, we ensure that it can never in reality live up to such lofty expectations. As a result, by definition the 'leadership mystery' is one that we will never adequately solve, and leadership books such as *Leadership Magic: Practical Tools for Creating Extraordinary Organizations* and *Creating Magic: 10 Common Sense Leadership Strategies from a Life at Disney* will continue to line the bookshelves. Furthermore, endorsements such as Marshall Goldsmith's, "Shows the *magic* in leadership — and the *leadership* in magic! Read this book!" will continue to help sell them.

In our review, we highlight that the questions that Meindl and colleagues asked in 1985 are even more relevant today than they were 25 years ago. In support of this assertion, we offer examples of modern day searches for the answers to questions Meindl originally raised. Can a president of a country really control its economy? Recent attributions of blame for the 2008 financial crisis have targeted the lack of regulation by the government and Federal Reserve, as well as the reckless financing on Wall Street, and in the process pointed fingers at the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama administrations, as well as former and current Federal Reserve Chairmen Alan Greenspan and Ben Bernanke, and numerous Wall Street CEOs. Can any of these individuals, or even their institutions, actually control this complex economy they are all a part of?

Other questions raised by the RoL continue to be directly relevant: Do CEOs cause accounting scandals and the bankruptcies of companies? Can we always blame the coach for losing seasons? These attributions of leadership are perhaps even more revealing in a world of WikiLeaks, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, in which social media themselves (and not individual leaders) have challenged our RoL tendencies. Social media have played a role in protests and revolts in Iran, as well as the overthrow of the Tunisian government. In early 2011, these emerging social media played a well-documented role in coordinating massive protests in Egypt, and the relatively speedy overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak, a leader who ruled with an iron fist for thirty years. Perhaps attributing such major change to collective, technological ecologies makes it easier to understand that individual leaders need not be the genesis of action, especially in the early revolutionary stages of a mass movement. Or, perhaps more fittingly, the romance of leadership highlights our tendency to desperately try to find some sort of leader responsible, even if responsibility is collectively distributed through technology. After all, technology can only go so far in providing basic services to the newly liberated populations in these countries.

In addition to exploring and documenting the RoL phenomenon, we also consider why leadership is such an attractive answer to these questions. Using Meindl's (2004, p. 464) own words, "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." Meindl and Ehrlich (1987, p. 92) describe the RoL as an assumption, preconception, or bias toward leadership embedded in the way we prefer to cope and come to grips with the cognitive and moral complexities of organized activity — forces that are often unknowable and indeterminate, perhaps even objectionable. Therefore, the RoL reflects our fundamental desire to reduce and translate these complexities into leadership, a simple human term that is seemingly readily understood and easily communicated to others. In our review, we refer extensively to Meindl's work on the RoL, in an attempt to trace its impact on subsequent scholarship as well as its weaknesses. Our intention is to trace the evolution of this theoretical approach in order to evaluate its impact and relevance; however, we note that the RoL is not without limitations, and we outline some of the major challenges and critiques of Meindl's work in the final section of the paper.

1. Methodological approach

For our review, we focused on top-tier peer reviewed journals over the 25 year period from 1985 through 2010. The journals included in our searches were: *Academy of Management Journal, Administrative Science Quarterly, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Management, Journal of Management Studies, Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, Journal of Organizational Behavior, The Leadership Quarterly, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, and *Personnel Psychology*. Our search yielded 91 theoretical and empirical papers that explicitly discussed the "romance of leadership" in the full text of the article. In addition, other relevant books and special issues were included, notably Shamir, Pillai, Bligh, and Uhl-Bien's (2007) edited volume on *Follower-Centered Perspectives on Leadership* and a 2007 special issue of *Applied Psychology: An International Review* on the romance of leadership, giving us a final sample of 101 articles.

After reviewing each paper, two researchers independently attempted to classify the articles into emergent themes. An initial coding scheme for classifying the primary focus of each article was developed, and after numerous discussions and iterations was finalized into the nine subthemes listed in Table 1. To obtain an initial assessment of reliability, we independently coded the references to the RoL for all articles, revealing a level of agreement of 86%. Discrepancies were discussed and reconciled, and the nine categories were organized into three overarching themes: 1) biases in (mis)attributions of leadership, including attributions for organizational success and failure (n = 25); 2) follower-centered approaches, including the role of follower characteristics, perceptions, and motivations in interpreting leadership ratings (n = 29); and 3) the social construction of leadership and followership, including interfollower and social contagion processes, the role of crisis and uncertainty in attributions of leadership, and constructions and deconstructions of leadership and CEO celebrity in the media (n = 47). We first provide an overview of the RoL theory, followed by an in-depth discussion of each of the three themes as enacted in subsequent empirical research. In addition, a summary of the themes and key findings is provided in Table 1.

2. Tracing the development of an 'anticonventional' approach

In its original formulation, the RoL approach did not entirely negate or repudiate the critical role of leaders and leadership — or did it? Meindl did not originally advance his approach as "anti-leadership," or an effort to compete with or to replace the dominant leader-centric approach (Jackson & Guthey, 2007). While other scholars had gone so far as to declare a virtual moratorium on traditional research on leadership (e.g., Miner, 1975), Meindl and colleagues lobbied to problematize the efficacy of leadership, not to reject it outright. It was not until ten years later that Meindl (1995, p. 330) explicitly presented 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." In reviewing the original work, we note that the romance of leadership approach was not originally "follower-centric" at all: in fact, the words "followers" and "follower-ship" each only appear once, in the final two sentences of the paper:

> And, if our analysis is correct, the continuing infatuation with leadership, for whatever truths it yields about the qualities and behavior of our leaders, can also be used to learn something about the motivations of *followers*. It may be that the romance and the mystery surrounding leadership concepts are critical for sustaining *follower-ship* and that they contribute significantly to the responsiveness of individuals to the needs and goals of the collective organization" (Meindl et al., 1985, p. 100, emphasis added).

However, the roots of a follower-centric approach were planted in the logical extension of these original arguments. In contemplating the difficulties in attributing causality in complex organizations, Meindl et al. (1985) surmised that the particular attributions made will depend at least as much on the characteristics of the 'observer' as on those characteristics of the system itself. The RoL highlighted that our informal, implicitly held models, together with more formal theories of organizing and leadership, are by definition somewhat limited responses to the task of comprehending the causal complexities that characterize all organizations. As a result, our attributions of causality say *as much or more* about us as 'observers' (and later, as 'followers') as they do about the phenomenon we are attempting to understand and explain. The RoL thus built on a more radical, social constructionist approach already outlined in the works of scholars such as Calder (1977) and Pfeffer (1977), who argued that leadership is best understood as a process of social inference, and emphasized the symbolic role of managers and the sense-making processes of followers. Keck and Tushman (1993) subsequently extended this argument to teams, arguing that given the complexity and ambiguity of organizational settings, senior teams actively create symbols, myths, and heroes to shape common interpretations, values, and frames of reference.

In later writings, Meindl asserted more strongly that a more unconventional, even anticonventional, 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. To those who criticized the romance of leadership, or felt this "topsy-turvy" view of leadership might seem a bit wild or overly one-sided, Meindl pointed out that the romance of leadership perspective simply represented "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, Meindl became increasingly less convinced that our collective obsession with leadership would be mitigated by progressively more attention on followers. This latter, more radical argument is also reflected in the social ecology approach discussed later in our review.

Table 1
25 years after the romance of leadership: summary of themes and key findings.

