



## The Romance of Leadership

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## The Romance of Leadership

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This research is an attempt to explore and understand the prominence of the concept of leadership in our collective consciousness. In three archival studies, we examined the attention and interest in leadership as reflected in a variety of publications, in conjunction with national, industry, and firm variations in performance. In a series of experimental studies, we examined the effects of performance outcome levels on the strength of leadership attributions. The results of these studies supported an attributional perspective in which leadership is construed as an explanatory concept used to understand organizations as causal systems; results were interpreted in terms of a romanticized conception of leadership. •

The sheer volume of theory and research devoted to the study of leadership over the decades is testimony to its prominence in our collective efforts to understand and improve organizations. However, it has become apparent that, after years of trying, we have been unable to generate an understanding of leadership that is both intellectually compelling and emotionally satisfying. The concept of leadership remains largely elusive and enigmatic. Critics have made us aware of a range of scientific deficiencies that have plagued relevant theories and research, citing poor methodology, conceptual problems, definitional ambiguities, inappropriate focus, lack of coherence, and so on (e.g., Bennis, 1959; Stogdill, 1974; Miner, 1975; Greene, 1976; Karmel, 1978; McCall and Lombardo, 1978). Others have told us that leadership is best construed as a mere substitute for and, thus, is functionally equivalent to other, more mundane organizational arrangements and processes (e.g., Kerr and Jermier, 1978). Still others confront us with disturbing evidence that our assumptions about the direct instrumental potency of leadership on organizational outcomes have vastly outstripped reality (e.g., Lieberman and O'Connor, 1972; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977). Finally, there are persuasive arguments that cause one to suspect that the greater relevance of leadership as a concept for organizational science is that it is a phenomenologically important aspect of how observers and participants understand, interpret, and otherwise give meaning to organizational activities and outcomes (Calder, 1977; Pfeffer, 1977; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Despite these assaults on traditional views, it appears that the concept of leadership is a permanently entrenched part of the socially constructed reality that we bring to bear in our analysis of organizations. And there is every sign that the obsessions with and celebrations of it will persist. The purpose of this analysis is to shed some light on this collective commitment to leadership.

In our view, the social construction of organizational realities has elevated the concept of leadership to a lofty status and level of significance. Such realities emphasize leadership, and the concept has thereby gained a brilliance that exceeds the limits of normal scientific inquiry. The imagery and mythology typically associated with the concept is evidence of the mystery and near mysticism with which it has been imbued. A sample listing of some articles on leadership that were found in recent volumes of the *Index of Business Publications* re-

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flects this imagery: "Leadership and Magical Thinking"; "Black Art of Leadership"; "I Think Continually of Those Who Are Great"; "Protean Managerial Leadership"; and "Casting Out Organizational Demons: An Exorcise in Leadership."

It appears that as observers of and as 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 in the actual efficacy of those individuals who occupy the elite positions of formal organizational authority. The romanticization of leadership is hinted at in the observations made by a number of social and organizational analysts who have noted the esteem, prestige, charisma, and heroism attached to various conceptions and forms of leadership (e.g., Weber, 1946; Klapp, 1964; House, 1977; Burns, 1978; Goode, 1978; McCall and Lombardo, 1978; Staw and Ross, 1980; March, 1981). We suspect that the romanticized conception of leaders and leadership is generalized and prevalent. The argument being advanced here is that the concept of leadership is a perception that plays a part in the way people attempt to make sense out of organizationally relevant phenomena. Moreover, in this sense-making process, leadership has assumed a romanticized, larger-than-life role.

An important part of the sense-making process involves an attempt to generate causal attributions for organizational events and occurrences (Thompson and Tuden, 1959; Weick, 1979). The possibility of taking an attributional perspective on leadership was first raised by Calder (1977) and by Pfeffer (1977). Since then, there has been a growing body of research and theory devoted to attributional analyses of leadership (see McElroy, 1982; Lord and Smith, 1983, for recent reviews). However, that literature, with but few exceptions (e.g., Phillips and Lord, 1981), has not dealt in a direct way with the basic issue raised by Calder and by Pfeffer, which we are addressing here: namely, leadership is perhaps best construed as an explanatory category that can be used to explain and account for organizational activities and outcomes. Staw (1975) reached a similar conclusion, but in a more general context, by arguing that the self-reported opinions and beliefs of organizational actors and observers regarding causality may in fact constitute attributional inferences rather than actual causal determinants of events and occurrences. Unfortunately, most researchers have responded by focusing narrowly on the methodological ramifications of this view (e.g., DeNisi and Pritchard, 1978; Downey, Chacko, and McElroy, 1979; Binning and Lord, 1980; McElroy and Downey, 1982), for the most part ignoring the wider, underlying implication that many organizational behavior concepts can be used by individuals to form coherent explanations of events and occurrences. This is precisely the premise from which the present analysis proceeds.

The significance placed on leadership is a response to the ill-structured problem of comprehending the causal structure of complex, organized systems. Imagine for a moment the problem faced by an observer who must comprehend a large

and complex system: there are many causal forces to consider and they occur together in highly intricate and overlapping networks, complete with multiple inputs and outcomes, numerous feedback loops, and all existing in some dynamic state of flux. Total comprehension of the system will easily be beyond the power of the observer. In such a task, the particular understanding that is gained will depend at least as much on the characteristics of the observer as it does on the system itself. Our informal, implicitly held models and perhaps our more formal theories, as well, are limited responses to the task of comprehending the causal complexities that characterize all organizations. Of course, the potential ways in which an understanding can be achieved are many, and it would be difficult to choose among them on a purely rational, logical basis. However, what is attended to and what causal factors emerge as the "figure" against the background of all other possibilities, even if arbitrary with respect to the system, is not random but is a process guided by the psychology and sociology of the observer. In effect, the results represent a systematic bias about how a system is understood, how relevant events and outcomes are defined and explained, and to what factors they are attributed. The term "bias" is used here in the way Schlenker (1982: 205) defined it: "A bias in the interpretation and explanation of events is a subjective tendency to prefer one interpretation over another; such an interpretation may or may not be an error according to some 'objective' criterion for assessing the event." Such preferences occur, in part, because of the ambiguity of relevant information and the perceived importance of events. The romanticized conception of leadership results from a biased preference to understand important but causally indeterminant and ambiguous organizational events and occurrences in terms of leadership. Accordingly, in the absence of direct, unambiguous information that would allow one rationally to infer the locus of causality, the romanticized conception of leadership permits us to be more comfortable in associating leaders — by ascribing to them control and responsibility — with events and outcomes to which they can be plausibly linked.<sup>1</sup>

### The Present Research

The research reported here examined the hypothesis that the relative prominence of the use of leadership in understanding complex, organized systems varies to a significant degree with the performance levels of such systems. Generally speaking, the need to understand and make sense should correspond to the occurrence of salient events (Anderson, 1983). It is possible that observers are generally prone to overestimate the impact of leadership in their explanations of events; however, it seems likely that variations in events would be important for uncovering any bias toward understanding events in terms of leadership. One implication of a heroic, larger-than-life view of leadership is that its effects on an organization are not trivial. That is, associations between leadership and events will be consistent with the romanticized conception and will therefore be most appealing when those events are in some way defined as extraordinary (i.e., large cause, large effect). We reasoned that the romanticized conception will have greatest sway in extreme cases — either very good or very poor performance — causing observers to understand these events

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This collective, idealized representation of leadership bears a certain similarity to what has been examined under the general rubric of "implicit leadership theories" (e.g., Rush, Thomas, and Lord, 1977; Staw and Ross, 1980); however, we presumed the conception to be much more generic, powerful, and less well articulated.

