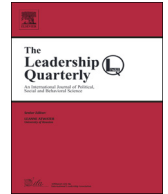




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Leaders' charismatic leadership and followers' commitment – The moderating dynamics of value erosion at the societal level

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ABSTRACT

In modern societies, followers might dissociate from their leaders. In our conceptual paper we discuss how the societal-level process of value erosion (Sennett, 2005) influences this phenomenon. First, we outline in what way value erosion will lead to followers' leadership-related cynicism on the one hand and an increased need for meaning on the other hand. We then describe in what way followers' cynicism and need for meaning moderate the positive relation between charismatic leadership and followers' affective and normative commitment. Last, we address the balance between the opposing dynamics of cynicism and need for meaning among followers by discussing the circumstances in which cynicism diminishes the positive moderating effect of need for meaning, and need for meaning compensates for the negative moderating effect of cynicism. We outline future research paths and implications for management.

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Do societal processes influence the effectiveness of charismatic leadership? In our conceptual paper, we focus on one such process – value erosion – which is especially observable in democratic societies engaged in modernization. We discuss if and how in the course of value erosion due to modernization two antagonistic forces develop that can influence the impact of charismatic leadership on commitment. On the one hand value erosion brings forth the development of a leadership-related cynicism that can hinder the effectiveness of charismatic leadership and on the other hand it brings forth an increased need for meaning that can support the effectiveness of charismatic leadership. Therefore the balance of power between these two factors (cynicism and need for meaning) gains importance, as e.g. high levels of cynicism can level out the positive moderation effects of followers' need for meaning. All in all, when societal-level value erosion occurs, followers are more likely to dissociate from their leaders. Our theoretical model is presented in Fig. 1.

Klein and House (1995) illustrated our central idea in the following way. They stated that “charisma resides in the relationship between a leader who has charismatic qualities and those of his or her followers who are open to charisma, *within a charisma-conducive environment* [emphasis added]” (p. 183). The authors illustrated this with a metaphor: The leader must be able to ignite a “spark” and the follower must be “ignitable,” whereby charisma can only be released if there is enough “oxygen” in the environment. Here, the last point is crucial. The societal-level process of value erosion can restrain followers' susceptibility via cynicism, and thereby choke the fire of charisma at its point of origin. This metaphor highlights the relevance of social environmental conditions, specifically value erosion, on charismatic leadership (cf. Popper, 2012).

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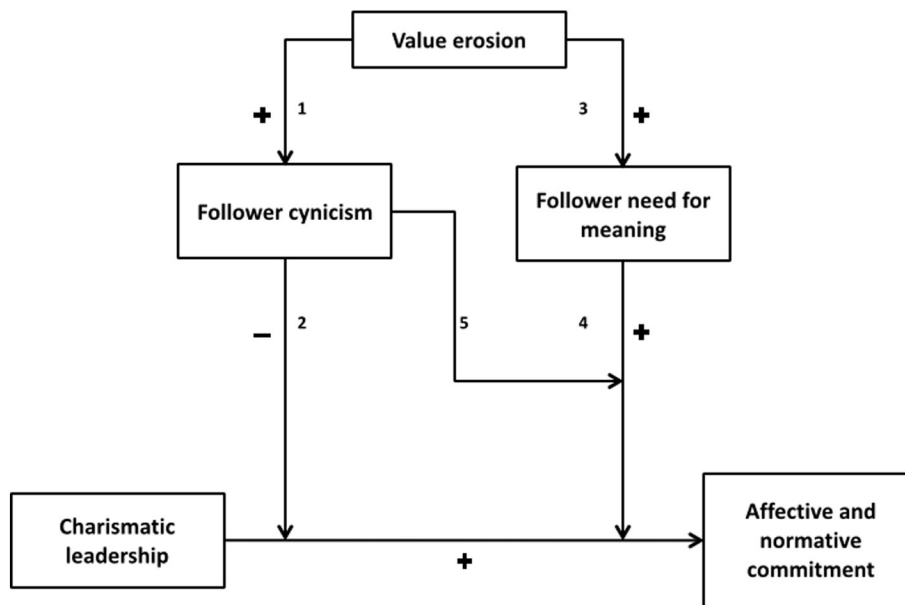


Fig. 1. Leader's charismatic leadership and followers' affective and normative commitment – the moderating dynamics of value erosion.

Charismatic leaders communicate missions and visions as distal goals and socially desirable outcomes (Conger & Kanungo, 1987), thereby instilling faith in a better future (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). These goals and outcomes are tied to shared values and ideologies, linked with the present, past, and the future (Conger, 1999). When followers trust and attribute positive characteristics to the leader (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991), a charismatic relationship (Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Klein & House, 1995) emerges in which their values are congruent and the leader is perceived as a role model.

In order to explain how charismatic leadership positively influences motivation- and performance-based outcomes, followers' internalization of leaders' values and identification with the leader are taken into consideration as relevant mediators (e.g. Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Shamir et al., 1993). If a leader is perceived as a role model, followers tend to internalize a leader's vision, mission and/or inherent values into their self-concepts (Shamir et al., 1993). In accordance with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), the resulting identification with the leader can be defined as the degree of overlap between the social identities of the leader and the followers (Wieseke, Ahearne, Lam, & van Dick, 2009; shared identity: Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004). In examining the influence of charismatic leadership on followers, we therefore consider the extent to which followers perceive the leader as a role model, internalize the leader's values and vision, and identify with the leader as intervening mechanisms.