Theme	Key findings	Reference(s)
Biases in (mis)attributions of leadership		
Biased attributions for organizational success: when leaders take the credit	Leaders tend to take credit for organizational successes — garnering social and economic benefit	Bettman and Weitz (1983); Meindl and Ehrlich (1987); Puffer (1990); Staw et al. (1983); Westphal and Zajac (1994, 1998)
	Desire to enhance perceptions of leadership efficacy and personal	Alexander and Cohen (1996); Zhang et al. (2008)
	wealth drives some leaders to unethical behavior	
Biased attributions for organizational failure: when others assign blame	Leaders are often blamed for failures outside of their control	Haunschild and Miner (1997); Kang (2008); Salancik and Meindl (1984)
	Declining firm performance is seen as a call for new leadership (leader "spoiled image")	D'Aveni (1990); Morrow et al. (2004); Sanders (2001); Sutton and Callahan (1987)
Mechanisms for (mis)attributions	Leaders are susceptible to hindsight biases in strategic decision making	Bukszar and Connolly (1988) Giessner and van Knippenberg (2008)
	Prototypical leaders are given "license to fail" with less reproach	House and Aditya (1997); Ling et al. (2008a,b); Meindl (1998a,b,c)
	Leader influence on firm performance may be minimal	Ensari and Murphy (2003); Giambatista (2004);
	Leaders at all hierarchical levels, not just top-level leaders, influence firm performance	Gibson and Schroeder (2003); Peterson et al. (2003)
Follower-centered approaches		
Follower and situational influences in the tendency to attribute outcomes to leaders	The perception of leadership is influenced by follower characteristics	Felfe (2005); Hunter et al. (2007); Meindl (1998a,b,c); Meindl (1990); Schyns et al. (2007)
	Romance of Leadership Scale (RLS) measures follower tendency to attribute outcomes to leaders	Ehrlich et al. (1990); Gardner (2003); Meindl and Ehrlich (1988); Meindl (1998c)
	Contextual characteristics also influence the constructions of leadership	Awamleh and Gardner (1999); Bligh et al. (2005); Meindl (1995); Schyns et al. (2007)
	Greater leader-follower distance may be linked to more (mis)attribution to leaders	Antonakis and Atwater (2002); Collinson (2005); Katz and Kahn (1978); Shamir (1995)
The role of follower perceptions and motivations in interpreting leadership ratings	The infatuation with leadership can give insight into follower motivations (needs, mind-sets, anxieties)	Calas (1993); Meindl (1990) Awamleh and Gardner (1999); Bligh et al. (2005); Meindl (1990); Schyns et al. (2007);
	RoL may be particularly relevant for the more transformational aspects of leadership	Shamir (1992); Shung-Jae and Jing (2003) Bass and Avolio (1993); Dirks (2000); Felfe
	Followers may infer leader characteristics/behaviors from previous performance	and Schyns (2006); Groves (2005); Kirkpatrick and Locke (1996); Puffer (1990); Shamir et al.
	Followers may infer leader characteristics simply because of the label "leader"	(1993); Sully de Luque et al. (2008) Day et al. (2004)
Implicit leader–follower theories and the social construction of followership	Our implicit theories about leaders/followers influences what is perceived	de Vries et al. (2002); de Vries and van Gelder (2005); Uhl-Bien and Pillai (2007); Sy (2010)
	Followers are constructed as passive and ineffectual	Carsten et al. (2010); de Vries et al. (2002)
The social construction of leadership		
Interfollower and social contagion processes in constructions of leadership	Leaders help construct organizational understanding	Calder (1977); Chen and Meindl (1991); Meindl (1990); Salancik and Pfeffer (1978)
	Follower arousal increases perceptions of leader charisma	Galvin et al. (2010); Meindl (1990); Pastor et al. (2002); Pastor et al. (2007); Weierter (1997)
	Followers' understanding of their leaders is affected by their social network	Chen and Van Velsor (1996); Mayo and Pastor (2007); Pastor et al. (2002); Zemba et al. (2006)
	Some charisma is needed for the social construction of charisma to occur	Meindl (1990, 1993, 1995); Pastor et al. (2007);
The role of crisis and uncertainty in attributions of leadership	Crisis is important in the emergence of charismatic leadership	Bligh et al. (2004a,b); Bligh et al. (2005); Pillai et al. (2003); Pillai and Williams (1998)
	Crisis can also make leaders seem less charismatic when leaders do not respond decisively	Pillai and Meindl (1998); Shamir et al. (1993); Trice and Beyer (1993); Waldman et al. (2001)
	Crisis conditions are conducive for toxic leadership	Lipman-Blumen (2007); Pastor et al. (2007)
Media portrayals and the social ecology of leadership	Societal beliefs about leadership in the media help construct our leadership reality	Bligh and Meindl (2004); Meindl et al. (1985); Menon et al. (2010)
	The media often romanticizes leaders	Chen and Meindl (1991); Guthey and Jackson (2005); Jackson and Guthey (2007)
	The media shapes causal attributions by publicizing and interpreting firm performance information	Deephouse (2000); Johnson et al. (2005); Pollock and Rindova (2003); Rao et al. (2001)
	CEO hubris affects what firms are willing to pay	Hayward and Hambrick (1997); Meindl et al. (1985)
	CEO charisma is not necessarily tied to firm performance	Agle et al. (1999, 2006); Tosi et al. (2004)

In sum, Meindl argued for the need to continually problematize the overarching emphasis on leaders to the detriment of followers, which has been developed in leadership research in a number of ways. Most directly, 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 (Mayo & Pastor, 2007).

In addition to examining the prevailing direction of influence, the RoL encourages us to explicitly consider the social psychological processes that take place among followers, independent of, or controlling for, the actions and traits of the leader. Part of this legacy is the now established on-going research tradition that approaches leadership as a complex and socially constructed phenomenon involving not only leaders, but also followers and the contexts in which leaders and followers interact.

3. Healthy skepticism? Biases in (mis)attributions of leadership

Somewhat ironically, one of the most frequently cited implications of the RoL approach is also the most leader-centered view: the degree to which outcomes can and should be attributed to leaders. 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. A 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. Empirical research has demonstrated that this tendency is strongest for more extreme situations, such as very high or low levels of organizational performance. 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., followers and external causes). Ultimately, this assumption of control and responsibility can be a dual-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.

This line of reasoning has fostered empirical attention into the ways in which this biased tendency plays out in the organizational realm, and what other factors help predict when and if observers will be more susceptible to these biases. Fundamentally, this stream of research is predicated on the assumption that people may react to the same outcomes very differently depending on the causal inferences they make regarding these outcomes. In other words, it is not only an academic question: it matters, in a very real sense, when and if outcomes are attributed to leadership. Stated differently, answers to the "why" and "how" questions of organizational events directly impact the range of responses to "what next"?

In the following section, we review research on (mis)attributions of leadership that emerged in our review. We further divide this literature into three separate themes: 1) biased attributions for organizational success when leaders take credit, including the motivations for how and why leadership is a commonly favored explanation; 2) biased attributions, made by external constituencies, for negative outcomes, including low organizational performance, ethical misconduct, and failure; and 3) proposed mechanisms for (mis)attributions of leadership.

3.1. Biased attributions for organizational success: when leaders take the credit

Several studies in the early 1980s documented portrayals of an organization's fortunes in ways that emphasize the efficacy of leadership. Bettman and Weitz (1983) and Staw, McKechnie, and Puffer (1983) both found evidence for attributional patterns of self-enhancing and ego-defensive statements, in which leaders internalized and took credit for successes and externalized failures. In other words, these studies highlight that poor company performance is often blamed on uncontrollable external events, while good performance is credited to the foresight and quality of leadership.

Meindl and Ehrlich (1987) subsequently suggested that leaders engage in these and other symbolic activities to enhance perceptions of the organization's worth and to justify their own elite positions. However, they also went on to ask why these thinly veiled attempts to persuade — likely products of obviously ulterior motives and agendas — are effective: in other words, how can such "one-sided, biased interpretations of sometimes scant, sometimes contrary substantive effects be at all compelling — even to naive observers, let alone to sophisticated organizational constituencies who have stakes in such matters?" Meindl et al. (1985) suggest that our "faith" in the efficacy of leadership makes us willing colluders in this charade, yet leaders intentionally and unintentionally foster these perceptions as well. Puffer (1990) similarly finds that under conditions of successful outcomes, leaders are credited with greater expertise, charisma, and overall charismatic leadership. She concludes "whether deserved or not, this positive halo can be used by leaders to create an illusion of control over uncontrollable events" (p. 187).

Because favorable attributions engender managerial pride and capitalize on attributions of causality to leaders (see also D'Aveni, 1990), leaders are motivated to broadcast their successful recovery stories to others. Thus, lessons learned from successes and near-failures disseminate quickly, resulting in rapid proliferation of apparently valuable actions and strategies or an emergence of new practices in an industry. Kim and Miner (2007) provide evidence that publicly learning from others' near-failures provides leaders with fine-grained knowledge of possible solutions as well as data that an observing firm can use to develop its own models and behaviors, thereby reinforcing beliefs in the efficacy of leadership.

Zajac and Westphal (1995) explore the idea that in addition to press statements and letters to shareholders, long-term incentive plans (LTIPs) represent a unique vehicle for symbolic management. Specifically, good firm performance provides an opportunity to invoke the romance of leadership as a credible justification for long-term incentive compensation, implicitly associating LTIPs with an optimistic perspective on corporate leadership. When performance is poor, the observed tendency of firms to use an

agency explanation implicitly suggests both the problem and solution: lack of incentive alignment, to be remedied by the adoption of a new LTIP. In other words, regardless of whether or not organizations actually use their LTIPs, adoption signals that shareholder' interests play a role in determining managerial action, while symbolically reaffirming the value of executive leadership (Westphal & Zajac, 1994, 1998).

This tendency to reaffirm the importance of top leaders can have a much darker side as well, as evidenced by studies of earnings manipulation and fraudulent financial reporting. CEOs are highly concerned with financial reports because such reports convey information about firm performance that directly reflects on their management ability and effectiveness (in addition to their personal wealth). As a result, CEOs may be highly motivated to manipulate reports of firm performance. Faced with expectations of high performance and high efficacy to impact that performance, CEOs will be more likely to engage in earnings manipulation when firm performance is low (Zhang, Bartol, Smith, Pfarrer, & Khanin, 2008) and more likely to engage in corporate crime (Alexander & Cohen, 1996).