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in terms of leadership. A stronger emphasis on leadership should occur under conditions in which high-magnitude outcomes obtain, and weaker preferences should be found when low-magnitude outcomes obtain. We know from past research that leaders are often held responsible and are "scapegoated" for poor organizational performance (e.g., Gamson and Scotch, 1964). Other evidence suggests that information about performance is sometimes used to infer the good and bad quality of leadership that must have existed (e.g., Staw, 1975). Thus, we expected that a bias toward leadership could be systematically related to performance levels in a positive or negative way. These ideas were tested in a series of archival and experimental studies.

## ARCHIVAL STUDIES

In the archival studies, we attempted to find evidence of the bias represented in the romanticized conception of leadership by explaining how, if at all, an interest in leadership is associated with the performance of firms, industries, and the national economy. In order to do so, we examined published sources and dissertations for the appearance of leadership as a topic of interest and attention. The working assumption was that an analysis of the correspondence between attention to leadership and performances could provide an indirect and very broad indication of the extent to which outcomes are collectively understood in terms of and attributed to leadership. In Study 1, we examined the relative emphasis on corporate leaders and leadership in the popular press. In Studies 2 and 3, we focused on the correspondence between variations in national economic performance and the general emphasis placed on leadership by young scholars and by the business community in general. All three studies were designed to test the hypothesis that the amount of interest in and attention devoted to leadership in the publications studied would vary directly or inversely with general performance.

## STUDY 1: THE POPULAR PRESS

### Method

For this study, we examined titles of articles published in the *Wall Street Journal*, from 1972 through 1982, on a sample of 34 business firms drawn from the Fortune 500 list of large U.S. corporations. We measured the amount of attention and publicity this well-known publisher of business news devoted to the topic of corporate leadership and determined whether or not that attention bore any relationship to performance levels — defined here in general terms of the sales or profit growth of the firms and industries involved. The *Wall Street Journal* was chosen because it has an impeccable reputation as a highly credible source of business news, it has an extraordinary readership, and it is perhaps one of the most powerful, leading publications in the world (Neilson and Neilson, 1973). For performance data for the same period, we relied on the *Value Line Investment Survey*.

Our selection of firms was guided by several considerations. First, we attempted to sample a range of different industries, with several sample firms in each industry. We also tried to choose firms that showed a range of different performance

curves over the time period. Finally, we wanted to select firms that we felt would have received ample press coverage during those years. We had originally sampled 35 firms; however, we realized later that we had unwittingly selected one firm that was a wholly owned subsidiary, and it was therefore dropped. The final sample of firms is listed in Table 1.

Table 1

<b>Sample of Firms</b>	
Abbott Labs	Ford Motor Company
Allied Chemical	General Electric
American Airlines	General Mills
American Cyanamid	General Motors
American Home Products	Hewlett-Packard
American Motors	IBM
Armco	Lilly
Bethlehem Steel	Lockheed
Boeing	McDonnell-Douglas
Bristol Myers	McGraw-Edison
Burroughs	NCR
Chrysler	Pan Am
Continental Airlines	RCA
Data General	Republic Steel
Delta Airlines	Texas Instruments
DuPont	U.S. Steel
Eastern Airlines	Westinghouse

**Emphasis on leadership.** To get an estimate of the extent to which corporate leadership was emphasized for a given firm in a given year, we used the annual index of the *Wall Street Journal*, which contains a listing by title, under each large corporation, of every article on the corporation appearing in the *WSJ* in that year. Our procedure was to read the titles under the headings for each firm in the sample and for every year. An article was classified as leadership oriented (LA) if its title included a keyword or phrase that appeared in a "dictionary," developed specifically for this research, containing a short, selected list of items. The items included references to names of corporate officers, references to senior executive positions, and phrases such as "top management," "senior executive," "top brass," and other descriptors commonly used to refer to corporate leadership. In some cases, whether or not an item was a keyword depended on its use in the context of the title. For example, the word "management" was included if it referred to the administrators of the firm, but it was excluded when the referent was a process, as in "the management of innovation." If the title did not include a listed item, then the article was assigned to an "other" (OA) category. Two coders had the task of scanning the titles and coding articles. Each coder was assigned responsibility for tabulating the frequencies in each category on a firm-by-firm, yearly basis, for half the sample. The two coders underwent several preliminary exercises in which they were asked to search and classify the articles from a number of pages of the *Index*, using the dictionary to guide their decisions. These exercises led to some modifications in the dictionary. In subsequent trial runs, each coder independently searched and classified the articles from two pages selected at random from the *Index*. The extent of their agreement was scored, revealing an error rate of less

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than 3 percent. The coders' tabulations summarizing the number of articles classified as LA relative to the number of articles classified as OA was taken as a rough indication of the degree to which leadership was being emphasized. This emphasis was captured in a "Leadership Quotient" (LQ), equivalent to the ratio,  $(LA/OA) \times 100$ .

Of course, there are some obvious, inherent limitations in using titles to classify articles. If nothing else, measurement error would be increased through any misclassifications. However, there are several considerations that justified its use and provided us with at least some reassurance about its suitability for this research. First, this method allowed us to scan and code a very large number of references in a reasonable period of time, thus enabling us to expand the number of data points far beyond that possible through an analysis of the actual contents of articles. Second, titles are usually intended to highlight the main themes of an article, which suggests that there is a reasonable correspondence between title and content. Third, even if the correspondence between titles and content is a loose one, references to leaders in the title head of an article symbolically emphasize the concept of leadership, increasing its prominence relative to other concepts and thereby producing an implicit association between top management and whatever information then appears in the article or elsewhere about the firm. Fourth, our method is conceptually consistent with the systems used by a number of well-known and popular library data bases. For example, the *Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI)* and the *Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)* data bases both make use of title-keyword systems to classify publications into a variety of content areas.<sup>2</sup> Although these considerations cannot give us perfect confidence, when taken together they allowed us to feel reasonably comfortable with our title scan and classification procedure.

## Results and Discussion

A total of 33,248 articles about the firms in our sample appeared in the *WSJ* over the period examined. Of those, 2,832 had titles that were coded as emphasizing things other than leadership (OA). The average number of articles for any given firm, in any given year, was 88.90. Of those, an average of 7.57 were coded as LA, ranging from a minimum of zero to a maximum of 59. The average number of OA articles was 81.33, ranging from a minimum of 6 to a maximum of 995. The average yearly LQ was 14.48 percent, ranging from a minimum of 0 percent to a maximum of 70 percent. The comparable figure for mean annual sales growth was 13.33 percent, ranging from a low of -45.57 percent to a high of 131.03 percent.

*Year-wise analysis.* To find evidence that a general emphasis on leadership is associated with performance, we examined the yearly LQ's for the entire sample of firms in conjunction with their yearly performances. The results indicated that LQ scores were positively related to performance, measured here in terms of yearly annual sales growth,  $r(9 \text{ df}) = .53, p < .05$ . This suggests that years in which companies are on average doing well are also the years in which leadership on average tends to be more highly emphasized.

## 2

Unlike the *SSCI* data base, which relies exclusively on a title-keyword system, the *ERIC* data base uses both a title-keyword system and a controlled vocabulary system. Under the controlled vocabulary system, assignment to a particular content area ("access code") is made by a coder who reads publications for their content themes. We conducted separate searches of the *ERIC* data base using the keyword descriptor method and the controlled vocabulary method to retrieve the number of entries on a yearly basis, for every year the data base was available (1966-1983), under the access code "leadership." The number of entries retrieved under each system were highly correlated,  $r(16 \text{ df}) = .94, p < .001$ .