We consider followers' affective and normative commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991) to be motivation-related outcomes of charismatic leadership. Commitment refers to "a force that binds an individual to a target ... and to a course of action of relevance to the target" (Meyer, Becker, & van Dick, 2006, p. 666). Followers' commitment to the leader's vision inherent values can be classified as desired by followers (i.e., affective commitment) and/or morally binding (i.e., normative commitment). In contrast to continuance commitment, which addresses an individual's commitment to remain with an organization, affective and normative commitment refer to followers' perceived (affective or normative) obligations to reciprocate, and are thus more directly linked to the leader's behavior.

Several moderators of the relationship between charismatic leadership and motivation- and performance-based outcomes have been identified, including individual, group and company level constructs; environmental level variables, however, have rarely been considered (Mumford, 2011; Walter & Bruch, 2009). Those who have considered environmental processes as moderators have mainly discussed economic crises resulting from environmental uncertainties (e.g., Agle, Nagarajan, Sonnenfeld, & Srinivasan, 2006; De Hoogh et al., 2004; House et al., 1991; Pillai, 1996; Pillai & Meindl, 1998). In contrast, we discuss specific social dynamics by considering value-related processes, whereby values relate to what ought or ought not to be done (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998; Rokeach, 1973). Concerning these values, there is a process of value erosion on the societal level, resulting in a decreasing consensus regarding the content of (ethical) norms judged to be legitimate (Sennett, 2005).

Our reason to focus on these processes of value erosion under the perspective of an environmental dynamism is as follows. To the extent in which followers' commitment requires followers' internalization of leader's values, value-related changes on the societal level become potentially relevant as they can influence the requirements for the necessary internalization processes. As mentioned, on the one hand, due to processes of value erosion the demand for meaning, defined as meaningful orientation that is transcendently grounded and therefore perceived as being valid, might increase (Frankl, 1978). Partially due to the Age of Enlightenment (Kant) and the processes of secularization the rational justifiability of values is being questioned to a higher or lesser degree especially in open societies (Habermas, 2001). If previous values no longer provide a valid interpretive framework, people will yearn for new values that create order and provide direction as they attempt to make sense of their world.

On the other hand, [Mirvis and Kanter \(1992\)](#), reviewing the results of national surveys in the U.S. concerning people's attitudes about life and their jobs, have come to the following conclusion: "Loyalty and esprit de corps have given way to mistrust and looking out for oneself. Cynicism is on the rise" (p. 45). And these conditions can impede the internalization of leaders' values (cf. [Anderson & Bateman, 1997](#); [Lapidot, Kark, & Shamir, 2007](#)). Cynicism can be defined as disillusionment-based negative attitude to specific objects (cf. [Anderson & Bateman, 1997](#)). Here we focus on leadership-related cynicism – i.e. followers' cynicism concerning the trustworthiness of a leader's intentions when practicing charismatic leadership – and interpret this form of cynicism as a result of common attributions of egoistic and selfish behavior as well as of the violation of ethical norms which mirror the process of value erosion.

We identify the balance between these two antagonistic forces among followers – cynicism and need for meaning – as being potentially relevant for the effectiveness of charismatic leadership (see [Fig. 1](#)). By focusing on conditions and effects of followers' cynicism and need for meaning, we contribute to followership theory as the "study of the nature and impact of followers and following in the leadership process" ([Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014](#), p. 2). We therefore follow [Popper \(2012\)](#), as we agree that "understanding the psychology of the followers may lead to clearer insights into leadership" (p. 4).

From a co-production perspective ([Shamir, 2007](#)), followers are not considered to be passive recipients of a leader's influence; rather, followers allow leaders to influence them, and thus are co-contributors to the leadership process. If the leader claims a leader identity, this claim can only be effective if followers signal that they endorse this claim. Leadership and followership cannot be constructed when claims and grants are not reciprocally supported ([DeRue & Ashford, 2010](#); [Uhl-Bien et al., 2014](#)). If cynicism dominates followers' need for meaning, they will question not only their identities as followers, but also the identity of the leader. We focus our discussion on reactions to these dynamics of value erosion and describe how cynicism and need for meaning may influence the relationship between charismatic leadership and follower commitment. Possible effects of value erosion on leaders are beyond the scope of this paper, but represent an area for future inquiry.

Beyond contributing to the literature on followership by highlighting societal conditions that might affect the dynamics of following, we contribute to the literature on charismatic leadership in several ways. First, we describe how followers' cynicism and need for meaning moderate the relationship between charismatic leadership and followers' affective and normative commitment and explain their influence using social identity theory ([Tajfel & Turner, 1986](#)). Second, we point out how the societal-level process of value erosion increases cynicism and need for meaning among followers. The to-date barely investigated question of the balance of power of these forces therefore comes into focus and the potential relevance of the rather neglected societal-level value erosion for the explanation of the effectiveness of charismatic leadership is being discussed on a theoretical basis. Specifically, we show that when followers' cynicism is high, then the effectiveness of charismatic leadership at strengthening followers' commitment decreases, even if followers' need for meaning is quite high. We also show how a high need for meaning can strengthen the positive relationship between charismatic leadership and followers' commitment, as long as leadership-related cynicism is relatively low. In doing so, we provide a preliminary framework for investigating conditions affecting the balance of the two antagonistic forces and thus the effectiveness of charismatic leadership.

In accordance with [Fig. 1](#), our paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we briefly discuss the relationship between charismatic leadership and followers' affective and normative commitment. We then describe and explain the effects of cynicism and need for meaning before discussing the balance between these two antagonistic dynamics. Our theoretical analysis is grounded in two contexts: corporations, a dominant setting in the literature in which both dynamics are highly virulent (e.g., [Sennett, 2005](#)); and democratic and open societies, in which challenges to values are considered constitutive ([Habermas, 2001](#)).