3.2. Biased attributions for organizational failure: when others assign blame

While the findings regarding the tendency for leaders to capitalize on the RoL and take credit for successes are relatively straightforward, the evidence for how leaders and followers attribute negative outcomes is less clear. Salancik and Meindl's (1984) results indicate, somewhat counter intuitively, that the internalization of failure by top management is under some circumstances as likely as the internalization of success. Thus, managerial causal accounts for both successes and failures reflect attempts to imply that outcomes are within — or at least potentially within — leaders' control, and *not* inevitably determined by uncontrollable external forces. The core argument is that the primary purpose of managerial causal accounts is to buttress faith in the efficacy of the current leadership team, and to assert that the fate of the organization is in good hands.

The RoL approach highlighted that competent leaders are expected to exercise control over their organizations and that such control is expected to lead to organizational success. In addition, their findings highlighted that outside observers will attribute the strongest responsibility to leaders when organizational performance is either very good or very poor. Haunschild and Miner (1997) reference this effect in their study of investment bankers: they report that very high or very low premiums result in an attribution process in which investment bankers are particularly likely to get credit for very good outcomes and blamed for very bad outcomes. More recently, Kang (2008) explored the possibility that investors are likely to attribute responsibility for alleged financial reporting fraud to an accused firm's corporate leaders based on the findings from the RoL. He found that investors indeed attribute responsibility to the firm's leadership, and this attribution extends to related firms as well. In addition, his findings suggest that negative spill over attributions cause harm to leaders associated with accused firms as well. In the case of ethical misconduct, investors not only attribute causality to organizational leaders, but also extend those attributions to leaders that are publicly associated with the fraudulent firm as well.

In addition, managers as well as internal and external constituents compare firm performance to average industry performance when evaluating strategies and the need for change; declining performance relative to industry averages is used as an indicator of the need for leadership action (Morrow, Johnson, & Busenitz, 2004). Sutton and Callahan (1987) extended this argument to the case of organizational bankruptcy (see also D'Aveni, 1990). The authors point out that bankruptcy is a clear, unambiguous case of extremely poor organizational performance, and as such, poses a significant threat to the credibility of top leadership. In filing for Chapter 11, the audience receives a clear sign of poor leadership, making it difficult for top managers to maintain face: While accepting blame for poor organizational performance helps create the illusion that leaders can control organizational environments that are objectively uncontrollable, leaders of bankrupt firms are viewed as tainted and incompetent.

Importantly, such unfavorable images even extended to leaders who joined a firm after Chapter 11 had been filed. Sutton and Callahan (1987) propose that the "spoiled image" of top management and the associated spoiled image of a company lead key organizational audiences to change both enacted relationships with a firm and espoused evaluations of the firm and its leaders. Through an inductive approach, they argue that those negative reactions, or "sent stigmas," further reduce the viability of bankrupt firms, in addition to damaging the careers of top managers. As in Kang's (2008) findings of spill over effects, the tendency to romanticize and demonize leaders can spread to those simply associated with the discredited leader as well. Finally, Sanders (2001) explores the relatively more ambiguous nature of poor organizational performance. His findings suggest that poor performance not only results in negatively framed decisions, but also increases shareholder scrutiny of a firm and attributions of the CEO's role in such negative outcomes.

3.3. Mechanisms for (mis)attributions

While a number of studies have explored the role of the RoL in attributions of outcomes to top leaders, relatively less empirical attention has been paid to the underlying mechanisms for these attributions. Bukszar and Connolly (1988) suggest one reason why leaders take credit for successes may be rooted in psychological biases. Specifically, they explore the role of hindsight bias in strategic decision making, providing evidence that the tendency to take credit for outcomes that seem more inevitable in hindsight is one mechanism through which RoL attributions are perpetuated. Their findings highlight that strategic decision makers, in retroactively evaluating successful and unsuccessful decisions, will likely evaluate an organization's environment as more predictable, and the relevant managers as more or less competent, than they actually were, again highlighting the tendency for biased attributions of causality to develop quickly and often inaccurately. Giessner and van Knippenberg (2008, p. 30) note that

follower perceptions are influenced by perceptions of leader prototypicality, or how far the leader is perceived as embodying the group's identity. A more prototypical leader receives more trust in leadership, because he or she is perceived as having the group's best interest at heart. This, in turn, gives the leader additional leeway, which the authors term a 'license to fail', and results in relatively more positive leadership evaluations after failure.

As recently as 2003, Peterson and colleagues argued that leaders do exert meaningful influence on the financial performance of their organizations, but that this assertion "is by itself somewhat unsatisfying." Although it "legitimizes" further research in the leader-performance link, it fails to address or illuminate the many processes that must necessarily mediate the relationship between leaders and organizational performance. However, other researchers have been much more skeptical about the general importance of CEOs' roles in affecting firm-level outcomes (e.g., Ling, Simsek, Lubatkin, & Veiga, 2008a,b), suggesting that the impact of top leaders on performance, after taking into account important contextual effects, may be minimal (e.g., House & Aditya, 1997; Meindl, 1998a,b,c).

A myriad of hypothesized relationships exist regarding these important contextual effects; however, few have received adequate (if any) empirical exploration. For instance, Peterson, Smith, Martorana, and Owens (2003) point out that culture, strategy, and structure have all been identified as factors that are likely to have an impact on organizational performance, and are susceptible to a leader's influence. Yet, in Peterson et al.'s estimation, surprisingly little research has examined the relationship between these characteristics and the leadership–organizational performance relationship, focusing instead on attempts to establish more basic and direct causal effects. Their arguments echo Meindl's frustration that researchers and practitioners continue to favour simplistic leader-performance linkages, without addressing other potential causal factors.

In sum, Detert, Treviño, Burris, and Andiappan (2007, p. 1003) note that we "should take care to set expectations and rewards for leaders in accordance with those outcomes that leaders have a demonstrated ability to control." In the strategy literature, Cannella and Monroe (1997, p. 214) add that the strategic leadership view tends to glorify leaders, while the agency view tends to vilify them, a divergence that sometimes makes conclusions seem "almost schizophrenic." We think that Meindl and colleagues would have agreed: nearly 25 years of research have failed to adequately explore the large number of variables that impact organizational performance above and beyond the CEO and top management team. However, Giambatista's (2004, p. 622) leader life cycle approach suggests a promising direction: employing dynamic systems modeling and incorporating time, contingencies, and mediating and feedback processes, "so that leader attributes, behaviors, and decisions can be appropriately observed in their proper and unfolding context."

It is important to note that the majority of studies reviewed thus far exploring attributions of causality to leaders focus primarily on CEOs and top managers. Ensari and Murphy's (2003) cross-cultural study is a notable exception. Groups of participants from either a collectivistic culture (Turkey) or an individualistic culture (United States) read a vignette about a prototypical or antiprototypical leader whose company produced a slight or significant increase in sales. Ensari and Murphy conclude that the "romance of leadership is alive and well because of the tendency for individuals in our study to rate leaders as more charismatic when the outcome for the company was good even though the leader was not exhibiting charismatic leader behavior in either culture" (p. 62). This echoes the findings of a U.S. study by Pillai (1997) in which participants were asked to rate a leader associated with different levels of performance. Leaders associated with a turnaround were rated as significantly more charismatic than leaders associated with poor performance.

Other research has begun to examine attributions to leaders relative to hierarchical status and group membership. Gibson and Schroeder's (2003) study on attributions provides support for the notion that blame and credit are assigned differently depending on a leader's status in the organizational hierarchy, particularly under 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.

Gibson and Schroeder (2003) 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. 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. These findings are consistent with other 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 (Kerr, MacCoun, & Kramer, 1996). Again, this research provides evidence that the RoL 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 and individuals at lower levels of the hierarchy remain less susceptible to this effect.

4. Toward a more balanced equation: follower-centered approaches

The second major stream of research that emerged in our review highlights 1) follower and situational influences in the tendency to attribute outcomes to leaders; 2) the role of follower characteristics, perceptions, and motivations in interpreting leadership ratings, particularly when understanding the more transformational aspects of leadership; and 3) corollaries to the RoL from a follower-centered approach: implicit follower theories and the social construction of followership.

4.1. Follower and situational influences in the tendency to attribute outcomes to leaders

One of the core issues raised by the RoL concerns the extent to which the perception of leadership is influenced by follower characteristics (Schyns, Felfe, & Blank, 2007). Meindl specifically argued that "the relationship between leaders and followers is

primarily a constructed one, heavily influenced by interfollower factors and relationships. The behavioral linkage between the leader and follower is seen as a derivative of the construction made by followers" (1998, p. 286). This assertion that ratings of leaders are more telling of followers than they are of leaders themselves represented a significant challenge to traditional leadership research, and highlighted the absence of theories exploring leader behaviors from a perspective that favored the needs and personalities of followers (see also Hunter, Bedell-Avers, & Mumford, 2007).