*Analysis by industry.* To examine the relative emphasis on leadership with respect to different industry performances, we classified the 34 firms in our sample into ten major industrial groupings on the basis of the first two digits of their SIC designations. The mean annual increase in sales performance across these industries was 10.37 percent, with a standard deviation of 2.70 percent, ranging from a high of 15.80 percent, to a low of 6.92 percent. The number of firms in our sample in the same industrial group was quite small: usually three or four, but in one case two, and in another case six. Even so, a one-way ANOVA revealed that the mean LQ varied substantially across the industry groups,  $F(9,34) = 2.28$ ,  $p < .05$ . Moreover, the variance in LQ appears to be systematically related to industry performance: a planned comparison revealed that firms associated with the five highest performance industries had, on average, significantly higher LQ's than those firms associated with the lowest performance industries,  $F(1,33) = 8.99$ ,  $p < .01$ . That finding was corroborated by a significant correlation between average firm LQ and industry performance,  $r(8 \text{ df}) = .64$ ,  $p < .05$ .

*Company-by-company analysis.* To examine how the emphasis on leadership may vary in relationship to a firm's own performances over time and how that relationship may vary across firms, we conducted separate analyses for each firm, correlating LQ with annual performance. Since we have data available for only 11 years, the potential degrees of freedom available for these analyses are quite small ( $df = 9$ ). However, we felt that the 34 replications could provide us with a reasonably good estimate of the pervasiveness of the expected effect. Given the inherent difficulties of specifying a priori what definition of performance will be used to make inferences about and associations to the leaders of any given firm, and since performance of a single firm is often judged in terms of how well it is doing relative to others in its own industry, we expanded the general performance outcomes for this analysis to include growth in profits and sales relative to the comparable industry-wide figures. The results of these analyses indicated that for 25 of the 34 firms (74 percent), LQ was significantly ( $p < .09$  or greater) associated with at least some of our definitions of performance. If 50 percent is used as an extremely conservative expected value, then a simple one-degree-of-freedom chi-square test suggests this is a nonrandom pattern;  $\chi^2(1 \text{ df}) = 6.89$ ,  $p < .019$ . Also, of the 25 firms showing an association between LQ and performance, 16 (64 percent) were positive, and the remaining 9 (36 percent) were negative.

*Within-year analysis.* Our final analysis focused on the covariation of LQ and performance across companies in each of the 11 years. The data summarized in Table 2 show that, in every year examined, LQ was correlated ( $p < .08$  or greater) with performance outcomes. In eight of those years, the significant correlations were negative, indicating that in each of those years, the poorer the performance, the more leadership was emphasized. In the remaining three years, the significant correlations were positive, such that the better the performances, the greater the emphasis on leadership.



Table 2

**Within-year Analysis: Direction of Significant Correlations between Leadership Quotient and Company Performance Measures**

Year										
1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982
neg*	neg	neg	neg	neg	neg*	pos	pos	pos	neg	neg

\* $p < .08$ ; all others are  $p < .05$  or greater.

The four sets of analyses gave us an opportunity to gain somewhat different perspectives on the data and provided us with different focal points for examining the tendency to associate leadership with performance. In each of the analyses, the weight of evidence supported our expectations that the emphasis on a firm's top management will vary significantly with performance levels. The industry and the year-wise analyses revealed that an emphasis on leadership increases with increasingly positive performance. The within-company and within-year analyses introduced additional evidence that, on some occasions and for some firms, leadership is more likely to be emphasized when performances are poor. These two major patterns of results, when taken together, provided us with initial support for the proposition that the perceived causal priority of and attributions to leadership in understanding organizational events and occurrences are likely to occur when performances are either very good or very bad.

## STUDY 2: DISSERTATION TOPICS

With the evidence obtained from Study 1, we turned our attention to exploring the societal aspect of our theory, which suggests that the level of collective interest and significance invested in the concept of leadership is responsive to fluctuations in the general economic performance of the entire nation. In order to test that notion, we chose, in this study, to track the level of interest in leadership through the dissertation topics young scholars chose. We assumed that the commitment and devotion represented by a dissertation topic would provide us with a glimpse of the collective investment in the concept of leadership.

### Method

We counted the number of doctoral dissertations devoted to the topic of leadership and related it to the general economic conditions over the years 1929–1983. Our primary source of information was *Dissertation Abstracts International (DAI)*, an internationally recognized reference tool that summarizes and indexes virtually all the current dissertations accepted in the U.S. and Canada (*DAI User's Guide*, 1983). We used the subject index, which lists and groups dissertations into over 200 specialized subject headings, one of which is "leadership." The number of dissertations appearing every year under that heading ("LD") formed the basis of our analysis. However, because *DAI* did not give comparable data that would allow us to estimate easily the total number of dissertations in all the social sciences, we obtained an estimate from another source, *American Doctoral Dissertations*. We used

their annual figures to find the total number of social science dissertations accepted each year ("TD"). In order to estimate general economic conditions, we relied on figures published by the Economic Statistics Bureau of Washington, DC, in their *Handbook of Basic Economic Statistics*, to compute year-to-year percentage changes in the GNP (delta GNP). This measure was chosen because it is a very broad and familiar indicator of swings in the nation's economy.

### Results and Discussion

From 1929 to 1983 there was a dramatic increase in the number of dissertations awarded. In 1929, there were under 2,000; in 1979, there were over 35,000. This historical trend showed up in our preliminary analysis as a very strong correlation between years and TD,  $r = .91$ ,  $p < .001$ , and LD,  $r = .81$ ,  $p < .001$ . Thus, in light of this strong historical trend, we controlled for years, through partial correlations, to examine the relationship between economic conditions and interest in leadership. We also formed a ratio, LD/TD, which yielded a leadership quotient ( $LQ_{\text{dissertations}}$ ) conceptually similar to that used in Study 1. It also seemed reasonable to expect a lag of several years between economic conditions and completed dissertations, although we could not specify exactly what that lag would be. On the basis of these considerations, our analyses focused on the lagged (0 to +6 years) partial correlations between delta GNP and  $LQ_{\text{dissertations}}$ , controlling for linear, historical trends. Table 3 shows that the relationship between delta GNP and  $LQ_{\text{dissertations}}$  was negative, indicating that down-

Table 3

**Lagged Partial Correlations between  $LQ_{\text{dissertations}}$  and Changes in the General Economy (Delta GNP)**

							Lag
0	+1	+2	+3	+4	+5	+6	
-15	-22	-28*	-27*	-39**	-17	-02	

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

turns in the growth of the economy were subsequently followed by a greater interest in leadership, relative to all other topics and after controlling for historical trends. This relationship becomes reliable after a two-year lag, reaching its highest level in the plus-fourth year, and then drops off. These results, then, suggest that there is an association between good or bad economic times and the interest in leadership, at least among scholars choosing dissertation topics.

### STUDY 3: GENERAL BUSINESS PERIODICALS

This study was conceptually similar to Study 2. This time, however, our strategy was to focus more specifically on the business community. Accordingly, we deliberately chose an available data base that was much wider in scope than that used in Study 2 and captured to a greater degree the interests of the general business community in the topic of leadership. Given the results of Study 2, we expected that the negative

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relationship between the state of the general economy and interest in leadership would be replicated here. This strategy allowed us to observe whether or not the general business community's collective interest in leadership is also responsive to fluctuations in the national economy. If so, then we could have added confidence in the generalizability of our guiding hypothesis. In addition, the study afforded us an opportunity to determine if interest is such that it tends to emphasize leadership to a greater degree during good or during bad economic times.