Leader's charismatic leadership and followers' affective and normative commitment

Our reasoning is based on [Shamir et al. \(1993\)](#) model of charismatic leadership, which emphasizes values and differentiates value-related processes in great detail ([Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013](#)). [Shamir et al. \(1993\)](#) described leadership behaviors as role modeling and frame alignment. For the leader to be taken as ideal in the sense of a role model, the authors specify, among other relevant behaviors, leaders' self-sacrificial behavior for the benefit of vision and mission, taking risks, engaging in unconventional ideological behavior (see also [Conger & Kanungo, 1987](#)), expressing confidence in the follower and "demonstrating their own courage and conviction in the mission and *thus* [emphasis added] both earn credibility and serve as a role model of the values of the vision and mission" ([Shamir et al., 1993](#), p. 585). This wording (i.e., *thus*), however, implies a direct relationship between a leader's behaviors and perceptions of the leader as a role model, which does not reflect reality ([Gardner & Avolio, 1998](#)). In fact, followers' *interpretations* of leaders' behaviors mediate this relationship ([Gardner & Avolio, 1998](#)). This is not explicitly addressed in [Shamir et al. \(1993\)](#) model, yet is important to our discussion since cynicism can influence these interpretations.

Interpretations are usually guided by a certain frame ([Goffman, 1974](#)). For example, a situation can be defined as being cooperative or competitive ([Cornelissen & Werner, 2014](#)). Defining a situation as cooperative requires that followers presume convergence between the leader's interests and their own, and can therefore trust the leader ([Deutsch, 1973](#)). Trust, defined as a follower's willingness to become vulnerable ([Deutsch, 1973](#)), can be considered a key requirement for effective charismatic leadership ([Conger & Kanungo, 1987](#); [Gardner & Avolio, 1998](#)). Trust facilitates the attribution of positive characteristics and thereby increases the effectiveness of leadership ([Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002](#); [House et al., 1991](#)). The opposite is true if followers frame the situation as being competitive.

Frame alignment "refers to the linkage of individual and leader interpretive orientations, such that some set of followers' interests, values and beliefs and the leader's activities, goals and ideology become congruent" ([Shamir et al., 1993](#), p. 585). [Shamir et al. \(1993\)](#) emphasize specific communicative processes as frame alignment behaviors. The leader describes an attractive future, relates outcomes to values, and anchors those values in shared history and collective identities in order to legitimize the vision inherent

organizational values and to provide a sense of continuity for followers. If frame alignment is successful, followers define the situation as being cooperative. Through trust-based attributes (Gardner & Avolio, 1998) the leader becomes a role model with regard to values and behavior. Therefore, a leader's attempts to achieve frame alignment and develop trust precede followers' perceptions of the leader as a role model.

If followers perceive their leader as being a role model, then their willingness to internalize (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Shamir et al., 1993) the leader's values into their self-concepts (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008) increases. The internalization of a leader's values is accompanied by a modification of the followers' identity-inherent value hierarchy inasmuch as the salience of specific values addressed by a leader within the followers' identity-inherent value hierarchy increases (Petriglieri, 2011). Once internalized into followers' deep structure identities (Meyer et al., 2006), the increased salience of these values stabilizes, which should intensify followers' affective and normative commitment (Pratt, 1998). Followers' commitment concerning the leader's vision on the basis of shared identities (Ellemers et al., 2004) enables followers to engage in identity-congruent behavior which creates positive emotions (i.e., affective commitment) (Ashforth et al., 2008), and to perceive their efforts aimed at achieving valued outcomes as meaningful obligations (i.e., normative commitment) (Bono & Judge, 2003; Wiener, 1982). As followers engage in these behaviors their internalization processes and therewith the increased salience of their values are validated (Weick, 1995), which in turn reinforces their commitment.

Value erosion at the societal level and followers' leadership-related cynicism (arrow 1)

According to the literature in which cynicism is defined as a negative attitude concerning the respective object areas being examined (Anderson & Bateman, 1997), we characterize the components of this attitude – beliefs, feelings and behavioral tendencies (Davis & Gardner, 2004) – in relation to followers' cynicism concerning the trustworthiness of leaders' intentions to practice charismatic leadership as follows. Followers' cynic beliefs reflect the degree to which followers think charismatic leadership practices are being used to achieve selfish, profit-based goals rather than the collective, value-based (and often idealistic) goals that have been communicated. Negative feelings associated with cynicism relate to disillusionment-based frustration. Cynical behavioral tendencies are exemplified by disparaging and sarcastic verbal statements such as: “The secret to success is knowing who to blame for your failures” (Davis & Gardner, 2004, p. 440); or labeling efforts to create a culture of excellence in a case study as “Yankee propaganda” (Fleming & Spicer, 2003, p. 159). As a result of followers' cynicism, the followers assume a low level of leader integrity, defined as the discrepancy between a leader's espoused and enacted values (Simons, 1999).

We attempt to explain this specific cynicism in the following by relating to the process of value erosion on the societal level and thereby follow the key position of Dean, Brandes, and Dharwadkar (1998), explaining cynicism as being solely depending upon the followers' interpretations of reality (Weick, 1995), in which real and attributed issues are inextricably mixed. Decreasing consensus regarding specific norms that are judged as legitimate is a notable characteristic of democratic open societies (cf. Gebert & Boerner, 1999; Zhao & Cao, 2010) and embedded within processes of modernization (Habermas, 2001). Modernization constitutes a multidimensional process including social, technological and economic changes (Beck, 2009).