One important mechanism that may impact ratings of leadership, irrespective of leader traits or behaviors, includes individual differences among followers. 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 factors such as locus of control and age predicted RLS scores.

Very little research has focused on other personal antecedents of the romance of leadership. Felfe (2005) examined personality characteristics in their relationship to the romance of leadership. Assuming that constructions of leadership may be rooted in constructions of the self, Felfe examined the relationship between the Big-Five personality traits, as well as achievement, power and affiliation motives, self-efficacy, need for structure, and need for leadership, and the 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. Tolerance for uncertainty, need for structure, and need for leadership were not related to the romance of leadership. This study represents an important first step in understanding what types of followers may be most susceptible to the RoL.

In a similar vein, Gardner (2003) explored perceptions of a leader who claims to be either exemplary or pragmatic and is revealed to have a reputation for either deception or honesty. Gardner also examined the role of speech delivery (strong versus weak) and scores on the RLS in predicting followers' perceptions of a leader's charisma, effectiveness, and moral worth. In a test of this more "follower-driven" perspective, 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 followers did not vary as a function of performance cues, as low RLS individuals tend to assign less significance to leadership as a causal category. Overall, these results are consistent with the RoL approach. Gardner (2003, p. 522) 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."

While the romance of leadership may have some foundation in dispositional differences, 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. Additional research has examined the extent to which the romance of leadership represents a "state-like" versus "trait-like" tendency to attribute outcomes to leaders. Although unable to address the causal direction, Bligh, Kohles, and Pillai's (2005) study showed that follower scores on the RLS were significantly related to perceptions of a current state of crisis. They theorized that strong situational effects may override the dispositional tendencies to romanticize leadership. In other words, the effect of a crisis situation may strongly cue increased attributions of leadership, regardless of an individual's dispositional tendencies.

As a result, 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 situational factors. 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 type of research is necessary to increase our understanding of how aspects of the situation and followers' dispositions potentially interact to predict leadership attributions.

Finally, in a recent meta-analysis of research in this area, Schyns et al. (2007) note that other possible factors related to RLS scores may be industry and occupational differences, cultural differences, and gender differences. In addition, 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 situational, resource, role, and political constraints that may temper or inhibit a follower's belief in the efficacy of leadership. Similarly, followers in certain cultures may be more likely to attribute outcomes to leadership, particularly cultures characterized by high power distance or a tradition of dynastic rule and the absence of democratic traditions. For example, it is possible that in a country like North Korea, there is a strong tendency to attribute all outcomes to the Dear Leader (Kim Jong-Il) and before him, the Great Leader (Kim Il Sung). This tendency is probably also likely to be more pronounced in collectivistic cultures.

4.2. The role of follower perceptions and motivations in interpreting leadership ratings

In the process of socially constructing organizational realities, the RoL argues that the concept of leadership is elevated or inflated to an often unwarranted status and significance. Perhaps even more importantly, Meindl (1995, 1998a) argued that these

socially constructed artifacts of leadership are worthy of study in their own right, due to their potential insights into the followers' needs, mind-sets, and anxieties. In other words, the continuing infatuation with leadership, for whatever truths it yields about the qualities and behaviors of our leaders, can thus be used to learn something about the motivations of followers as well. Meindl (1990, 1998b) also theorized that the romance and the mystery surrounding leadership concepts are critical for sustaining followership, and that they contribute significantly to the responsiveness of individuals to the needs and goals of the collective organization. In other words, romanticizing leadership may be fundamentally *necessary* to keep followers motivated and committed to work hard and make sacrifices for the organization.

The majority of research into followers' perceptions and motivations has been within the realm of charismatic and transformational leadership. Meindl (1990) specifically theorized that leader-centered approaches need to be complemented with follower-centered approaches when it comes to understanding the more transformational aspects of leadership. He believed both charismatic and transformational leadership to be highly romanticized, and emphasized Weber's (1921) arguments that charisma was fundamentally a relational process between leaders, followers, and the situation, in which charisma is present only when followers perceive it as such. In Meindl's terms, the social construction of charisma involves viewing leaders as exceptional and larger than life, ultimately romanticizing them (see also Calas, 1998; Conger, Kanungo, & Menon, 2000).

A number of studies have focused on the question of how a romantic view of leadership impacts the perception of actual leaders. 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 over attributing 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 (see Meindl, 1990; Shamir, 1992), others find little or no relationship (see Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Bligh et al., 2005).

Subsequent research has supported the assertion that transformational leadership concepts may be especially romanticized and therefore are more dependent on emotional influences and less dependent on the personal qualities and behavioral displays of leaders. Shung-Jae and Jing (2003) provide a direct illustration of this argument. In their empirical investigation of transformational leadership, conservation, and creativity in Korea, they found that, consistent with the RoL perspective, the nature of the transformational leadership-follower creativity relationship was different for employees with different levels of conservation. In revealing the moderating role of conservation as a follower value in the relationship between transformational leadership and creativity, Shung-Jae and Jing (2003) illustrate how more follower-centered approaches can enhance our understanding of a traditionally leader-centered process. Similarly, Puffer's (1990) examination of follower perceptions of decision style, success of the decision outcome, and the role of the observer (managerial or not) on attributions of charismatic leadership found that all three had effects on whether or not the leader was considered charismatic.

Schyns et al. (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of 18 studies that measured the RoL and transformational or charismatic leadership. They report an estimated population correlation between RoL and transformational/charismatic leadership of $r = .25$ based on a total sample size of 3312 participants (95% confidence interval .22–.28). Their results highlight that followers' ratings of transformational and charismatic leadership — whether positive or negative — should not always be taken at face value. Specifically, followers high in RoL are prone to make positive assessments and followers low in RoL may show the opposite bias. Moreover, leaders with followers high in RoL will be given more credit for their actions and outcomes. In addition, Schyns et al. (2007) found a positive relationship between the romance of leadership and the perception of transformational leadership/charisma, suggesting that across situations, some followers are more susceptible to transformational and charismatic leadership styles. Thus, organizations should be aware of follower characteristics that systematically over- or under-estimate leadership ratings, and should implement appraisal and promotion systems that mitigate these potential biases.

Extending this argument across transformational, charismatic, and visionary leadership studies, Kirkpatrick and Locke (1996) highlight the possibility that vision, in fact, has no direct effect on performance, stating that "although significant correlations between charismatic and transformational leadership and follower outcomes have been found in more than 35 studies (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993), the causal direction between them has never been validated." Given that the vast majority of these studies used non-experimental designs, the results are also consistent with the RoL interpretation, as in many of these studies followers had previous knowledge of the leader's performance, which could have led followers or raters to infer charisma. They further cite an experimental study by Puffer (1990), which found that knowledge of the leader's performance and decision style resulted in attributing charisma to the leader, lending further support for the RoL interpretation of many of these findings: namely, that knowledge of successful outcomes leads to charismatic attributions, irrespective of the leader's actual charisma.

Additional support is provided by Groves (2005) study of charismatic leadership. Variables in the model consisted of leader social and emotional skills, follower openness to organizational change, and organizational-change magnitude. Groves (2005) found that, consistent with a RoL perspective, follower perceptions of leadership effectiveness influence follower ratings of leadership behaviors. Dirks (2000) notes that future research on the determinants of trust in a leader should also consider the effect of the leader's past performance. In his exploration of trust in NCAA basketball coaches, Dirks points out that the team members attribute (correctly or incorrectly) the team's prior performance to the team's leader. After attributing the performance to the leader, team members come to form expectations about team outcomes from those attributions — and hence may be more or less willing to trust the leader. In this way, past successes engender perceptions of efficacy and trust in a team's leader, an important building block for transformational/charismatic leadership.

Sully de Luque, Washburn, Waldman, and House (2008) provide similar evidence for the importance of follower perceptions in understanding leadership. They examine the indirect effects of executives' stakeholder and economic values on firm performance through followers' perceptions of leadership. In data collected from separate surveys of CEOs and two subsets of followers in 520 firms in 17 countries, they find that assigning a greater level of importance to stakeholders in decision making results in a leader being perceived by followers as more visionary and less autocratic. In addition, perceiving visionary leadership encourages extra effort, which translates into improved firm performance. Sully de Luque et al. (2008) also directly tested for the RoL effect by including a model in which firm performance was a predictor variable of leadership perceptions (rather than the other way around). In this model, however, the paths from performance to follower perceptions of visionary and autocratic leadership were not significant, and the overall model fit was significantly worse. While Sully de Luque et al.'s (2008) findings did not support the RoL interpretation, they highlight the importance of explicitly testing these alternate models; rather than assuming that leadership leads to performance, it is important to examine the alternate hypothesis, that performance leads to perceptions of charismatic leadership. Only through consistently examining the evidence for these competing hypotheses can we empirically validate if and when leadership matters above and beyond just the belief that leadership matters by default.