## Method

We examined the annual volumes from 1958 to 1983 of the *Business Periodical Index (BPI)*, published by the H. W. Wilson Company, which consists of subject entries for a wide range of business-oriented publications. In 1981 alone, the contents of over 250 different periodicals were indexed and grouped into hundreds of subject headings, one of which is "leadership." Although scholarly journals such as *ASQ* and *AMJ* are indexed, the majority of the publications indexed are nonacademic and practitioner-oriented. For example, this index includes popular periodicals, such as *Barrons*, *Business Week*, *Forbes*, and *Fortune*, as well as more specialized, often industry-specific publications, such as *Chemical Week*, *Electronics World*, and *Pipeline and Gas Journal*. Because of these characteristics, this database was chosen over others, such as *ERIC*, or *SSCI*. In addition, the index was published from 1958 to the present — the longest running period we could find.

As in Study 2, obtaining a yearly estimate of the interest in leadership entailed a simple count of the number of titles listed under the subject heading, "leadership" ( $LA_{BPI}$ ). However, no published data were available on the total number of articles indexed ( $TA_{BPI}$ ), and this had to be estimated. Fortunately, because the format, page size, and type size have remained the same across volumes and years, we were able to obtain the average number of entries per page by drawing a sample of 50 pages (two pages for every year) and then counting the number of entries on each ( $M = 65.24$ ;  $SD = 7.15$ ). We then multiplied the number of pages in each volume by the average number of entries per page to arrive at a yearly estimate of  $TA_{BPI}$ .

## Results and Discussion

There has been a strong growth in the number of business periodicals published over the years, and this historical trend was reflected in our data by the zero-order correlations between years and  $TA_{BPI}$ ,  $r = .88$ ,  $p < .001$ , and  $LA_{BPI}$ ,  $r = .83$ ,  $p < .001$ . In an analysis parallel to that in the previous study, we examined the relationship between  $LQ_{BPI}$  ( $LA/TA$ ) and delta GNP, controlling for that linear historical trend. The partial correlations were lagged in the same manner as in Study 2 (0 to +6 years), although little delay was anticipated, given that the intent of the majority of the periodicals is to stay current. The results, summarized in Table 4, show that, as in Study 2, there appeared to be some association between economic performance and interest in leadership, after controlling for historical trends. However, unlike in the previous study, the relationship is predominantly positive, suggesting that the interest in leadership in the general business community, at

least in terms of publications, seems to be at its greatest levels when there are upswings in the nation's economic growth. Apparently, the relationship is more immediate in time than that found with the dissertation data, which is not surprising, given the differences in the nature and goals of those publications. However, why  $LQ_{\text{dissertations}}$  in Study 2 varied inversely and why in this study  $LQ_{\text{BPI}}$  varied directly with delta GNP is intriguing. Perhaps those patterns represent some underlying differences between academic and practitioner-oriented views. Whatever the case, the relationships are not likely to represent random associations and are both generally consistent with our expectations, if not in direction, at least in terms of degree.

Table 4

**Lagged Partial Correlations between  $LQ_{\text{BPI}}$  and Changes in the General Economy (Delta GNP)**

							Lag
0	+ 1	+ 2	+ 3	+ 4	+ 5	+ 6	
.67***	.48**	.52**	.02	-.33	-.35	-.02	

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES

The preceding archival studies provided reasonably clear evidence of a general relationship between performance outcomes and degree of emphasis on leadership. The following series of experiments was designed to test more precisely the notion that the use of leadership as an explanatory concept — in the form of causal attributions — varies with performance. In particular, given the theoretical arguments and the pattern of positive and negative relationships uncovered in the archival studies, we sought to determine if, under controlled experimental conditions, leadership attributions would indeed be more likely to occur — and thereby create a stronger association — when performance is either very good or very bad. In the three experiments reported here, business school students were presented with minimal information and were asked to account for instances of performance that varied in terms of the magnitude of outcomes. In each case, they were asked to consider a leader as a possible reason for the outcome event. For comparison purposes, individuals' attributions to alternative determinants of performance other than to the leader were also obtained. Study 4 provided a partial test of the hypothesis by examining attributional patterns when observers were presented with information that varied the magnitude of *positive* performance outcomes. Study 5 provided a more complete test of the hypothesis by replicating and extending Study 4 and included conditions that varied the magnitude of *negative* as well as positive performance outcomes. Studies 4 and 5 laid the groundwork for Study 6, which attempted to replicate the pattern of results under more refined conditions and began to explore the role of expectations on leadership attributions. Although Studies 4 and 5 were preliminary, because they were instrumental to the development of Study 6, we will briefly describe them here.

## STUDY 4

### Method

Fifty-nine undergraduates enrolled in an introductory organizational behavior course at a large northeastern university participated in this study. Their mean age was 21.90 years, and on the average they reported having the equivalent of 2.56 years of work experience.

Subjects were randomly assigned to read one of three different versions of an extremely brief organizational performance-related vignette. Each version contained the same summary description of an organizational unit and its members, including the leader. The vignettes differed only in terms of the information they provided on performance outcomes, which were defined in terms of sales increase. Low, moderate, and high magnitude effects were conveyed to subjects by providing them with information that the unit had experienced either a slight (2 percent), moderate (10 percent), or large (25 percent) increase in sales performance. The vignettes read as follows:

John Smith is the Director of Sales for a major northeastern appliance firm. John assumed this position five years ago following his attainment of an MBA degree. Prior to his MBA, John had completed a bachelor's degree in Marketing. In this position he has gained the respect of both his subordinates and superiors. On his last evaluation John was rated as a capable worker and his subordinates have indicated that they enjoy working for him. John currently is in charge of five subordinates. All of the subordinates working in John's department have a good working knowledge of marketing principles as demonstrated by their prior and current work experience. At the end of the fourth quarter, new customer accounts had shown a slight/moderate/large increase (2%/10%/25%) during the year, over last year's performance.

Immediately after reading the vignettes, subjects were asked to rate (on a 7-point scale) the extent to which they considered the leader to be an important causal determinant of the performance outcome.<sup>3</sup> And, in order to insure that subjects were aware of and at least considered other, perhaps competing explanations for the outcome, parallel questions asked them to express the extent to which alternative, plausible factors may have contributed to the outcome, including other actors (subordinates), environmental factors (general economy), and anything else they felt should be considered (other). Responses to these last questions were considered together as "alternative" attributions and were therefore aggregated, for conceptual and analytic purposes.

### Results and Discussion

Attributions ("leader" vs. "alternatives") were examined jointly with outcome effects (low, moderate, and high magnitudes) in a  $3 \times 2$  ANOVA. The data in Table 5 reveal that the general level of attribution making did not differ across the three magnitude conditions (overall low  $M = 5.08$ ; overall moderate  $M = 4.93$ ; overall large  $M = 5.03$ ),  $F(1,56) = .21$ ; ns. The analysis also revealed that in general, attributions to leader (overall  $M = 5.27$ ) were preferred to attributions to alternatives (overall  $M = 4.75$ ),  $F(1,56) = 11.59$ ,  $p < .001$ . Most importantly, however, and as expected, the main effects were qualified by an interaction between type of attribution and magnitude of outcome,  $F(2,56)$ ,  $p < .06$ , indicating that larger magnitude out-

**3**

We considered using open-ended response measures; however, recent evidence suggests that structured, scale measures similar to those used here are generally preferable to other methods for assessing attributions (Elig and Frieze, 1979).