Recently, economic processes associated with societal-level modernization have especially impacted the processes of value change and value erosion (Sennett, 1998). As an isolated discussion of the social dimension of modernization is not meaningful at this point, we additionally refer to the sustained economic changes brought about by increasing and strengthening global competition (Soros, 2012). Value erosion, defined as decreasing consensus concerning hitherto accepted societal norms, manifests in an especially strong and observable manner on the behavioral level through violations of ethical standards within the different subsystems of a society. The more human beings believe that they are witnessing violations of ethical standards also outside the business world (e.g., in politics, sports, the arts, science, religion), the higher the probability that such violations will be interpreted as being part of the social-economic system as such (Sennett, 2005), or expressions of human nature (Wrightsmann, 1992) and hence are attributed as being a stable factor. As a consequence, a generalizing cynicism covering different object areas in the sense of a generalized expectation of low integrity can develop (Anderson & Bateman, 1997). Illustrating the dissemination of a generalizing cynicism, Mirvis and Kanter (1992) estimated that the percentage of cynic individuals in the United States is approximately 42%. Cynicism also has been observed in Europe and Asia (Kouzes & Posner, 1993).

If a follower perceives the dissemination of generalized cynicism at the societal level, this alone can result in mistrust of a leader's intentions to practice charismatic leadership (Bond et al., 2004), since the leader is at the same time a part of this society. In addition, the development of a negative attitude can be explained by looking at specific processes within the business world. Negative feelings toward leaders occur more frequently when employees perceive their organization as being primarily oriented toward shareholder (rather than stakeholder) values (de Luque, Washburn, Waldman, & House, 2008; cf. Ghoshal & Moran, 1996).

In particular, the perceived contradiction between what managers say and what managers do (e.g., neglected promises: Naus, van Iterson, & Roe, 2007) fuels cynicism among followers. Such behavior violates followers' fairness expectations. When a follower is denied fair treatment, which is an assumed employee right (Jones & Skarlicki, 2005), this is experienced as unjust and hence cynical attitudes may flourish (Anderson & Bateman, 1997). Incongruences between words spoken and actions taken by managers have been well-documented by legal entities in the United States and in Germany. While corporations may hire compliance officers or even create compliance departments in order to assure that laws are followed, many executives specify targets that are unattainable through legal means (Pinto, Leana, & Pil, 2008). In a study by KPMG (2014) in Germany, 57% of participants attributed unethical organizational behavior primarily to severe pressure to achieve business goals; moreover, 52% said they lacked appropriate resources to accomplish corporate goals without bending the law. Comparable results were found in U.S. contexts by Barsky (2008) and Welsh and Ordóñez (2014).

Going one step further, Anand, Ashforth, and Joshi (2004) found that many managers believe that corruption and bribes are necessary, and thus have made numerous attempts to legitimize such practices. These attempts at legitimization “are often accompanied by socialization tactics through which newcomers entering corrupt units are induced to accept and practice the ongoing unethical acts and their associated rationalizations” (Anand et al., 2004, p. 9). Companies’ expectations toward the followers in this regard can be accompanied by cynicism-inducing feelings of alienation (Johnson & O’Leary-Kelly, 2003). The case of Carmen Segarra may serve to illustrate this legitimization of ethically questionable practices and potential consequences when employees dare to voice related concerns. The bank examiner was dismissed after refusing to tone down her report on “shady” practices of major investment banks, including Goldman Sachs. She had made secret recordings during her tenure at the New York Federal Reserve, an agency of the U.S. government responsible for regulating the banking sector, showing how such practices were not only known and tolerated, but legitimized by her employer.

The stronger the impression that leaders’ profit-making interests are being pursued to the detriment of the followers, the stronger the tendency will be to perceive the leader as “representing the ‘other side’ of the system” (Shamir, Zakay, Breinin, & Popper, 1998, p. 391). If followers frame the situation as competitive in the sense of diverging interests (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014), distrust will be the result (Deutsch, 1973). This, on the other hand, facilitates negative attributions such as selfishness (cf. Fu, Tsui, Liu, & Li, 2010; Kim, Bateman, Gilbreath, & Anderson, 2009) as well as expectations for a lack of integrity (in sensu Simons, 1999).

Followers might thus develop negative attitudes, especially concerning charismatic leadership as such (Bond et al., 2004). Charismatic leadership may be interpreted by the cynical follower as a particularly effective means for exploitation in order to ensure the economic and career success of the leader. When cynicism is high, a leader’s communication of distal rather than proximal outcomes (Shamir et al., 1993) might even be interpreted as an attempt to put followers off to an indeterminate future. Nonverbal communication can be interpreted as manipulation mechanisms by cynical followers, since nonverbal influence is hardly controllable by the one being influenced (Conger, 1999; Bono & Ilies, 2006).

Of course we do not assume that the follower assigns negative expectations without further ado onto the leader and the manner in which the leader leads. Rather, followers will examine whether any ethically questionable processes are observable in their own companies and question their leaders’ roles in the processes (Tсахuridu, 2011). In addition, there is a moderating effect based on the quality of previous leader–follower interactions (cf. Davis & Gardner, 2004; Howell & Shamir, 2005) as well as the proximity of leadership (Shamir, 1995; Yagil, 1998). However, one important aspect that has been ignored is the fact that followers observe leader behavior frame-dependent and will interpret it in this manner. The frame and hence how situations are interpreted depends not only on the leader, but also on the follower’s external socialization experiences independent of the leader (cf. Cornelissen & Werner, 2014). After analyzing the scandals at Enron and Arthur Anderson, Davis and Gardner (2004) concluded: “Thus, not only will followers have greater motivation to observe and judge the behavior of their leaders, but the lens through which these observations and judgments are made is much cloudier” (p. 461).

Importantly, the process of ceding authority to a leader does, in fact, expose a follower to the risk of exploitation by the leader (Sennett, 2005); thus, integrity-related negative expectations might already be activated (cf. Van den Bos, Lind, & Wilke, 2001), especially if a follower assumes diverging interests due to the framing described above. According to research on confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998), followers will preferentially process information that subjectively confirms their existing negative integrity expectations.