Felfe and Schyns (2006) presented 175 students a vignette about a transformational or a non-transformational leader. Subsequently, respondents were asked to rate the described leader's behavior on the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire. Results revealed that followers high in extraversion tended to perceive more transformational leadership, and showed a more positive evaluation of transformational leadership than did followers with low extraversion. These findings provide further support for Meindl's assertion that the more transformational aspects of leadership are influenced by follower characteristics, independent of any actual differences in leader behavior. Livi, Kenny, Albright, and Pierro (2008) also note that the perceiver effect is a key factor in leadership perception, and that it becomes even more important in the perception of socio-emotional styles of leadership.

Felfe and Petersen (2007) found that the romance of leadership serves as a moderator for the relationship between the information about the leader and approval. This relationship is stronger for persons who score high on romance of leadership than for those who do not. de Vries, Roe, and Taillieu (1999, p. 118) specifically explored followers' need for leadership: the extent to which an employee "wishes the leader to facilitate the paths towards individual, group, and/or organizational goals." In a sample of 958 Dutch employees across a wide variety of organizations, their results indicate that the need for leadership moderated the relationship between charismatic leadership and three of the four outcome variables, namely job satisfaction, commitment, work stress, and role conflict. More specifically, a lower need for leadership was associated with a weaker link between charismatic leadership and the outcome variables. Similarly, Felfe and Petersen (2007) showed that followers' RoL influenced perceptions of managerial decision-making; specifically, when evaluating a hypothetical decision, followers high on the RLS were more likely to overestimate leaders' capabilities and neglect other relevant cues in a specific situation.

Mayo, Pastor, and Meindl (1996) explored the relationships among workgroup diversity, performance, and leader self-efficacy. They found group heterogeneity to be associated with negative group performance, with a resultant decline in leader self-efficacy, as well as a direct effect from group heterogeneity to leader self-efficacy. In addition, both of these effects were greater in charismatic domains than in transactional aspects of leadership. These results support the idea that group and contextual factors play a significant role in both performance outcomes and leader perceptions of efficacy and causality, particularly when it comes to the more transformational aspects of leadership. Atwater, Camobreco, Dionne, Avolio, and Lau (1997, p. 147) found leaders who give rewards "just because" are more likely to be seen as charismatic than those who base rewards on performance or other types of behavior. These noncontingent rewards may also suggest that any positive feedback, whether justified or not, may take on a positive halo effect. Stated differently, any positive feedback was interpreted as "great news," leading to increased charismatic attributions on the part of followers.

The RoL approach also highlights that simple use of the leadership 'label' causes followers to more readily imbue the symbolic gestures of leaders with meaning and significance. In a study of professional players from the National Hockey League, Day, Sin, and Chen (2004) subsequently found that simply assuming formal leadership responsibilities as team captain (complete with visible sweater designation) was associated with better performance compared to seasons in which the same players had no leadership responsibilities. This effect was still present even after controlling for individual performance in the previous season. Day et al. (2004) posit that one important reason for this effect may be that teammates provide their captains with greater opportunities to score and to assist others in scoring because they have heroic and romanticized notions of leadership that accords high status and visibility to team captains. Following Meindl's work on follower attributional processes and heroic conceptualizations of leadership, Day et al. (2004) argued that teams were actually creating a self-fulfilling prophecy by providing their leader with additional resources and opportunities to perform well as their team captain.

Accordingly, followers' psychological readiness to comprehend events in terms of leadership may play an important role in determining the ultimate effectiveness of symbolism as a political tool, benefiting most those leaders who are adept at its manipulation. Specifically, leaders' dysfunctional behaviors may be strongly influenced by and enabled by potentially dysfunctional behaviors on the part of followers (see also Clements & Washbush, 1999; Tourigny, Dougan, Washbush, & Clements, 2003). 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). The collapse of Enron under Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling's leadership is a prime illustration of this scenario. However, when major ethical breaches are revealed, the public backlash is often immediate and decisive, a phenomenon we explore in a later section on the social ecology of leadership.

Overall, we note that follower resistance and reactions to the romance of leadership may take both constructive and destructive forms, emphasizing the active role that followers play in the leadership process. Constructive forms might include voice behaviors, upward influence tactics, or OCBs such as sportsmanship and helping behaviors. In fact, it is important to explicitly note the possibility that follower romanticism of leaders 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 (see Bligh & Schyns, 2007), and active follower resistance may take the form of sabotage, mockery, and other behaviors designed to minimize the perceptions of leadership efficacy. For example, Lord, Brown, and Freiberg (1999) point out that both followers' and leaders' self-concepts have received very little attention. They suggest that a focus on the self-concept provides a mechanism for understanding reciprocal effects from both leaders to followers and followers to leaders, and point out that followers directly influence leaders' self-schemas, both individually and collectively. Taken together, these findings argue for the continued importance of examining follower perceptions in evaluating leadership, and suggest caution in taking leadership ratings at face value without considering follower needs, perceptions, motivations, and biases.

4.3. Implicit leader–follower theories and the social construction of followership

In addition to exploring follower characteristics in understanding leadership, de Vries and van Gelder (2005) introduced the idea of implicit follower theories as an extension of the RoL. While implicit theories of leadership (ILTs) have a long history within leadership research as a means of understanding leader attributions and perceptions (Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984), implicit follower theories concern our implicit assumptions about followers and followership. Lord et al. (1984) suggested that ILTs can be classified as prototypes, or ideal instances of leadership (Lord et al., 1984). Given the tendency to glorify leaders and the need to simplify and understand a complex organizational world, de Vries and van Gelder point out that as leaders are commonly perceived to be causally and efficacious, so too are followers perceived to be inefficacious, creating a greater need for leaders and leadership (de Vries, Roe, & Taillieu, 2002). While leaders are commonly associated with traits such as sensitivity, dedication, tyranny, charisma, attractiveness, masculinity, intelligence, and strength (Offerman, Kennedy, & Wirtz, 1994) including both effective and ineffective characteristics (Schyns & Schilling, 2011), followers are frequently portrayed as passive and dependent. In this way, the notion of the 'almighty' leader is supported and continually reinforced, not only in our glorification of leaders and leadership, but also in our subjugation of followers and followership (see also Uhl-Bien & Pillai, 2007).

More recently, Sy (2010) defines implicit followership theories (IFTs) as individuals' personal assumptions about the traits and behaviors that characterize followers. In an examination of 1362 participants across five separate studies and seven samples, he outlines six aspects of IFTs: Industry, Enthusiasm, Good Citizen, Conformity, Insubordination, and Incompetence. In addition, Sy reports evidence for a second-order factor, comprised of a Followership Prototype (Industry, Enthusiasm, and Good Citizen) and a Followership Antiprototype (Conformity, Insubordination, and Incompetence).

In a related stream of research, Carsten, Uhl-Bien, West, Patera, and McGregor (2010) examine the social construction of followership, followership schemas, and contextual influences that affect these constructions. They propose an important corollary to the RoL as "the subordination of followership: the view that followers are largely ineffectual" (2010, p. 546). While their results indicate that followership is constructed by some as passivity, deference, and obedience, they also found that other followers emphasize questioning and challenging their leaders, suggesting both active and passive constructions of followership exist.

5. The social construction of leadership

The final theme that emerged from our review is also the most radical: the social construction of leadership and the broader critique of our collective fascination with leadership. In this stream of research, Meindl most explicitly adopted a social constructionist view (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999), which argues that our organizational understandings are strongly influenced by leaders, who represent one of the most prominent features of our socially constructed realities (see Calder, 1977; Chen & Meindl, 1991; Meindl, 1990; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). We discuss subsequent research that has expanded upon this theme in three primary areas: 1) interfollower and social contagion processes in attributions and constructions of leadership; 2) the role of crisis and follower uncertainty in shaping attributions of leadership, and 3) the social ecology of leadership, or the constructions and deconstructions of leadership and CEO celebrity in the media and the popular press.

5.1. Interfollower and social contagion processes in constructions of leadership

Although Weber (1947) originally conceptualized charisma as a type of leadership, distinguishable qualitatively from other kinds of leadership, contemporary leadership researchers have also taken the approach that charismatic leadership is a variable — that is, a matter of degree — and have focused the unique patterns of psychological motives, personality traits, and behaviors of leaders that are correlated with higher and lower levels of charismatic "effects" on, and appeal for, followers (see Shamir, 1991 for an overview of different approaches to charisma). Meindl questioned this emphasis on the leadership element of charisma, and speculated that arousal and emotional displays on the part of networked followers may be an important part of upwardly spiraling, contagious charisma. He argued that followers vary in their susceptibility to a charismatic leader: the first followers to succumb to the charisma "virus" are likely to be those high in both agreeableness and affect intensity. Yet an understanding of charismatic attributions is no more complete through an understanding of these follower characteristics as it is through an understanding of the leader's characteristics; we must also examine the inter-follower processes of construction involved.