Table 5

**Mean Attributions in Each Magnitude Condition: Study 4**

Attributions*	Magnitude of Increase		
	Low ( <i>N</i> = 19)	Moderate ( <i>N</i> = 20)	High ( <i>N</i> = 20)
Leader	5.10	5.20	5.50
Alternatives	5.00	4.67	4.55

\*7-point scales; higher scores indicate stronger attributions.

comes caused *greater* use of the leader as an explanation and *less* use of alternative explanations. A planned comparison between the leader and alternative attributions in the large magnitude condition ( $M = 5.50$  and  $M = 4.55$ , respectively) was significant,  $F(1, 56) = 13.43$ ,  $p < .001$ . These two types of attributions were not reliably different in the other low and moderate magnitude conditions.

Thus, the pattern of results provided initial support for the hypothesis that the preference to use leaders in understanding organizational outcomes increases with increasingly large magnitudes of positive effects. Although, by itself, the increase in attributions to the leader was not great, the trend upward is compelling when compared with the "baseline" provided by the use of alternative explanations. Such comparisons reveal that the increase in leadership attributions occurred despite the fact that attributions to alternatives decreased.

## STUDY 5

The support found in Study 4, although suggestive, is limited by the fact that only positive performance conditions were examined. In its general form, the hypothesis is indifferent to the direction of performance changes — the effect should occur in the negative as well as in the positive cases. Accordingly, the goal in Study 5 was to further verify the hypothesis by examining attributional responses for negative performance cases, as well, especially in light of the negative associations uncovered in our archival studies.

### Method

One hundred and sixteen undergraduates enrolled in introductory organizational behavior and human resource courses participated in this study. Their mean age was 22.32 years, and on average they reported having the equivalent of 2.24 years of work experience.

The vignettes used in Study 4 were modified to accommodate the inclusion of negative as well as positive outcomes of varying degrees. That resulted in six different versions: large negative (25 percent decrease), moderate negative (10 percent decrease), small negative (2 percent decrease), small positive (2 percent increase), moderate positive (10 percent increase), and large positive (25 percent increase) effects. Thus, the descriptions subjects received ranged from very poor sales performance at the high-magnitude, negative end, to very good sales performance at the high-magnitude, positive end. On the basis of feedback obtained from initial pre-testing, the

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brief description of the leader was made consistent with the general positive or negative direction of performance change, in order to insure that he remained an equally plausible explanation for all outcome effects. Thus, in three cases of increased performance, a somewhat positive impression was conveyed; in the decreased performance cases, a somewhat negative impression was conveyed. Of course, the description of the leader within each type (increase versus decrease in performance) was held constant.

Immediately after reading the vignettes, subjects were asked to rate the performance of the unit on a 7-point scale, from "extremely poor" to "extremely good." As in Study 4, subjects were then asked to attribute performance outcomes to the leader and to alternative causes.

## Results and Discussion

The performance and attribution data are summarized in Table 6. Our prediction was that the greatest level of leader attribu-

Table 6

**Mean Perceived Performance and Attributions in Each Performance Outcome Condition: Study 5**

Dependent Variable	Performance Condition					
	Large Decrease (N = 19)	Moderate Decrease (N = 19)	Slight Decrease (N = 20)	Slight Increase (N = 18)	Moderate Increase (N = 20)	Large Increase (N = 20)
Attributions*						
Leader	5.00	4.26	4.55	4.94	5.05	5.10
Alternatives	3.82	3.96	4.07	4.09	3.91	3.80
Perceived performance†	2.47	3.11	3.55	5.17	5.55	6.35

\*7-point scales; higher scores indicate stronger attributions.

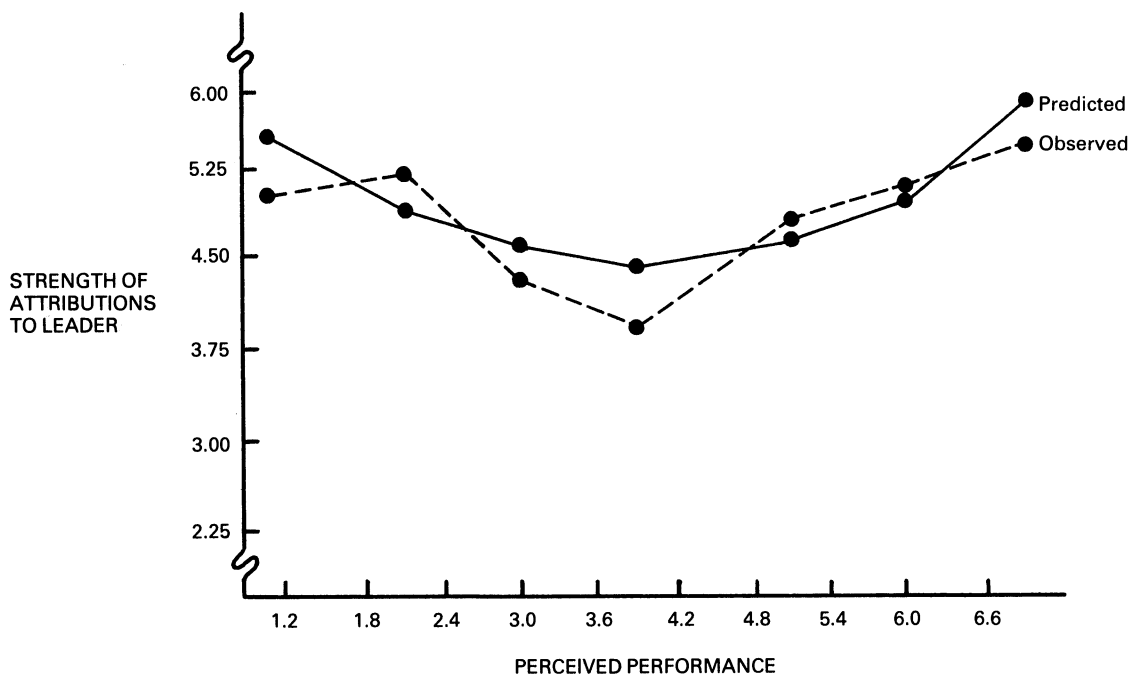
†7-point scales; higher scores indicate better perceived performance.

tions would occur at both extremes of the performance continuum — i.e., where positive and negative magnitudes are greatest — implying a curvilinear relationship between performance level and leader attributions. The means across the six conditions suggest such a pattern did indeed occur.<sup>4</sup> However, the most sensitive and useful test compares subjects' own perceptions of performance outcomes with the strength of their attributions to the leader. Accordingly, an orthogonal polynomial regression analysis was conducted, using subjects' own perceptions of performance to predict the extent to which leadership was used as an explanatory concept. The hypothesis, in this case, is a quadratic (2° polynomial) model. Linear, quadratic, and cubic models were examined, and, as predicted, the only coefficient to reach significance was associated with the quadratic component,  $B = 3.09(1.02)$ ;  $t = 3.02$ ,  $p < .001$ . In addition, goodness-of-fit tests for the polynomial model at each degree were conducted. These tests estimated the *lack* of fit of models at each degree, relative to the residual MS from fitting polynomials of higher degrees. Thus, a high  $F$  ratio is an indication of a poor fit. These tests revealed that the linear model produced a significantly poor fit,  $F(2, 112) = 4.87$ ,  $p = .009$ , while the quadratic model provided the best fit,  $F(1, 112) = .62$ ,  $p = .43$ . A scatter plot of the data

#### 4

A  $1 \times 6$  ANOVA on the performance ratings revealed a significant main effect,  $F(5, 110) = 77.22$ ,  $p < .001$ , attesting to the efficacy of the manipulation. The attribution measures were examined in a  $2 \times 6$  ANOVA (one within factor: two types of attributions; one between factor: six performance levels). This analysis revealed a significant main effect for type of attribution, such that leader attributions (overall  $M = 4.82$ ) were generally stronger than attributions to alternative causes (overall  $M = 3.94$ ),  $F(1, 110) = 55.38$ ,  $p < .001$ . The main effect for performance level was not significant,  $F(5, 110) = .99$ ,  $p = .42$ ; ns, indicating that the level of attributions to all sources did not vary across conditions. The interaction between attribution and performance was marginal,  $F(5, 110) = 2.01$ ,  $p < .08$ .

confirmed the U-shaped distribution of scores. Figure 1 shows the mean attributions for subjects at each perceived performance level. Similar analyses conducted on the alternative attributions indicated that such curvilinear trends did not occur, lending added support to the hypotheses.



