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

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ARTICLE INFO

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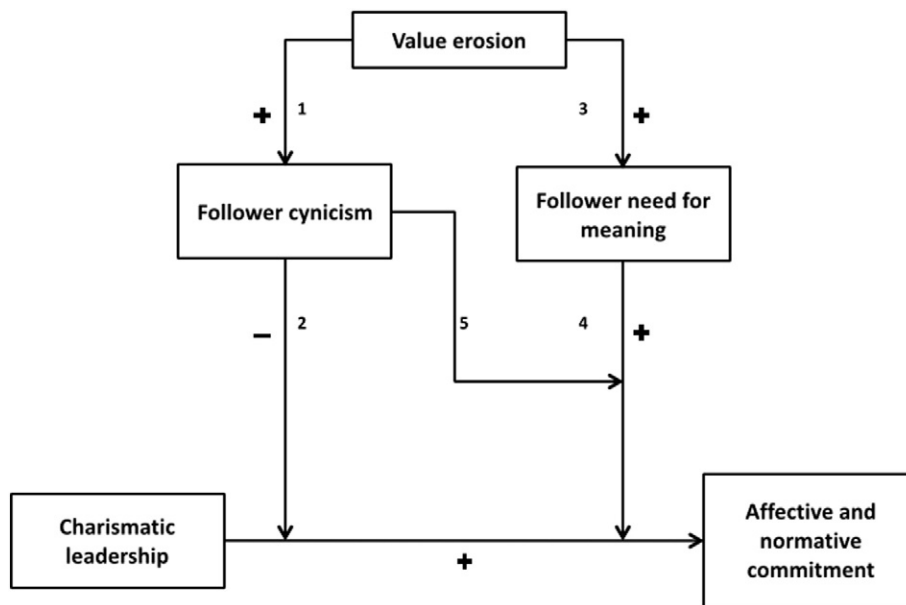
Fig. 1. Leader's charismatic leadership and followers' affective and normative commitment — the moderating dynamics of value erosion.

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 transcendentally 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.