This assertion has fostered a number of studies that have examined charismatic leadership attributions from a social network perspective. Specifically, Pastor, Meindl, and Mayo (2002) focus on the arousal component of followers' emotions and the role that emotions play in followers' tendency to view a leader as charismatic. Building on Klein and House's (1995) fire metaphor to suggest that "charisma is a fire, a fire that ignites followers' energy and commitment" (p. 183), the leader provides the spark, the followers are the flammable material, and the context is the oxygen required for combustion. Pastor et al. suggest that followers' arousal increases the flammability of followers by raising the propensity of followers to perceive the leader as charismatic and, therefore, giving a boost to the fire. Weierter (1997) similarly discusses this social contagion model of charisma, where the focus is on the spread of expressive behaviors between followers, and the attributed cause of these processes. Based on Meindl's (1990) arguments, these behaviors are subsequently attributed to the leader, irrespective of whether the behaviors were modeled from the group or the leader.

Pastor et al. (2002) provide evidence that followers' broad understanding of their leaders is affected by their exposure to, and interaction with, other actors within the surrounding network of social relationships. This research documented considerable variation in the degree to which different followers see any given leader as charismatic; Pastor et al. (2002) utilize a social network perspective to gain insight into how the charismatic appeal of a given leader may be diffused and dispersed among a group of followers. Mayo and Pastor (2007) subsequently point out that the individuals most likely to spread charismatic attributions are those who are high in closeness centrality and betweenness centrality within a given network. Importantly, these attributions about leader behaviors may also vary due to cultural, power and status differences (Chen & Van Velsor, 1996; Zemba, Young, & Morris, 2006).

Overall, support for the "proximity hypothesis" was found in both studies, with the distribution of the strength of charisma attributions most strongly related to the patterns of friendship ties within groups of followers. That charisma attributions tend to be distributed more consistently within follower friendship networks is consistent with a RoL perspective, in which charisma is conceptualized as the pattern of positive affective bonds that bind group members together. Such inter-follower processes help to define the social reality of leadership, establishing the appeal and reputation of leaders and shaping followers' responses to them, even in the absence of any direct knowledge of the leader. By exploring social network effects, Pastor et al. (2002, p. 419) hope to pave the way for a more expansive and "complexly socialized account of how followers imbue their leaders with charismatic appeal."

Pastor, Mayo, and Shamir's (2007) subsequent study also contributes to this more follower-centered approach by demonstrating that experimenters can manipulate changes in the perception of leaders' charisma by changing the level of emotional arousal of followers. In two studies, they found a significant interaction between followers' arousal and leaders' charismatic appeal. Such interactions between followers' emotional state and leadership attributions provide a more integrative picture of leader-centered and follower-centered models of charisma (see also Galvin, Waldman, and Balthazard's (2010) attributional model of charisma).

Together, these studies suggest that the dispersion or degree of consensus among followers regarding the charismatic appeal of their leadership becomes relevant. More specifically, individual differences regarding leadership perceptions are not just random variance, but the result of group members defining their own organizational reality, and developing constructions of leadership that can only be understood through the pattern of social ties that link group members to one another. This is a radically different approach to the study of charisma, and suggests that the disparities among follower ratings of charisma may be as relevant as the level of consensus concerning a leader's charismatic appeal.

However, Pastor et al. also note that Meindl's (1990, 1993, 1995) social contagion model is a social information account of the emergence and spread of charisma. The role of arousal in Meindl's model is that excitement among followers causes them to look for explanations, which they look to others in the social realm to help them interpret. Thus, other social actors provide an account of their reactions in terms of the leader's personality, style, or actions, and the followers subsequently 'buy into' this explanation. While Pastor et al. (2007) found that high levels of arousal can increase ratings of charisma, this effect was interactive: that is, it only applied for leaders with some level of charismatic appeal. Their evidence suggests that social information may not be a *sufficient* condition for follower-centric effects; the leader must engage in some charismatic behavior as well. However, they also note that aroused students were more likely to attribute charisma to a leader whom other social sources had already defined as charismatic (i.e., through prior reputation), suggesting that other social actors do play an important role in the equation.

5.2. The role of crisis and uncertainty in attributions of leadership

Both Meindl's social constructionist perspective and social identity analyses point specifically to the role that crisis and uncertainty play in determining follower responses to leadership. Specifically, research in this area focuses on the role of contextual factors in the emergence of charismatic and toxic leadership, as well as the ways in which the situation impacts and shapes followers' expectations for leadership. A number of studies in this area examine the socio-political context of leadership, especially the importance of crisis in the emergence of charismatic leadership, including: the U.S. Presidential elections (Pillai & Williams, 1998; Pillai, Williams, Lowe, & Jung, 2003), the impact of seminal events such as the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 on the rhetoric adopted by the president (Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004a,b), and the influence of the California Recall Election on perceptions of incumbent governor Gray Davis and charismatic challenger Arnold Schwarzenegger (Bligh et al., 2005). These studies emphasize that followers look to leaders during threatening times of a crisis to provide a sanctuary from the threats of terrorism, economic downturns, and natural disasters. Islam (2009) analyzes animated films to explore themes of leadership crises and leadership emergence, focusing on how, via the RoL, leadership myths mix individual psychological well-being with social well-being. Specifically, he views the ROL

as "a cultural motif in which the leader of an organization brings prosperity or demise to the organization through the expression of personal virtues or qualities" (p. 831).

The important role of crisis in followers' perceptions is also an important theme in Lipman-Blumen's (2007) analysis of toxic leaders. She argues that followers are drawn to toxic leaders after a crisis because they hold the promise of keeping them safe in an uncertain world. Pastor et al. (2007) similarly note that crises produce high-fear-arousal states, making followers particularly 'susceptible' to charismatic influence. They also point out that nonthreatening sources of arousal, such as the success of a team or an organization, physical exercise, or even the mere presence of enthusiastic others, can have a similar influence on ratings of charisma. In other words, other states of high arousal, not necessarily related to crises or ambiguous situations, may produce a similar tendency to attribute high charisma to mildly charismatic leaders. As Pastor et al. (2007, p. 1595) put it, "one can picture the energy floating in the crowd of political conventions, where the presence of others and the loud music activate followers and increase their levels of arousal. If leaders are able to stage a self-confident and charismatically appealing display, the result is an amplification of their charismatic appeal, with the corresponding identification and emotional attachment to their goals and mission." For example, the political campaign rallies of Barack Obama became notorious for supporters fainting amidst all of the enthusiasm, and his smooth responses evoked admiration as well (Taranto, 2008). Followers' decisions to attribute "charisma" to a leader are partially the result of such interactions, observations, and communications with one another about such events (Bligh & Kohles, 2009).

However, it is important to note that perceptions of crisis and stress are not always sufficient to evoke charismatic attributions. For example, Pillai and Meindl (1998) found that a greater sense of crisis and stress among followers was associated with reduced perceptions of leader charisma. They conclude that if leaders are not seen as taking bold and purposeful action during crises, they are probably not likely to be seen as meeting followers' charismatic criteria. This study demonstrates that multiple contextual elements, including the work unit structure, the level of work group collectivism, and perceptions of crisis all play an important role in the emergence of charismatic leadership. Similarly, Waldman, Ramirez, House, and Puranam (2001) found that, consistent with expectations, charisma predicted performance under conditions of uncertainty but not under conditions of certainty. Williams, Pillai, Lowe, Jung, and Herst (2009) found that during the 2004 US presidential elections, perceptions of crisis were negatively related to charismatic leadership ratings for the incumbent, George W. Bush and positively related to charismatic leadership ratings for the challenger, Senator John Kerry. This is probably due to the fact that voters blame incumbents if things are not going well in the country. These findings are consistent with arguments that charismatic leadership will only have effects under conditions of environmental uncertainty (see also Shamir et al., 1993; Trice & Beyer, 1993), suggesting that charismatic leadership has at least as much to do with followers and the situation as it does with the leaders themselves.

While situations of crisis and ambiguity have been examined, other situational and contextual impacts on charismatic attributions present promising opportunities for future research. For example, our review did not uncover any research that specifically examines the role of leader–follower social distance (Shamir, 1995) on the romance of leadership. Specifically, we know little about the varying impacts of the RoL on perceptions of distant leaders, about whom followers possess little intimate knowledge, versus socially close leaders, about whom followers have potentially richer and varied types of information. 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) originally 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 (see also 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. More specifically, 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 or even manipulating organizational performance cues. As a result, the tendency to romanticize leaders may increase 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.

