

**What goes around comes around: How meso-level negative emotional contagion can ultimately determine organizational attitudes toward leaders**

**Author**

T. Dasborough, Marie, M. Ashkanasy, Neal, Y.J. Tee, Eugene, Tse, Herman

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A Meso-Model of Negative Affect Towards Leaders: The Effect on Organizational  
Endorsement and Cynicism

**Abstract**

We present a follower-centric model of leadership that integrates multiple levels of analysis and includes meso-level processes in the form of emotional contagion. Focusing on negative emotions, we argue that leadership at the individual level is manifested in terms of the leader's prototypical behavior, favoritism toward members, and affective displays. Drawing upon affective events theory and emotional contagion theory, we argue further that members' perceptions of a leader's behaviors and affect associated with attributions of insincerity result in negative emotions. These spread to the other individuals, and are in turn reflected in the group's affective climate and trust and, in particular, in the quality of leader-member relationships (LMX) and team-member relationships (TMX). These effects will ultimately result in disapproval of the leader and cynicism at the organizational level. We conclude with a discussion of the limitations of our model, and its implications for theory, research, and practice.

Key Words: follower-centric leadership; meso-level processes; negative emotions; emotional contagion.

## A Meso-Model of Negative Affect Towards Leaders: The Effect on Organizational Endorsement and Cynicism

Leadership research is still largely fractured, riddled with contradictory findings and assertions that lack connected interpretability (Chemers, 2000). One reason for this state of affairs stems from an omission of theory that integrates both micro- and macro-level leadership influences. As Yammarino and Dubinsky (1992) suggest, more attention should be paid to multi-level issues that have the ability to influence, and in turn to be influenced by leadership performance. This argument is reiterated by Tse, Dasborough, and Ashkanasy (2008) and Ashkanasy and Jordan (in press), who more recently posited that the adoption of multi-level perspectives in scholarly leadership inquiry is crucial if a more comprehensive and accurate portrayal of organizational leadership is to emerge. Recent publications in this field show promise, however, and scholars are beginning to incorporate and to apply multi-level perspectives to the study of leadership (see Chen et al., 2007; Tangirala, Green, & Ramanujam, 2000; Tse, et al., 2008). We build on these multi-level frameworks by adopting a meso-level approach.

Individual characteristics, team behaviors, and organizational factors affect the process of leadership and its effectiveness in organizations (Shamir, & Howell, 1999). Hence, leadership is embedded within a broader social context, manifesting in work groups, units, and organizations (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). Consequently, contextual factors can produce cross-level effects where variables at one level influence variables at another (Mowday & Sutton, 1993; Rousseau, 1985). For example, Tse, et al. (2008) demonstrated that situational variables such as group-level affective climate moderate the relationship between leader-member exchange and team-member exchange at the

individual level. These cross-level effects help explain leadership processes. On the other hand, and as Antonakis and colleagues (2004) explain, the context in which leadership is manifested and embedded has received relatively little research attention to date. New leadership theories regularly neglect contextual influences and regard leadership as isolated from the larger social context (Johns, 2006).

Given that leadership is context-dependent and is multi-level in nature, scholars have called for more research synthesizing macro and micro perspectives to study leadership in the hopes of providing new insights into individual, group, and organizational effectiveness. In this regard, House, Rousseau, and Thomas-Hunt (1995) were among first to develop a comprehensive framework for proposing the “Meso-Paradigm” that integrates micro and macro perspectives to advance research in the field of Organizational Behavior. Their framework emphasizes that macro and micro conceptualizations and cross-level linkages should be considered and specified for theoretical development, research design, data analysis and results interpretation. Adding to this early work on the meso-paradigm, attention was directed towards variables at different levels of analysis with respect to their contextual effects (House et al., 1995; Johns, 2006; Rousseau & Fried, 2001; Rousseau, 1985).

As a result, developing meso-models of leadership is theoretically and practically important because it provides a more comprehensive picture of how leadership should be studied. By integrating micro and macro perspectives, we can examine processes and variables across levels simultaneously. Our proposed model will contribute to the existing leadership research because it involves representing the context in which leadership is conceptualized, and the levels at which leadership is enacted (Porter & McLaughlin,

2006). Specifically, our model consists of micro and macro variables including individual-level (perception of non-prototypicality, perception of unwarranted favoritism, and attribution of insincerity), dyadic-level (LMX quality), group-level (TMX quality, affective climate and trust climate) and organizational-level variables (organizational endorsement and cynicism towards leaders).

### **A Meso-Model of Negative Member Affect Towards Leaders**

In the meso-model we propose, relationships between variables proceed from the micro-level, through to dyads and groups, and end up at the macro-organizational level. Thus, beginning at the micro-level, we consider the leader behaviors that influence members' perceptions of the leader. In particular, based on Dasborough (2006), who showed that negative emotions are stronger determinants of member perceptions of leaders relative to positive emotions, we focus our present discussion on member negative emotions that occur in response to leader prototypical behavior, favoritism towards group members, and affective displays.

We argue that followers' perceptions of these aspects of their leader's behavior form the basis for their consequent experience of negative emotions, resulting in their portrayal of negative affective displays towards the leader. Our proposed meso-model of leadership is based on a follower-centric approach and encapsulates the underlying principles of the meso-paradigm. While leadership research has traditionally focused on the leader (Hollander, 1992), we instead focus on the role of the follower in the leadership process (Meindl, 1995).