**Figure 1. Predicted values and mean attributions to leader at each level of perceived performance: Study 5.**

As an even better test of the hypothesis, the perceived performances were used to predict subjects' preferences for using the leader as a causal explanation *relative* to their tendency to make alternative attributions. Accordingly, a parallel regression analysis was conducted using the difference between the leader and alternative attributions as the dependent variable. Again, the quadratic component was significant,  $B = 4.60(1.22)$ ;  $t = 3.76$ ,  $p < .001$ . Also as expected, the subsequent fit test revealed a poor linear fit,  $F(2, 112) = 7.34$ ,  $p < .001$ , but a good fitting quadratic model,  $F(1, 112) = .57$ ,  $p = .45$ . These results, then, paralleled those of the previous regression analyses.

When taken together, the results provided good support for the hypothesis that larger outcomes — whether they are positive or negative — are most likely to lead observers to make the inference that a leader was an important cause. Nevertheless, several issues remained, and those became the focus of Study 6.

## STUDY 6

This final study had two general objectives. One was to replicate the pattern of results found in the previous experiments under somewhat more refined conditions. The vignettes used in those experiments raised some issues that could be relevant to the observed effects. One issue con-



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cerned the salience and general prominence of the leader in the vignettes. Upon reflection, we had not paid much attention to the positioning and length of the leader's description in the vignettes. It was possible that we had unwittingly and artificially inflated the extent to which the leader was subsequently considered as an important causal determinant of performance. That is a concern, because other research indicates that attributions in general are highly sensitive to the contextual properties of causal information, such as saliency and primacy (e.g., Jones et al., 1968; Taylor and Fiske, 1978; McArthur, 1981). In fact, it is precisely for those reasons that the "main effects" for type of attribution (leader versus alternatives) observed in Studies 4 and 5 must be treated with caution. A less likely, but nevertheless present possibility is that extreme outcomes may somehow have been attributed to the leader in response to such artificial, externally induced prominence, rather than being the results of internal processes (e.g., Phillips and Lord, 1981). A related issue was the description of the leader: in Study 5, in order to insure that the leader remained an equally plausible, potential causal determinant across the entire span of positive and negative performance conditions, he was portrayed somewhat positively in the three positive, increased performance conditions and somewhat negatively in the three negative, decreased performance conditions. Although this is not necessarily a problem, Study 6 allowed us to make use of an alternative strategy in which all descriptive information on the leader was deleted from the various vignettes, and we were able to clear up any ambiguities that might have been associated with the previous strategy.

A second general purpose was to examine the role of performance expectations in making leader attributions. Other literature (e.g., Jones and Davis, 1965; Jones et al., 1971; Pyszczynski and Greenberg, 1981; Hastie, 1984; Weiner, 1985) suggests that spontaneous attribution making is exacerbated by, among other things, the degree to which events depart from observers' general and normative expectations. Surprising, extraordinary events increase the need to search for plausible causal determinants. In the present context, expectations may be strongly related to the magnitude of the performance outcome and to the subsequent tendency to make attributions to the leader and perhaps to alternative causes, as well. One reasonable hypothesis is that the more extreme performances deviated from observers' less extreme expectations of what performance changes are typical for an organization. If that is true, then perhaps it is the size of deviation from expectations — not simply the magnitude of performance — that is responsible for the observed pattern of leadership attributions. Although that reasoning is not inconsistent with the general perspective taken in this analysis, it does suggest that some attempt should be made to take into account observers' expectations, along with performance outcomes, in order to examine their effects on attributions.

## **Method**

Seventy-two undergraduate business majors in sections of an evening introductory organizational behavior course participated in this experiment. Their mean age was 25.0 years, and on average they reported having nearly five (4.87) years of full-time work experience.

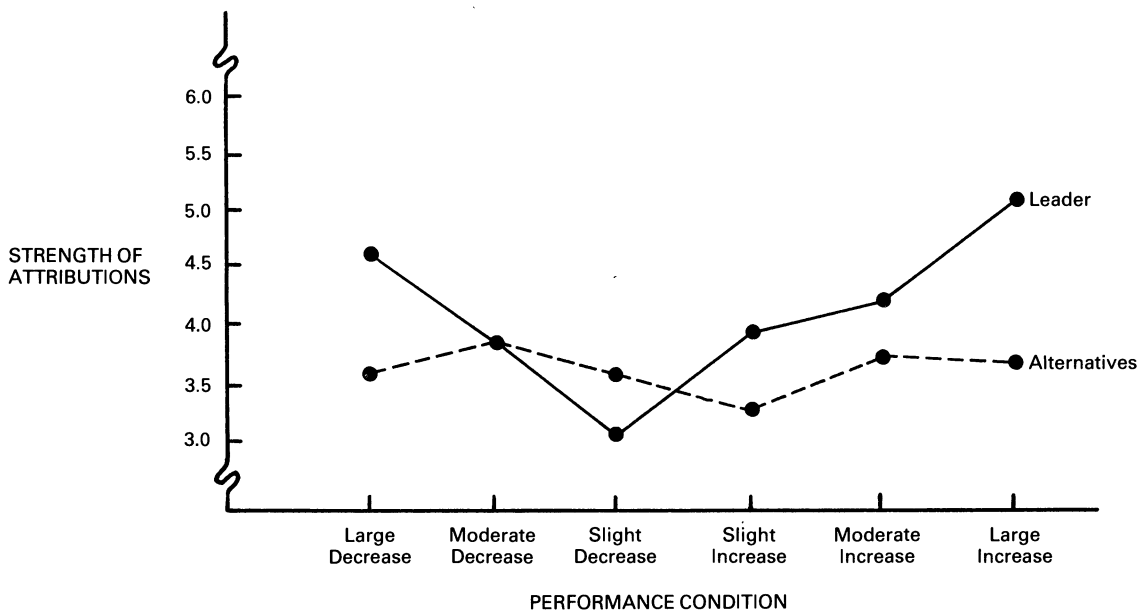
The vignettes used in the previous studies were modified, in order to decrease the prominence of the leader relative to other potential causal determinants, by weaving into the text the mention of the leader, along with a number of other causal determinants. The final vignettes read as follows:

The Gemini Corporation is a large volume manufacturer of household appliances. They have been in business for a number of years and have several plants located throughout the country. The appliance industry is characterized by an environment whose market and economic factors have been changing over the past few years. Sales is one of the functional departments within this corporation and is headed by a Director, John Smith, who assumed this position at the beginning of the last fiscal year. At about the same time, a new group of sales representatives were hired and reported directly to Mr. Smith. At the end of the fiscal year, gross sales had shown a slight/moderate/large increase/decrease (2%/10%/25%) over last year's performance.