5.3. Media portrayals and the social ecology of leadership

Meindl et al. (1985, p. 78) explicitly highlighted the social construction of leadership, suggesting that the concept of leadership "has thereby gained a brilliance that exceeds the limits of normal scientific inquiry… the corresponding symbolism, imagery, mythology and stories associated with the concept of leadership are evidence of the mystery with which leadership has been imbued." Meindl emphasized that popular conceptions of leadership are embedded within a larger cultural context, which is important in understanding our collective fascination with leadership. While social psychological approaches to leadership and relational leadership theories focus on leader–follower and interfollower dynamics, Meindl was also interested in the study of leadership as reflected in popular leadership books, cartoons, and media accounts. These depictions, he argued, provide an important window into our beliefs as a society about leadership: what constitutes leadership, what makes it successful, and what attributions we make about its effects.

Bligh and Meindl's (2004) analysis of popular leadership books from an ecological perspective is an example of this approach. Their analysis emphasizes the societal, cultural, and environmental factors that shape leadership discourse, and argues that the

content of popular leadership books represents a highly accessible collection of beliefs and perspectives about leadership. The results of this study highlight that themes of change, expert and guru appeal, self-actualization and fulfillment constitute the contemporary ecology of leadership. Leaders who are seen as affecting change, possessing great experience and knowledge, and providing their followers with the opportunity to reach their unique potentials fit our cultural stereotypes of what a "great leader" should be. In a similar vein, Menon, Sim, Ho-Ying Fu, Chiu, and Hong (2010) compare cultural differences in leadership imagery, finding that Americans represent leaders standing ahead of groups, whereas Asians also represent leaders behind groups. They note that classic leadership research similarly portrays charismatic leaders transforming their environments and overturning the status quo with ground-breaking innovations. However, by studying leadership functions and their associated imagery in Asian culture, Menon et al. highlight the dual functions of leadership in both finding opportunities and watching over the group as important leadership themes in the Singapore context. In contrast with the traditional representation of American leaders as standing ahead of groups, President Obama's decision to "lead from behind" in the 2011 allied attack on Libya generated dismay among both detractors and supporters alike. This example highlights the potential implications for leaders whose behaviors do not align with culturally embedded prototypes.

At a 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) point out that successful CEOs have a romantic aura in the media; they are often depicted as "heroic" and larger than life. Further, Chen and Meindl (1991) found that, having formed favorable images of the CEO, media publications remain faithful to those images even if the leader's performance diverges materially. Such romanticized CEO media portrayals in turn may influence the CEO's self-image, fostering the impression that the CEO is in control, efficacious, even a miracle worker. Favorable attributions to the CEO in the media are particularly salient because they not only crystallize and solidify the attributions of organizational members, but they diffuse the CEO's prestige across wider audiences both within and outside of the organization. The effect may be to reinforce the CEO's power, fostering perceptions of their own self-importance and esteem.

Overall, 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." This work was influential in highlighting the role of the media in shaping and influencing ideas about leadership, and for drawing attention to how 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 (see also Guthey & Jackson, 2005; Jackson & Guthey, 2007).

This theme is also prevalent in the work of Jackson and Guthey (2007), which builds on Meindl and colleagues' research into the social construction of business leadership images in order to better understand charismatic appeal and high profile CEOs. Jackson and Guthey explore the visual construction of leadership images through photographic media. In their examination of the 'Celebrity CEO Backlash,' or the period of widespread media recrimination and criticism directed against former business heroes and celebrity CEOs, they argue that popular business images provide an important window for examining how visual images can work to both construct and deconstruct images of business leadership and set in play multiple and even conflicting leadership images at the same time. In this sense, it represents a more interpretive version of Meindl et al.'s work concerning the collective construction of CEO celebrity, demonstrating how we both celebrate and demonize leaders, collectively constructing and deconstructing their efficacy and morality. Through use of images, Jackson and Guthey highlight the production of leadership and the plurality of follower interpretations, suggesting that interpretative and aesthetic insights are ultimately necessary to understand leader–follower dynamics.

In a similar vein, other work has documented that 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). Followers subsequently process information in line with their belief in this heightened efficacy, and leaders may manipulate language and symbolism so as to maintain 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, corporate leaders such as Kenneth Lay and Jeffrey Skilling of Enron, John Thain of Merrill Lynch, Carly Fiorina of Hewlett Packard, and Richard Scrushy of HealthSouth). These quite drastic changes in the public's perceptions may occur in part due to the tendency for followers to romanticize them, leading to greater disillusionment as leaders inevitably cannot live up to such lofty expectations. However, we note that in Bill Clinton's case, there is also the possibility of rehabilitating tarnished leadership images with second acts such as the Clinton Global Initiative, now widely seen as an esteemed charitable foundation that is making a difference around the world.

Recent research suggests that the media plays an important role in constructing leadership images and shaping causal attributions by publicizing and interpreting organizational performance information (e.g., Deephouse, 2000; Johnson, Ellstrand, Daily, & Dalton, 2005; Pollock & Rindova, 2003; Rao, Greve, & Davis, 2001). Hayward, Rindova, and Pollock (2004) proposed that celebrity CEOs actively embraced and cultivated their celebrity by taking credit for their successes, attempting to capture greater control of their firms. By embracing their celebrity status, CEOs publicly reinforce the perceived cause-and-effect relationship between their actions and firm performance. For example, it is hard to think of Apple's phenomenal success without also thinking of CEO Steve Jobs, whose announcement in early 2011 that he was taking medical leave initiated a downward trend in the value of Apple's stock. Similarly, Wade, Porac, Pollock, and Graffin (2006) explore the role of CEO media certifications on firm performance. They define certification contests as competitions in which leaders are ranked on the basis of performance criteria that key stakeholders accept as legitimate. They point out that such contests are common in many organizational settings

and have important effects upon a leader and firm's reputation. *Fortune*, for example, ranks companies annually for public reputation, while *U.S. News and World Report* publishes highly influential rankings of business schools. Wade et al. (2006) examined similar data from *The Financial Times'* rankings of exemplary CEOs, and found that CEO certifications appear to generate positive abnormal returns when they are first announced; however, the longer-term impact of CEO certifications was negative. In addition, Wade and colleagues conclude that, given CEO certifications do not appear to have a beneficial effect on future profitability, the argument that boards of directors should pay exorbitant levels of compensation to attract and retain "star CEOs" whose firms have performed well in the past may be somewhat misplaced. In addition, this caution is especially true given the heightened investor expectations that come with celebrity CEO status. In essence, the expectations created by such recognition vastly exceed an individual leader's ability to live up to those expectations.

Hayward and Hambrick (1997) found that several sources of CEO hubris, or excessive pride and belief in a leader's own self-worth, have their own independent and additive effects on the premium that acquiring firms are willing to pay. First, the better the recent performance of the acquiring firm, the more that is paid for an acquisition. This represents the tendency to attribute organizational success to the CEO that Meindl et al. (1985) first reported, and a tendency for CEOs to deem that success as applicable to managing additional entities. Consequently, CEOs may come to believe their own press, and media praise serves to reinforce the CEO's confidence, increasing the likelihood that the CEO will be infected with hubris. Hayward and Hambrick (1997) also found that the greater the recent media praise for the CEO, the larger the premium paid for an acquisition, suggesting that a romanticized portrayal of leaders in the press can have very tangible impacts on firm. Specifically, Hayward and Hambrick found that each highly favorable article about the CEO resulted, on average, in a 4.8% increase in premium paid. For a billion-dollar acquisition, this would be a $48 million premium. According to these authors (1997, p. 120), "through glowing portrayals, the media not only conveys to the CEO an external validation of his or her capabilities, but it also broadcasts the message widely, disseminating a new level of CEO prestige outward to business and social circles." Acquaintances and business associates may start treating the CEO as more glorified as well, further fostering a leader's perceptions of personal ability in which the leader literally comes to believe his or her own press. It is also important to point out that CEO hubris, while positively associated with acquisition premiums, was negatively associated with firm performance.

Other research has explored the extent to which collective attributions of charisma to leaders matter, both objectively and subjectively. Agle and colleagues (Agle, Mitchell, & Sonnenfeld, 1999; Agle, Nagarajan, Sonnenfeld, & Srinivasan, 2006) note that studies have failed in general to find a direct relationship between CEO charisma and organizational performance. Specifically, Agle et al. (1999) suggest that the influence of CEOs on outcomes might not be as great as expected because of inflated expectations on the part of followers and organizational outsiders, but explicitly note the difficulties in including 'inflated expectations' as a measured variable. Tosi, Misangyi, Fanelli, Waldman, and Yammarino (2004) similarly found that charisma ratings were related to CEO pay but not to performance measures, concluding that CEO charisma influences compensation and stock prices, but not actual firm performance. In a follow-up study, Agle et al. (2006) ask "Does CEO charisma matter?," concluding that the evidence suggests that CEOs who are perceived to be more charismatic are also perceived as more effective; in other words, CEO charisma matters in a subjective sense. However, despite evidence of possible initial effects, the lack of long-term corroborating evidence from objectively assessed CEO performance suggests that the "search for charismatic CEOs may be based more on implicit theory or halo effects than on solid evidence that charisma really does make CEOs more effective," providing additional evidence for the RoL perspective that charismatic attributions are made irrespective of actual leader behaviors.