We, of course, do not rule out that followers’ negative expectations can be refuted over time when it comes to specific follower–leader interactions. Therefore, cynicism is a state that is malleable (i.e., reversible) depending on the experiences made (Anderson & Bateman, 1997). Interactions that followers interpret as positive are widely documented in the literature (e.g., Davis & Gardner, 2004). However, we do assume that the conditions for this are quite difficult because the follower’s “lens ... is much cloudier” (Davis & Gardner, 2004, p. 461). Through such a lens and with having in mind that behavior is generally ambiguous (Pfeffer, 1981) the smallest hints at unethical behaviors or attitudes can be enough to activate a follower’s more or less unconscious but as a tendency generalized negative expectations of his/her particular leader (at least temporarily) as a defense mechanism against potential disappointments or exploitation (cf. Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Hence, followers’ cynicism also has a protective function (Fleming & Spicer, 2003; cf. Van den Bos et al., 2001). Therefore we posit:

Proposition 1. There is a positive relationship between value erosion at the societal level and followers’ cynicism concerning the trustworthiness of a particular leader’s intentions to practice charismatic leadership.

Moderating effect of followers’ leadership-related cynicism (arrow 2)

If followers have developed cynical attitudes toward their particular leader, whom they perceive as representing the other side of the system, they will no longer define the situation as being cooperative and the leader’s ability to achieve frame alignment will be limited (Cha & Edmondson, 2006; Choi & Mai-Dalton, 1999; Ferrin & Dirks, 2003). As we interpreted the leader’s framing processes and trust development as antecedent of followers’ perceptions of the leader as a role model (Gardner & Avolio, 1998), the transition from the leader’s charismatic leadership into the followers’ perception of the leader as a role model is hindered. Since we consider perceiving the leader as a role model and the associated processes of internalizing the leader’s values and identifying with the leader to mediate the relationship between charismatic leadership and followers’ commitment, we posit:

Proposition 2. The positive relationship between a leader’s charismatic leadership and followers’ affective and normative commitment will be less positive if followers’ cynicism concerning the trustworthiness of the particular leader’s intention to practice charismatic leadership is high.

Value erosion on the societal level and followers' need for meaning (arrow 3)

Need for meaning, defined as meaningful orientation that is transcendently grounded and therefore perceived as being valid, is a basic need that is virulent if this orientation cannot be assured (Frankl, 1978). Frankl (1978) documented crises of meaningful orientation in the course of his experiences as a doctor and concentration camp prisoner. Crises of meaningful orientation, however, can also be induced by value erosion (Sennett, 1998). The reason why a crisis occurs becomes clear through the following logic. From an identity theory perspective, goal-oriented behavior is hindered if the identity standards of a person (Burke, 1991) reflecting the guiding principles of the ideal ego (cf. the use of value in Schwartz et al., 2012) and goal justification are destabilized (Bandura, 2001). Future-oriented action control (Bandura, 2001) becomes harder if a person cannot rely on certainties that he or she takes for granted when answering the questions “What do I want?” and “What is important to me?” (Ashforth et al., 2008). Value erosion can cause identity standards to be questioned (Burke, 1991) and can, in this case, harm the identity (Petriglieri, 2011) in a way that is perceived as threatening.

As mentioned, value erosion is reflected at the individual level in the belief that (traditional) ethical norms are not adhered to and are seen as having lost their binding force. If those norms are perceived as outdated and escapist, the question is raised about what norms are currently valid. Answering this at first glance unbinding question becomes urgent latest when an individual is personally confronted with identity-related decisions privately or at work. The shift in values in open societies toward autonomy and individual development (Inglehart & Baker, 2000), a phenomenon that has been well-documented in Europe and the United States, is probably related, among other things, to the rising divorce rate. Individuals who experience divorce typically engage in a complex process of self-reflection about what they want and what their priorities should be. Answering these questions becomes even harder when value erosion has resulted in the social acceptance of diverse identity standards, which are incompatible but at the same time all reasonable in some way (a point made decades ago by Durkheim, 1966). Analogous crises of meaningful orientation and necessary identity-related decisions exist in the work context. For example, in an economic climate characterized by a high unemployment rate, followers may feel the pressure to identify with a company's shareholder-value philosophy and to interpret unethical practices (e.g., illegal bribes) as legitimate, even though doing so may contradict followers' values (Sennett, 1998).

An autonomous re-definition of destabilized identity standards might demand too much to an individual, even more so if traditional legitimization instances – mutual history and collective identities, as well as authority figures (Habermas, 2001) – seem to disappear due to accelerated value shifts and an increasingly diverse set of socially accepted values (as a reflection of value erosion), which implies the “breaking away” of formerly taken for granted identity-related certainties as well as their instances of legitimization (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). This “breaking away” constitutes the core of the problem in our context.

Against this background, observations of economically-induced instabilities of values, missions, and visions are problematic, especially within followers' own organizations, as they reflect this breaking away phenomenon at the company level. As the focus of corporate policies and strategies shifts toward short-term considerations and the number of mergers and takeovers increases (Sennett, 2005), missions and visions, which are value-related, are frequently reformulated (de Luque et al., 2008). As a result, leadership practices that refer to collective identities and a mutual history of the respective organization become less effective as a binding mechanism, as mutual history and collective identities are essentially being destroyed (Sennett, 2005).