As a further precaution, subjects were asked on the rating form itself to consider all of the potential causes before they made their attributional ratings of the impact of any single causal determinant. Before making these ratings, however, subjects were first asked to rate the performance of the unit, as in the previous studies. And, in order to assess the extent to which the level of performance deviated from their own implicit and general expectations, after rating the unit's performance they were also asked to rate (on a 7-point scale) how surprising they found the increase or decrease in performance.

### Results and Discussion

**Initial analyses.** A series of analyses of variance was conducted on the six performance conditions, examining attributions, expectations, and perceived performance. These data are summarized in Figure 2. A one-way ANOVA of the perceived performance attested to the efficacy of the manipulation,  $F(5,66) = 9.65, p < .001$ . A similar analysis of the expecta-



**Figure 2. Graphic representation of attributions to leader and alternatives in each performance outcome condition: Study 6.**

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tion measure revealed a significant effect of performance condition on expectations,  $F(5,66) = 3.14, p = .013$ . Attributions were examined in a two-way analysis of variance with one between factor (performance) and one within factor (leader versus alternative attributions). This analysis revealed a significant main effect for performance outcome,  $F(5,66) = 2.55, p = .036$ , and for type of attribution,  $F(1,66) = 7.49, p = .008$ . Moreover, both main effects were qualified by a significant interaction,  $F(5,66) = 2.42, p = .045$ .

**Expectations and performance.** First, in order to establish the relationship between performance and expectations, a polynomial regression analysis was conducted in which rated performance was used to predict the reported deviations from expectations. This analysis revealed that the coefficient on the quadratic component was significant,  $B = 2.989(1.26); t(69) = 2.38, p < .025$ . Moreover, the goodness-of-fit tests indicated that the linear model provided a significant poor fit,  $F(2.89), p = .062$ , while the U-shaped model (2° polynomial) provided the best fit,  $F(1.68) = .19, p = .67$ . Thus, extremely good and extremely poor performance were judged to be more surprising and therefore represented larger deviations from subjects' general expectations.

**Leader attributions.** The next task was to incorporate expectations into the model specified by the original hypothesis. However, the polynomial regression technique used in the previous experiment to test the predicted curvilinear relationship between perceived performance and leader attributions did not lend itself to the inclusion of more than a single predictor variable and, therefore, could not be used to control and test for the additional effect of expectations. Consequently, a more traditional multiple-regression procedure was employed as a reasonable approximation of the model. First, the relationship between leader attributions and perceived performance was estimated by including the performance variable and its squared term as predictors of leader attributions. If the hypothesized "quadratic" relationship were true, then a significant, but negative coefficient should be obtained on the performance variable, *in combination* with a significant but positive coefficient on the squared term. With only these two predictor terms, the overall equation was significant,  $R^2 = .347; F(2.69) = 18.30, p < .001$ . More importantly, however, and as expected, the coefficient associated with the performance term was significant and negative,  $B = -2.41(.438), p < .001$ ; and the coefficient associated with the squared term was significant and positive,  $B = .322(.545), p < .001$ . In effect, then, these results replicated those of the previous study and, in light of the changes made in the vignettes, provided us with more confidence in the validity and generalizability of the effect.

The overall equation remained significant when the expectation ratings were added into the above model as a predictor,  $R^2 = .344; F(3,68) = 13.41, p < .001$ . However, the coefficient associated with the expectation rating was not significant,  $B = .1829(.110), p = .103$ . The negative coefficient on the performance term remained significant,  $B = -2.24(.444), p < .001$ , as did the positive coefficient on the squared term,  $B = .297(.559), p < .001$ . Thus one must conclude that although extreme performances deviated from expectations and were

generally viewed as more surprising than lower magnitude performances, in this case, such deviations probably did not, by themselves, have a large independent effect on the strength of leader attributions. Moreover, when controlling for expectations, the observed relationship between the magnitude of outcomes and the tendency to understand performance in terms of leadership persisted.

A plausible argument is that when faced with explaining a large magnitude outcome, individuals make more attributions to all relevant sources. According to that line of reasoning, the level of leadership attributions may simply be an artifact of a more general trend. Consequently, we performed one final set of analyses that attempted to control for individuals' general tendency to make attributions to all sources. In order to do that, the same set of variables was used to predict a ratio in which the strength of leadership attributions was divided by the strength of attributions to all other sources. This ratio roughly parallels the LQ measure used in the previous archival studies. According to the hypothesis, extreme performances should be associated with higher ratios. The prediction model was also significant for this dependent variable,  $R^2 = .283$ ,  $p < .001$ . And, as with the previous dependent variable, the coefficient associated with the expectation term was not significant  $B = .238(.458)$ ,  $p = .604$ . However, as predicted, the coefficient on the performance term was significant and negative,  $B = -.811(.184)$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and the coefficient associated with the squared term was significant and positive,  $B = .109(.232)$ ,  $p < .001$ . This last analysis, then, indicated that extreme performances did indeed lead to a proportional increase in the preference to use the leader as a causal explanation and provided a strong confirmation of our expectations.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The romanticized conception of leadership suggests that leaders do or should have the ability to control and influence the fates of the organizations in their charge. This assumption of control and the responsibility it engenders is a double-edged sword: not only does it imply giving credit for positive outcomes, but it also entails laying blame for negative ones (Salancik and Meindl, 1984). Our experimental studies revealed that pattern. However, the results of our archival studies suggest that one or the other tendency, for whatever reasons, may predominate in any given case. The negative and positive associations in Studies 2 and 3, respectively, between an interest in leadership and the state of the national economy are particularly intriguing. The positive association uncovered in Study 3 suggests that the popular press that serves the general business community contributes to the credit-giving aspect of the romanticized view. Of course, the popular press is in part a reflection of the community it serves, and firms, by their own activities, can prompt an interest in and association to leadership factors. Thus, the finding that leadership is accentuated during times of economic prosperity is, in retrospect, not so difficult to understand. By the same token, the scholarly community may have less reason to favor giving credit over laying blame. In fact, the negative association between an interest in the topic of leadership and economic

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prosperity may reflect the problem-oriented response of young scholars to hard times.

Others (e.g., Pfeffer, 1977; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) have suggested that the tendency to ascribe high levels of control and influence to leaders arises from private needs to find causes among human actors. Accordingly, the exacerbation of those needs would tend to foster the development of a romantic conception in which leadership was indeed believed to be highly significant. In fact, a subsequent analysis of our experimental studies revealed that attributions to different personal causal agents (in this case, leader and subordinates) tended to be positively correlated ( $r = .20, .22, \text{ and } .37$  in Studies 4, 5, and 6, respectively), as this general line of reasoning would suggest. A romanticized view of leadership is probably also an outgrowth of a general faith in human organizations as potentially effective and efficient value-producing systems that fulfill the various interests of their participants and perhaps, also, society at large. The potency and promise of human organizations and all the values they represent come to be symbolized in the formal hierarchy of authority and the officials who occupy the elite positions of power and status (Milgram, 1974). Given this, a faith in the significance of leadership may be one manifestation of internalized values about the validity of organizations and therefore, by implication, the roles occupied by people who are charged with the responsibility to maintain and control them.