6. Challenges, critiques, and future directions for the romance of leadership

It is important to acknowledge the prevailing critique of the RoL: namely that leaders can and do matter, and perhaps now more than ever. Hunt's (1999, p. 134) characterization of the RoL approach in the section of his review, titled "Doom and Gloom," adequately summed up this critique that the RoL represented a disillusionment with leadership and one of many "pronunciations of calamity" about the state of leadership research. However, as Hansen, Ropo, and Sauer (2007, p. 545) note, Meindl (1995) was "remorseful" that so many people took the romance of leadership as a call to abandon leadership studies. Rather, he hoped that we would embrace leadership's "larger-than-life" status as a demonstration of just how important and significant leadership is for all organizational participants as they make sense of their experience. House, Spangler, and Woycke (1991) point out that in an age of complexity, change, and larger and larger organizations, leaders are more important now than ever before. In addition, they argue that personality and charisma are largely responsible for their effectiveness. This approach focuses on exceptional leaders who have extraordinary effects on their followers and social systems, transforming the needs, values, preferences, and aspirations of followers. Based on a sample of 39 US presidents, they report that as much as 66% of the variability in direct presidential action may be explained by motives, behavioral charisma, institutional age, and crises. However, they acknowledge that "there are reasons to suspect that these numbers overstate or misstate the actual contribution of motives and behavioural charisma to presidential performance" (p. 386), and present four alternative explanations for their findings. The fourth explanation is that perceptions of performance may cause perceptions of charisma, rather than charisma causing performance.

In response to Meindl et al.'s critiques (see also Daily & Schwenk, 1996; Day & Lord, 1988; George & Jones, 2000; Slater, 1989), Eisenhardt and Schoonhoven (1990) also weighed in on the debate over whether leaders (primarily top executives) make a difference. They examined the relationship between the founding top-management team, strategy, and environment to the sales growth of newly founded U.S. semiconductor firms. Their findings indicate significant main and interaction effects for the founding top-management team and market stage on firm growth. They conclude that when differences in abilities and fitness of leaders are considered, leaders do influence organizational performance when viewed as a founding condition. Barrick, Day,

Lord, and Alexander (1991) tested the impact of high-performance executive leaders on organizational performance in *Fortune 500* organizations between 1971–1985. They report that estimations of leader impact are legitimate and tend to be stable, contrary to the RoL's assertion that leadership is over-attributed causality for results (they report an overall leadership effect size of about .15). They conclude that "a heroic, romanticized explanatory concept may be used by individuals who are less sophisticated, novice judges of leadership effects" (p. 17). In his overall analysis, Yukl (1989) similarly concludes that while Meindl and colleagues have made the case for the exaggeration of leaders' importance, the RoL fails to show that leaders have no impact on performance.

Bresnen (1995, p. 511) presents a more critical view of both the RoL and other attributional and alternative perspectives on leadership. He notes that, on the one hand, attribution-based approaches "tend to remain firmly within the functionalist paradigm-understating the complexity of interpretations of leadership and effectively ignoring the impact of broader social relations. On the other hand, more radical perspectives tend to ignore the multiplicity of meanings attached to the concept of leadership and underplay the role of subjectivity and agency." Thus, we note that in contrast to critiques of the RoL as a radical, unconventional approach, there are others who have suggested that the RoL has not gone far enough afield from the functionalist paradigm.

6.1. Directions for future research

Overall, we note that the RoL has provided an important caveat for how we study leadership over the last 25 years. Meindl and Ehrlich (1987) argued that leadership may be more illusionary than real, and that followers may attribute performance to leaders simply as a function of them being labeled as leaders. As a result, we note the increasing norm of controlling for previous performance outcomes in leadership research. For example, Waldman et al. (2001) controlled for performance in the year prior to survey administration, and Ling et al. (2008b) similarly controlled for prior firm performance, explicitly allowing for the possibility that leadership might be more illusionary than real in that followers may attribute past performance to the qualities of leaders. We laud these approaches, and suggest that controlling for previous performance outcomes in the study of leader perceptions should be as common as controlling for gender or industry. Further, Giambatista's (2004) leader life cycle approach suggests an even more promising direction: in employing dynamic systems modeling and incorporating time, contingencies, and feedback processes, researchers can explore leader-follower influence processes without assuming a priori whether or not leadership is the appropriate causal attribution.

In addition, given the interesting findings regarding the RLS, we suggest that studies of leadership that depend primarily on follower perceptions should examine potential interactions between follower RLS scores and leadership ratings. The work stemming from the RoL on interfollower processes suggests a number of implications for research. Clearly, longitudinal studies with multiple data points could more fully explore the time lag in which network influence processes have a maximum impact, as well as identify those stages in the life span of a group when individuals are more or less easily influenced and more or less susceptible to RoL effects (see Pastor et al., 2002). The role of convergence and divergence of follower ratings of a leader over time is another interesting avenue for future research, involving more time series data sets and qualitative approaches.

Throughout this review, we have attempted to highlight areas where questions remain. In sum, we think the following questions are particularly important for future research in the RoL tradition: How and to what extent do leaders actively manage their own leadership images and others' perceptions of them? To what extent are these images and perceptions influenced by the leader's own tendencies to romanticize leadership? Is there a reciprocal romance of followership, whereby leaders reduce the complexities of followership to interpret performance without regard to the myriad other factors that might be in play? Who are the first followers to succumb to the charisma "virus," and what contexts are more or less conducive to charismatic attributions (e.g., situations of crisis, high and low social distance, organizational change)? Do gender differences play a role such that one or the other gender is more susceptible to the effects of the RoL? Who are the individuals most likely to spread charismatic attributions and through what interfollower processes?

In addition, we have much to learn about the implications of the RoL in a technologically mediated and global world. For example, how do cross-cultural differences (e.g., power distance, individualism–collectivism) influence leadership attributions? Jackson's (2005) review suggests that while the romance of leadership is likely to endure for a long time to come, the degree to which leadership is romanticized is culturally contingent. In addition to cultural contingencies, under what circumstances is there a wider versus more narrow dispersion of charismatic consensus among followers, and what role does the media play in this dispersion? Does the advent of social media mitigate or enhance the tendency to romanticize leadership? What are the key affective mechanisms that influence leadership constructions, and how do they spread among followers? Are some types of leaders (e.g., presidential candidates) or leadership roles more susceptible to the RoL? Does the process by which leaders are chosen (appointment or election) and evaluated (publicly versus privately) play a role in influencing leadership attributions? And given recent ethical scandals, how can followers empower one another to take leadership responsibility, and how can they counterbalance leaders that are not acting ethically? What factors influence more or less active constructions of followership?

In addition, up until now, transformational/charismatic leadership has been the primary focus of the RoL perspective, consistent with Meindl's (1990) assertion that the prevailing emphasis on transformational/charismatic leadership represented a hyper-romanticization in itself. However, to what extent are perceptions of other leadership styles, such as authentic leadership or Level 5 leadership (often presented as an antidote to charisma) affected by the RoL and interfollower processes? 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 canonized or demonized accordingly?

How resilient is the leadership attribution to contradictory or ambiguous information? Is it more resilient for certain leadership styles (e.g., transformational and charismatic) than for others?

Overall, we end our review with a sense of renewed passion to explore these and other questions in academic research. However, such interest in scholarly leadership research can unfortunately be easily dampened. In their critique of our quest for leadership understanding, Hansen et al. (2007, p. 545) comment, we were not 'in search of excellence' as much as we were in search of a way to calm our collective anxiety to explain everything in organizations via scientific realism — a complex we acquired from modeling the social sciences after the natural sciences. If things went from good to great and we were unable to correlate antecedents with outcomes, our catch-all antecedent became "leadership." We brushed much under this rug. We then pulled a fast one on ourselves. We began looking for antecedents and consequences to leadership. Never mind that leadership itself was ambiguous (Pfeffer, 1977), just so long as we could suggest that anything good in organizations was the result of it. We got so giddy about leadership that we forgot it was our pat answer for the unexplainable, and went about looking for rational, objective, causal explanations, making great efforts to quantify a quality we used to explain what we could not quantify. Kafka would have found this sort of insanity all very delightful, and we might add "leadership tomfoolery" as a symptom of "academic amnesia."

James Meindl was one of the first to point out that much of our quest to understand leadership said more about our collective anxiety than it did about our leaders. Twenty-five years later, our review highlights that amidst this insanity, our collective urge to solve the leadership mystery and capture the essence of its magic continues to allure, and there is no sign that the leadership fire will be extinguished any time soon. The diverse and often conflicting perspectives of leadership make it well worth the pursuit, as long as we can all stand the heat.

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