In such environments, formerly reliable certainties that were – as long as they were taken for granted – perceived as fundamentally true basically come to be viewed as arbitrarily agreed upon conventions or economic strategies of adjustment (Beck, 2009; Schwartz, 1986), creating a vacuum for meaning. This especially creates irritation if identity standards must be autonomously defined and legitimized (Alvesson, 2010; Collinson, 2006; Schwartz, 1986). For the period of an unsuccessful re-definition of destabilized identity standards and respective inhibition of actions (Bandura, 2001), followers react with feelings of generalized insecurity or even fear (Lazarus, 1991). In modern times, this phenomenon resembles what is sometimes labeled as burn-out (Fahlman, Mercer, Gaskovski, Eastwood, & Eastwood, 2009; Goldberg, Eastwood, Laguardia, & Danckert, 2011; Munro & Huber, 2012).

Searching for a new, ‘taken for granted’ security that does not fail due to the shortages of a mundane and more or less arbitrary legitimization of identity standards, followers will increasingly demand values that can be experienced as transcendently grounded or “revealed” in the sense of Weber (1963). Empirically, the demand for transcendently grounded meaning is revealed by the initiation or intensification of religious activities (Stark & Glock, 2008). Religious ties allow for access to (revelation) knowledge that is validated by being put down in the Holy Scriptures (Bible, Torah, Koran) and became accessible to the Prophet by divine afflatus. The demand for transcendently grounded meaning is reflected in recent increased interest in spirituality in the United States as well as in Europe (Hicks, 2003). Affiliation with religious denominations and the turn to spiritual experiences – ways and means that are outside the company realm – reflect a desire for transcendence. “Transcendence is about connecting with something beyond the self, dedication to a higher cause” (Ashforth & Vaidyanath, 2002, p. 361; also cf. Schwartz, 1992). Whereas formalized religion meets this desire in a collective and institutionalized way, spirituality does so with varying degrees of individualization (e.g., different meditation methods or mystic immersion) (Hicks, 2003; Schwartz, 1992). Contrary to Weber (1963) assumptions, formal religious participation has increased in the United States – the pioneer country of modernization (Sennett, 2005) – not decreased, as was expected decades ago. Likewise, an increase in the demand for spiritual experiences has been documented in Europe (Fry, Vitucci, & Cedillo, 2005; Hicks, 2003). According to our line of argumentation, both developments are systematically interrelated with perceptions of tendentially alienating value erosion. Therefore we posit:

Proposition 3. Value erosion on the societal level is positively related to followers' need for transcendently grounded meaning.

Moderating effect of followers' need for meaning (arrow 4)

The central assumption for the moderating effect of followers' need for meaning is as follows: When value-related insecurity increases in society, even a work organization – transmitted via an overarching cosmology – can become a place of religion – a secular religion (Ashforth & Vaidyanath, 2002). Therefore, followers can also meet their needs for transcendence within an organization (cf. Fry, Hannah, Noel, & Walumbwa, 2011; Fry et al., 2005). An overarching cosmology defines “who one is (identity) and who belongs (membership), what matters (values) and what is to be done (purpose)” (Ashforth & Vaidyanath, 2002, p. 361). An overarching cosmology has the potential to be regarded as a secular religion, as it fulfills basic desires for transcendence and defines moral values (e.g., caring and concern, willingness to work hard, cooperativeness, etc.) that followers interpret to be valid (Ashforth & Vaidyanath, 2002). When charismatic leadership is interpreted as the transmission of an overarching cosmology, as Shamir et al. (1993) pointed out, then, in the course of charismatic leadership and the burgeoning charismatic relationship between the leader and followers (Klein & House, 1995), jobs could become “callings”, efforts above and beyond the call of duty could become “rituals”, and value-related meanings created through daily exposure could become “truths” (Ashforth & Vaidyanath, 2002). These potentials can become reality, especially in times of value erosion, due to a then occurring “raw hunger of many individuals for transcendence and thus their susceptibility [emphasis added] to edifying cosmologies” (Ashforth & Vaidyanath, 2002, p. 364). “Meaning, in short, is found where it is sought; it is not so much discovered as projected” (Ashforth & Vaidyanath, 2002, p. 364) and validated by action (i.e., daily rituals; Shamir et al., 1993; Weick, 1995).

Under such conditions, charismatic leadership could indeed serve as an anchor that helps followers re-define identity standards (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Lord & Brown, 2001; cf. De Hoogh & Den Hartog, 2009). Embedded in an overarching cosmology and a community of moral values, followers will frame the situation as being particularly cooperative, thus subjectively justifying a particularly high level of trust (Deutsch, 1973). As a consequence, followers increase positive attributions to the leader with regard to his or her trustworthiness. Thus, perceptions of the leader as a role model are strengthened and the values of the overarching cosmology are internalized. In the case of a high need for meaning and if followers are highly susceptible to edifying cosmologies, the positive relationship between charismatic leadership and followers' perceptions of the leader as a role model is further strengthened so that an especially high degree of affective and normative commitment can be expected. We therefore posit:

Proposition 4. The positive relationship between charismatic leadership and followers' affective and normative commitment will be more positive if followers' need for transcendentally grounded meaning is high.

The more the sentence “meaning is not discovered, but projected” (Ashforth & Vaidyanath, 2002, p. 364) holds true, the stronger the corruptibility of human beings is emphasized; the raw hunger for transcendence is evidenced by the popularity of extreme religious and political groups (e.g., Shamir et al., 1993). Thereby, the relevance of societal-level value erosion also becomes evident (Munro & Huber, 2012). As there are many more relevant boundary conditions for the appeal of extremist groups in addition to value erosion, we will not go into further detail here on this matter.

