



## Relational ties that bind: Leader–follower relationship dimensions and charismatic attribution

Stacy M. Campbell <sup>a,\*</sup>, Andrew J. Ward <sup>b</sup>, Jeffrey A. Sonnenfeld <sup>c</sup>, Bradley R. Agle <sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Kennesaw State University, Coles College of Business, Burruss Building – BB 303, 1000 Chastain Road NW, Kennesaw, GA 30144, USA

<sup>b</sup> Terry College of Business, University of Georgia, GA, USA

<sup>c</sup> Yale School of Management, Yale University, USA

<sup>d</sup> Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

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### ABSTRACT

Recent research on charismatic leadership has focused on the relationship between the leader and follower. Thus far though, researchers have simply assumed the existence of the relationship or distinguished between strong and weak relationships between the leader and the followers. What have been overlooked are the underlying dimensions of the relationship that may influence a charismatic attribution. The current study identifies two relational qualities and tests the relationship of these dimensions with the perception of charisma in a sample of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and their top management team (TMT) members. Results indicate that a constructive relationship is positively related to the attribution of charisma, while a competitive relationship has a negative relationship with the charismatic attribution. Implications and future directions for the study of charismatic leadership from a relational perspective are discussed.

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Derived from the Greek word “charismata,” meaning “gift from the gods,” charisma has been used to describe leaders who seemed to have a “charismatic gift” of exceptional powers that set them apart from ordinary men (Weber, 1947). Since the first studies on charismatic leadership, researchers have tried to gain a better understanding of the factors that govern attributions of charisma. Early research focused on the traits and behaviors of the leader (e.g. House, 1977) or the situation in which the leader performs (e.g. Schneider, 1937). Later researchers began to consider the importance of the follower (Avolio & Yammarino, 1990; Bass, 1988; Klein & House, 1995; Meindl, 1995), arguing that charismatic leadership did not exist separate from the perceptions of followers. As a result, the focus shifted towards the active role of the follower and how traits and behaviors of the followers influenced the perception of charisma in leaders. Today however, the emerging consensus on charismatic leadership is that the focus should be on the dyadic nature of the charismatic relationship (e.g., Klein & House, 1995; Lord & Maher, 1991; Weierter, 1997) rather than just the individual characteristics of the leader or the follower. There is agreement among researchers that rather than being a “gift from the gods” of extraordinary powers, charismatic leadership is located in the relationship between the leader and follower (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Groves, 2005; Howell & Shamir, 2005; Klein & House, 1995; Weierter, 1997).

In studying the relational basis for charismatic attribution, researchers have thus far simply assumed the existence of the relationship between the leader and the followers (Hollander, 1993; Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999), or have distinguished between strong versus weak leader–member relationships (Graen, 1976; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and have largely overlooked other qualities of the relationship which may influence a charismatic attribution. Rather than focus on potential antecedents, much of the empirical research in this area has focused on the consequences of transformational leadership as well as potential mediators and moderators of the relationship between charismatic leadership and follower/firm performance (e.g., House & Howell, 1992;

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 678 797 2528.

E-mail addresses: [stacy\\_campbell@kennesaw.edu](mailto:stacy_campbell@kennesaw.edu) (S.M. Campbell), [ajward@terry.uga.edu](mailto:ajward@terry.uga.edu) (A.J. Ward), [Jeffrey.sonnenfeld@yale.edu](mailto:Jeffrey.sonnenfeld@yale.edu) (J.A. Sonnenfeld), [agle@vms.cis.pitt.edu](mailto:agle@vms.cis.pitt.edu) (B.R. Agle).

House & Shamir, 1993; Klein & House, 1995; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; Weierter, 1997). We argue that to better understand charismatic leadership we must first focus our attention on understanding the relationship between the leader and his/her followers, and this entails more than just describing the leader–follower relationship as high-quality or low-quality (Graen, 1976; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Rather we need to identify the characteristics that define, constitute, and differentiate these relationships and understand how they influence the perception of charisma. To this end, this study seeks to begin to understand the dimensions of the relationship between the leader and follower which result in an attribution of charisma to the leader by the follower. Specifically we look at two relational qualities between the leader and follower: the constructive and competitive dimensions of the relationship, and test the relationship of these dimensions to the attribution of charisma in a sample of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and their top management teams (TMTs).