Because observers are prone to overestimate the amount of control that leaders exert, particularly when the event or outcome in question is especially significant, a subscription to a romanticized view could be dysfunctional to the goals of an "objective" or rational assessment of important but causally indeterminant events. At the same time, however, it seems possible that an excessive belief in the potency of leadership could also be functional for those who will occupy positions of formal authority and status. If we assume that on some occasions leadership can, in reality, make a difference — but that we cannot be sure when — then it may be important for organizations to have leaders who operate, at some level, on the assumption that they do make a difference and that they are in control. Without the benefits of a working assumption that conveys a sense of efficacy and control, the initiation of and persistence in potentially relevant activity would be considerably more difficult. The end result may be somewhat depressed functioning and a sense of helplessness in situations in which control is in fact possible.

The present research may begin to provide us with some new insights about the reason for changing leadership or decisions to extend an incumbent's tenure in response to perceived variations in an organization's fortunes. For example, there is a small, but somewhat paradoxical literature that attempts to understand the causes and consequences of managerial succession. Several theoretical perspectives have been offered (e.g., Grusky, 1963; Gamson and Scotch, 1964; Gordon and Rosen, 1981), all of them based on more or less implicit assumptions about the attributions of relevant and powerful others to leadership factors in response to poor organizational performance. In fact, the theories and the empirical studies make a convincing case that poor performance increases the

probability and rate of successions (Grusky, 1963; Helmich and Brown, 1972; Lieberman and O'Connor, 1972; Helmich, 1974, 1977; Osborn et al., 1981). There is less theoretical agreement about the effect of succession on subsequent organizational performance. Conventional wisdom implies that the effect on performance of changing leaders should be positive, since such events are ostensibly guided by the positive intentions and expectations of those in a position to induce them. Some (e.g., Grusky, 1963) argue that successions are disruptive to so many important processes that subsequent performances will decline. Still others (e.g., Gamson and Scotch, 1964) emphasize the symbolic aspects of successions and consider them exercises in "ritualistic scapegoating" that involve processes that are only incidentally or tangentially relevant for subsequent performance. The available empirical evidence tends to run contrary to the conventional wisdom, suggesting that although poor performances may often precipitate successions, such events have little or negative effects on subsequent performance (e.g., Allen, Panian, and Lotz, 1979; Brown, 1982). The paradox is that, despite the absence of clearly instrumental effects, successions are nevertheless a popular response to poor performance. At least a part of that paradox can be understood as reflecting an inclination to construe events and outcomes in terms of leadership. Pfeffer (1977) argued that the limited impact that many leadership successions have on performance outcomes is due in large part to the lack of variability in the pool of individuals from which both the incumbent and successor have been drawn. One interesting and testable hypothesis precipitated by the present analysis is that interested parties are very likely to overperceive the degree of relevant variation in that pool, seeing more heterogeneity than really exists between the old and the new leader and among the potential successors. Given the romanticization of leadership, it is less difficult to understand the optimistic faith in the effectiveness of successions — the shifting of commitment from the old to the new leader and the maintenance of positive expectations for outcomes, even in the face of contrary evidence.

Needless to say, organizations have always been influenced by their environments, yet it is only recently — within the last ten years — that organizational dependencies have been fully appreciated in our theoretical perspectives (e.g., Aldrich, 1979; Hall, 1982; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). In Study 1, the average company sales growth performance over the 11-year period and the corresponding figures for relevant industries were strongly correlated,  $R(9 \text{ df}) = .80, p < .01$ . That is not surprising, given the number of industries sampled and the size of the firms in our sample that were chosen to represent these industries. However, it does provide a rough indication that a given firm's fate, in terms of performance, is closely tied to external factors affecting whole industries, as opposed to being under the direct, unique control of its top management. As expected, however, we were able to find evidence that there is nevertheless a tendency to link leadership not only with variations in company performance, but also with the performance of entire industries, which are undoubtedly affected by factors well beyond the control of any single firm or management. Other researchers have also found systematic

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evidence indicating that traditional views have overestimated the amount of variance in performance outcomes that is logically and empirically attributable to leadership (e.g., Lieber-son and O'Connor, 1972; Salancik and Pfeffer, 1977). Such evidence shifts attention and the locus of control away from top-level leaders and the positions they occupy to other causal entities and forces not directly tied to the qualities and activities of leadership. The implication is that perhaps leadership is not as important as we normally think — at least not in the traditional sense (Pfeffer, 1978, 1981). That implication is provocative, because it contradicts the romanticized conception of leadership, and some resistance to it is predictable. To the extent that observers are psychologically invested in a romanticized view of leadership, then, we might expect selective perceptions, confirmatory biases, and other processes (Ross, 1977) to be present that cause the observer to avoid or resist information and evidence that diminishes the significance of leadership to organizational functioning. Consider the reaction of Burke (1979: 121) to Pfeffer (1978):

Pfeffer indeed went out on a limb by proclaiming that leaders do not matter that much. Many variables other than the leader per se account for organizational outcomes. Moreover, "leadership is the outcome of an attribution process in which observers — in order to achieve a feeling of control over their environment — tend to attribute outcomes to persons rather than to context, and the identification of individuals with leadership positions facilitates this attribution process" (p. 31). An interesting belief, interpretation, hypothesis, or whatever, but methinks Pfeffer broke the limb and fell off. In other words, in an apparent attempt to be provocative, Pfeffer seems to have leaned too heavily toward iconoclasm.

It is possible to take the position that leadership may in fact contribute to a large portion of the variance that is controllable and thus warrants intense attention. However, the results of our analysis suggest that the faith in leadership is likely to exceed the reality of control and will be used to account for variance that is in fact uncontrollable. This is a convenient state of affairs for managements motivated to do just that. Salancik and Meindl (1984) presented evidence documenting the attempt by top managements to create an illusion of control through the manipulation of causal reasoning around performance issues. Such motivations appear to be strongest among managements whose firms have displayed the sorts of erratic performance histories that would imply little real control. Our analysis suggests that what otherwise might be considered patently obvious attempts to create the illusions of control where none exists is likely to be complemented by a high degree of receptivity among observers.

When considering the "symbolic role" of management (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; Pfeffer, 1981), the greater significance of leadership lies not in the direct impact on substantive matters but in the ability to exert control over the meanings and interpretations important constituencies give to whatever events and occurrences are considered relevant for the organization's functioning (Pondy, 1978; Daft and Weick, 1984). The manipulation of language and other organizationally relevant symbols allows leaders to manage the political and social processes that maintain organized activity in the face of potentially disruptive forces (Pondy et al., 1982). One plausible hypothesis is that the development of a romanticized concep-

tion of leadership causes participants more readily to imbue the symbolic gestures of leaders with meaning and significance. Accordingly, the psychological readiness to comprehend things in terms of leadership, whatever dysfunctions it represents, 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.

## CONCLUSION

There has been in recent years some question concerning the viability of leadership, both as a concept and as an area of inquiry. Indeed, there is ample reason to modify our traditional assumptions about the instrumental potency of leadership factors in the larger scheme of things. Given the present analysis, however, it appears that the obsession with the concept will not easily be curtailed. While there are some obvious limitations to the studies reported here, together they provide reasonably coherent and compelling evidence for the premise that a romanticized conception of leadership is an important part of the social reality that is brought to bear in our informal analysis of organizations — and perhaps in our more formal theories as well. Ironically, though, a heroic vision of what leaders and leadership are all about virtually guarantees that a satisfying understanding will remain beyond the grasp of our best scientific efforts, particularly since the thrust of scientific inquiry is to do away with mysteries. The major effect is to objectify, quantify, and in some cases trivialize the unique import of leadership. In that sense, the product of such efforts is contrary and antithetical to the romanticized conception. 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.

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