The interactive effects of followers' leadership-related cynicism and need for meaning (arrow 5)

Concerning the balance between the antagonistic dynamics of followers' need for meaning on the one hand and followers' cynicism on the other, two questions arise: Can followers' high cynicism weaken the positive moderating effects of followers' need for meaning? And vice versa, if and under which circumstances can a high need for meaning compensate or even overcompensate dysfunctional effects of followers' cynicism?

We will start with the second question. When followers' cynicism is low, we believe a compensation effect of high need for meaning is possible. Furthermore, as already discussed, followers' cynicism may decrease with adequate corrective experiences (cf. Lorinkova & Perry, 2014). Appropriate conditions for corrective experiences exist if followers are not confronted with short-lived modifications of visions and their implicit values (de Luque et al., 2008) and feel as though they are complying with valid moral values and that these establish a reference to transcendence. If the leader models values such as caring and helpfulness, this signals a norm of reciprocity, which counteracts attributions of exploitation intentions (Davis & Gardner, 2004).

Accordingly, if followers' cynicism decreases, the potentially negative cynicism dynamic (arrow 2) becomes less important. Moreover, if one imagines that the development of an overarching cosmology and the consequential accomplishment of identity redefinition would bring noticeable emotional relief to the follower, and if one considers the resulting susceptibility of the follower, it is possible that low and even declining cynicism can not only be compensated for, but also be overcompensated through a higher need for meaning. Not only is the negative moderating effect of followers' cynicism more or less eliminated, but the positive relationship between charismatic leadership and followers' perceptions of the leader as a role model is further strengthened so that a high degree of affective and normative commitment can be expected. Therefore we posit:

Proposition 5. The relationship between charismatic leadership and followers' affective and normative commitment will be more positive if followers' need for meaning is high and followers' cynicism is low.

As to the first question, an analog moderating effect of followers' high need for meaning is a lot less plausible if followers' cynicism is high. As long as the leader is attributed with having selfish and economic motives, distrust will dominate a follower's consciousness. It is barely justifiable that the negative moderator effect of cynicism can be compensated through a high need for meaning under these circumstances. If we inversely examine the interaction between these two dynamic forces from the point of view of the follower, the

leader's effort to model an overarching cosmology and to provide a frame alignment can be interpreted as being a subtle and intelligent (capitalistic) strategy of exploitation when cynicism is high. Due to the diminished credibility of the leader as a person, the leader is seen more as a negative (rather than as a positive) role model. Hence, if the credibility of the intention of the offered overarching cosmology is decreasing, followers' susceptibility and therefore their willingness to project meaning declines, despite their high need for meaning in this case. Therefore we posit:

Proposition 6. The relationship between charismatic leadership and followers' affective and normative commitment is less positive if followers' cynicism concerning the trustworthiness of a leader's intentions to practice charismatic leadership is high, even if followers' need for meaning is high as well.

Discussion

Many scholars have examined how specific environmental factors (e.g., acute economic crisis situations and economic uncertainties; see House et al., 1991) impact the effectiveness of charismatic leadership. The effects of modernization and resulting value erosion at the societal level as another possible dimension of environmental factors remained unexplored until now. As a first step, we reconstructed the positive relationship between charismatic leadership and followers' commitment by performing a thorough theoretical analysis (see Fig. 1) in order to clarify the potential mechanisms and possible effects of followers' cynicism and the need for meaning, which spread at the societal level. We conclude, that leaders' attempts to achieve frame alignment are truly critical to creating perceptions of the leader as a role model among followers. The credibility of these attempts is negatively affected by followers' cynicism and positively affected by their need for meaning. As our analysis reveals, this credibility problem is the core issue.

By being able to postulate (a) that the two dynamics of cynicism and need for meaning can be transmitted to individuals via societal level processes and how this transmission occurs, and (b) that both dynamics moderate the positive relationship between charismatic leadership and followers' commitment in an opposing manner, we can also postulate the leadership-related relevance of the environmental dimension of value erosion. With regard to the hard to define balance between the antagonistic dynamics of followers' need for meaning on the one hand and followers' cynicism on the other, we focused on clarifying when and why followers' demand for meaning does or does not compensate for the negative moderator effects of follower cynicism. Obviously, our discussion of this balance is of a preliminary nature.

Davis and Gardner (2004) proposed that the lens through which followers observe organizational realities is much cloudier. We applied this metaphor to leadership-related cynicism, explained the creation of that lens by societal level processes, and described the effects. Specifically, we concluded that the commitment-related effectiveness of charismatic leadership decreases even if followers' need for meaning is high. The risk of follower–leader dissociation is therefore not insignificant. Within the frame of follower–ship theory, Uhl-Bien et al. (2014, p. 15) used the examples of “proactive behavior, obedience, resistance, voice, dissent, advising” to illustrate followership on the behavioral level. We presume that followers not only question specific, typically object-related versions of following, but on a meta-level, question following itself and thus also the legitimacy of the leader's identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; cf. Van der Toorn, Tyler, & Jost, 2011). This also implies that followers are less likely to grant power to their leader, which is crucial for effective leadership (Howell & Shamir, 2005).

Limitations and future research

This review has several limitations. First, we were not able to encompass the entire universe of understandings of charismatic leadership (Conger, 1999), and the framework on which we base our research simplifies highly complex feedback processes within charismatic relationships between leaders and followers (Gardner & Avolio, 1998). This inspires two potential avenues for future research: First, if a leader notices that followers no longer perceive him or her as a role model due to cynicism, what are the potential effects on the leader and his or her leadership practices? Second, in what ways does followers' cynicism affect leader identity (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014)?

The second limitation relates to the fact that we addressed the relationship between charismatic leadership and follower affective and normative commitment primarily from a dyadic perspective (i.e., we did not discuss identification processes at the group level; Reicher, Haslam, & Hopkins, 2005; Ullrich, Christ, & van Dick, 2009), which is a simplification (Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Klein & House, 1995). We accepted this simplification as we primarily tried to explain the mediation of societal level value erosion through followers' cynicism and the need for meaning at the individual level and we believe this process is already highly complex.