## 1. Theoretical framework

### 1.1. Transformational/charismatic leadership

Based on charismatic behavior described by Weber (1947), a new type of leadership theory, alternatively known as “transformational,” or “charismatic”, became a popular research topic (e.g., Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; House, 1977; Trice & Beyer, 1986). Under this leadership theory, the focus shifted from the transactional exchange between the leader and the followers (Burns, 1978; House, 1977) to exceptional leaders who have extraordinary effects on their followers by elevating followers' goals and helping them to reach their full potential (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Conger & Kanungo, 1987). Research has shown that charismatic leadership can have positive effects on individual outcomes (e.g., motivation and self-esteem, willingness to go beyond expectations and engage in organizational citizenship behaviors), group outcomes (e.g., group cohesion) and eventually on organizations (e.g., resulting financial outcomes) (Agle & Sonnenfeld, 1994; Bass, 1985; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; House, 1977). A number of meta-analyses and empirical studies have demonstrated the strength of these effects (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe & Kroeck, 1996) and as a result transformational/charismatic leadership continues to be a popular research topic.

Weber's original conceptualization of charisma had five principal components (Trice & Beyer, 1986): 1) a person with extraordinary gifts; 2) a crisis; 3) a radical solution to the crisis; 4) followers who are attracted to the exceptional person because they believe that they are linked through him to transcendent powers; and 5) validation of the person's gifts and transcendence in repeated experiences of success. The research that initially followed Weber's work focused primarily on the impact of leader traits and behaviors on follower's attitudes and behaviors, especially on followers' commitment to performance outcomes that exceed their expectations. Subsequently many researchers (e.g., Howell & Shamir, 2005; Klein & House, 1995; Meindl, 1990, 1995) criticized these post-Weberian leadership theories for being too leader-centric. It was apparent to these scholars that leaders do not work in a vacuum and that the followers also play a key role in charismatic leadership (e.g., House & Shamir, 1993; Howell & Shamir, 2005; Klein & House, 1995). As Hollander (1993, p. 29) pointed out, “Without followers, there are plainly no leaders or leadership.” Leaders interact with, and react to, their followers and often are influenced by them. Despite this push, research looking at followers' characteristics has still received limited attention. Moreover, these studies focused on follower traits and behaviors that were likely to predispose followers to perceive and be attracted to charismatic leaders (e.g., House & Howell, 1992; House & Shamir, 1993; Klein & House, 1995; Shamir et al., 1993; Weierter, 1997). Klein & House (1995) used a fire metaphor in which charismatic leadership is seen as consisting of the spark (the leader), flammable material (the followers), and oxygen (a conducive environment). Recently Howell & Shamir (2005) pointed out that viewing followers as “flammable material” waiting to be ignited, portrays them as having a limited and passive role.

Current leadership research suggests that the variance in charisma can be attributed not only to the exceptional leader, the follower or the situation, but to the relationship between the leader and followers (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2005; Groves, 2005; Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999; Howell & Shamir, 2005). That is, leaders and followers are seen as coming together to form a dynamic relationship that influences the perception, and resulting benefits, of charismatic leadership. This approach puts leadership in the relationships connecting individuals rather than the attributes of the leader or the follower (Balkundi & Kilduff, 2005). According to Howell & Shamir (2005, p.4), charisma is defined as “residing in the relationship between leaders who exhibit certain charismatic qualities and behaviors and those followers who have certain perceptions, emotions, and attitudes toward the leader, the group led by the leader, and the vision advocated by the leader”.

Inferred in this definition, and described in Weber's original theory, is that *charisma* is a perceptual phenomenon (Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Lord & Maher, 1991). Drawing on theory and research into social cognition, Lord & Maher (1991, p. 11) defined *leadership* as “the process of being perceived by others as a leader”. Thus, understanding how the leader–follower relationship might influence this perception is an important next step. While there is consensus that charisma is indeed a relational phenomenon, it is unclear what characteristics of the relationship are driving the followers' perception of charisma. The purpose of this current paper is to obtain a better understanding of the relationship characteristics between a leader and follower that influence the perception of charisma.

### 1.2. Leader–follower relationship

Social relationships permeate every aspect of human life. We are born into relationships and we live our lives in relationships with others. Relationships are the context in which most human behavior occurs (Berscheid, 1999; Fiske, 1991) and people think about themselves in relational terms (Fiske & Haslam, 1996). For human beings, relationships are defining elements. According to social-cognitive theory, social information is organized around person categories as well as around relationships (Fiske, 1991).

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