Our analysis opens up several additional avenues for future research. For example, at the behavioral level, followers' cynicism manifests as derogatory verbal statements (Dean et al., 1998). What effects do such statements have on the affective and normative commitment of other group members (i.e., at the group level), and how are these effects mediated? In addition, scholars have shown that enthusiasm can be dispersed through processes of emotional contagion (e.g., Barsade & Gibson, 2007). Can such processes be assumed for cynicism? This topic has been barely investigated to date.

If “framing is an *art* [emphasis added] whereby leaders manage meaning and socially construct reality for themselves and followers” (Gardner & Avolio, 1998, p. 41), it is important for researchers to clarify the extent to which followers' cynicism can be attenuated or dissolved, and how. Especially against the background of the above-mentioned credibility problem, we hold that the term “art” should be emphasized. Measuring the degree of cynicism among followers prior to and one year after joining a new organization and trying to explain possible changes by assessing the quality of framing-related interactions based on interviews

with followers and their respective leaders could give insights into this art. In order to capture the myriad of potentially critical leader behaviors, its description could be oriented toward leader behavior as described in Conger and Kanungo (1987); Gardner and Avolio (1998) and/or Shamir et al. (1993).

To examine our multilevel framework or the propositions brought forth, we propose that researchers use the residential environments of study participants (i.e., large cities versus small towns versus remote rural areas) as a proxy reflecting the described societal processes. This is based on the reasoning that the respective living conditions may run parallel to the discussed value erosion. An examination of our multilevel model would also yield information on levels of cynicism at the individual level (cf. Mirvis & Kanter, 1992). Furthermore, additional moderators should be considered; for example, at the individual level, according to Rokeach (1960), the negative moderating effect of cynicism and the positive moderating effect of need for meaning should be higher among followers who exhibit a high need for closure (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & DeGrada, 2006).

As a future perspective, we want to point to the following: Under the perspective of cynicism, we so far only discussed in what way value erosion fosters follower cynicism and what effects take place. However, the question remains whether value erosion immanent to modernization can also induce cynicism among leaders. Leaders' cynicism may differ in content and strength from follower cynicism. Anyhow, cynicism may influence leaders' practices and/or intentions and so, followers' cynicism may not be based solely on attributions (cf. Bommer, Rubin, & Baldwin, 2004). "Charismatic" leadership based on cynicism – e.g. practiced due to career reasons in an opportunistic spirit, and therefore being related to pseudo-transformational leadership (Barling, Christie, & Turner, 2008) – can become less effective due to reduced authenticity and this effect can be independent of follower cynicism. A more in-depth analysis of the relevance of value erosion immanent to modernization on the influence of charismatic leadership must therefore focus on leaders as well as followers. However, the questions that arise due to this conclusion can only be discussed satisfactorily in a separate paper.

Managerial implications

Leaders who consider charismatic leadership to be a reasonable way to fulfill followers' need for meaning and who engage in this leadership practice have to answer the question of how to encounter followers' cynicism. When followers frame the situation as competitive (i.e., perceive the leader as representing the other side of the system, Shamir et al., 1998), the resulting distrust must be addressed. In this context, it will be helpful if the leader credibly communicates to at least try to balance the economical interests of the organization with the followers' demands for fair treatment and the adherence to ethical standards in general. From our point of view, leaders should not deny the conflicts between those criteria (Anand et al., 2004; Donaldson & Preston, 1995) but explicitly acknowledge their existence. Especially cynics would not expect the leader to endanger his or her career in order to establish this balance. As they, by self or external experience, know the scopes of these efforts, they have over time developed a sense as to which leader efforts are reasonable. In the noticeable exploration of options within these scopes, we see chances for the leader to successfully counteract followers' cynicism and the attributed manipulation intents; at the same time there lies a chance in this noticeable exploration of options to put the legitimacy of the leader's identity on reliable grounds (DeRue & Ashford, 2010) and to better fit the dilemmas immanent to modernization.

This implies that the postulate of "value congruence" between leader and follower, which is induced by frame alignment as well as references to the so-called (typically undefined) "collective" (Shamir et al., 1993), should not be overemphasized, as this would corroborate followers' suspicions of manipulation (Naus et al., 2007). Likewise, role modeling has to be reconsidered. Shamir et al. (1993) assumed that a leader's communicated conviction in the vision and respective values is beneficial to being perceived as a role model. For cynics, this could appear implausible, particularly since the vision and mission are not typically developed by the leader, but are specified by top managers and are temporally unstable (de Luque et al., 2008). In this context, Kohles, Bligh, and Carsten (2012) recommendation not to specify visions in the central unit, but to let leader and followers at a lower level jointly work on their specification is remarkable. To promote credibility, it can be helpful for leaders to explicitly acknowledge the fundamental "man-made" character of vision-inherent values as being a *conditio humanae* while interpreting "man-made" as a chance to imply certain purposes – together with the follower (cf. Kohles et al., 2012) – and to be mutually engaged with each other in order to follow these purposes. This would resemble a followership theory of leadership that could counter the perception of the leader as representing the other side of the system.

When confronted with the problem of cynicism, which is immanent to modernization, charismatic leadership must be adjusted in its practices and its understanding in order to effectively promote follower commitment. Less dreaming and much more proximal and realistic projections would also be part of the solution. Supposed appropriate support by the top management – this supposition has not always been fulfilled (Fu et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2009) – along with this new understanding could improve the conditions for effective charismatic leadership even in modern, ever-changing societies.

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