We argue further that the process of emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994), once initiated by negative affective displays, may then spread the

negative affect from the individuals to groups and to the organizational level. Specifically, we suggest that emotional contagion serves as a kind of meso-process, spreading the impact of negative affect across organizational levels. Individual level member displays of negative affect will thus influence the quality of leader-member exchanges at the dyadic level, as well as impacting the quality of team-member exchange, affective climate and trust climate at the group level. These collective outcomes will ultimately determine the level of organizational endorsement of the leader and organizational cynicism towards the leader. Figure 1 represents our conceptual model.

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Insert Figure 1 here

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Emotions are central to our meso model of leadership. Consistent with the tenets of Affective Events Theory (AET: Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), we argue that organizational members' behavior is determined by variations in the way they perceive and react emotionally to events in the workplace, rather than by relatively fixed characteristics, such as personality (Bono, Foldes, Vinson, & Muros, 2007; Weiss, Nicholas, & Daus, 1999). In AET, these "affective events" engender emotional reactions in organizational members that can result in immediate, impulsive behavioral reactions or to changes in more long-term attitudes, such as job satisfaction, affective commitment, or a desire to quit the organization (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996).

We note that, while are many and varied possible sources of member negative affect (see Dasborough, 2006 for leader behaviors associated with negative employee emotion) and other causes of member grievances, we elect to focus on three specific

leader behaviors: (1) prototypicality, (2) favoritism, and (3) affective display. The reason we chose these three specific variables is because they evoke particularly strong negative emotional responses in organizational members. We discuss each of these sources of negative affect in the following sections.

### **Micro-Level Predictors**

#### *Members Perceptions of Leader Non-Prototypicality*

In leader-member exchange theory (LMX), leadership effectiveness depends on the quality of the leader-member relationship (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). A key limitation of the LMX theory, however, is that it considers only micro-level dyadic relationships, and, as such, does not address the group context in which leaders themselves are part (Hogg, et. al., 2005). In view of this, we position our model in accordance with suggestions by Hogg and colleagues (2005), incorporating a social identity perspective. More importantly, the combination of LMX and social identity appears to be a neglected facet of leadership theorizing.

The core idea of social identity theory is that individuals ascribe to a group-level identity on the basis of two motivational factors: self-enhancement and uncertainty reduction (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tajfel, 1981). Social identity theorists argue that, within a leadership context, leader emergence and effectiveness is largely defined by members' perceptions of the leader's prototypicality (Fielding & Hogg, 1997). Prototypicality infers that leaders need to be representative of, and to embody, the identity of the groups in which they lead in order to be supported by members. Moreover, the extent to which leaders are perceived to be prototypical by members determines the extent to which members convey their approval of the leader. For example, Hains, Hogg and Duck (1997)

found in an experimental study that prototypical leaders were more accepted and perceived as more effective leaders than non-prototypical leaders. Fielding and Hogg (1997) replicated these findings in a field study, and also found that prototypical team members were more likely than their non-prototypical counterparts to emerge as leaders. Further, members based their attraction of prototypical leaders more on the basis of social attraction, as opposed to interpersonal attraction. In particular, Fielding and Hogg found that members liked prototypical leaders because they were representative of their group's identity (social attraction), rather than being based on the leader's individual characteristics (interpersonal attraction).

Perceptions of prototypicality thus refer to the extent to which the members perceive the leader to be typical of the group and typical of a leader. We suggest that individuals' perceptions of leader prototypicality are likely to evoke emotional responses. Specifically, we suggest:

Proposition 1: When the leader is perceived to be non-prototypical, individuals are more likely to experience negative emotions.

#### *Members Perceptions of Unwarranted Favoritism*

Simply being perceived as prototypical, however, is insufficient for leaders to be endorsed by organizational members. The way leaders treat individual organizational members is also important. For example, Platow and van Knippenberg (2001) found that distributive intergroup fairness is an important predictor of support for leaders. They demonstrated that stronger endorsements for leaders came when members perceived the leader to be fair.

In the context of our model, social identity theory provides an interesting point of disagreement with the LMX theory on the issue of group member favoritism. While LMX theorists would tend to support the notion that leaders should foster positive in-group relationships to be perceived as effective (hence differentiating between in-group and out-group members), social identity theorists would argue that such perceptions of favoritism disrupts expectations amongst members in a group. Hogg and colleagues' (2005) study provides empirical evidence for this argument, elaborating that personalized treatment of specific in-group members is detrimental to leadership endorsement and effectiveness.

Sparrowe and Liden (2005) suggest that interpersonal relationships between leaders, subordinates, and coworkers constitute an interconnected social system; that LMX relationships do not exist in a vacuum. With respect to this, LMX research has demonstrated that team members in high-quality LMX relationships are more likely to be treated better than other team members because they receive greater work-related benefits than those in low-quality LMX relationships (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien 1995). The differential treatment from the different quality of LMX relationships is relevant because team members are very sensitive to interpersonal comparisons and perceptions of unfairness (Liden, Erdogn, Wayne & Sparrowe, 2006; Tse & Dasborough, 2008; Tse, Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2008). Hence, they may respond to perceptions of unfairness with negative emotions.

Thus, how leaders develop differential relationships among team members becomes important because such means convey a signal to all members about their own status within the team. For instance, high-quality LMX relationships provide individual

team members with a strong sense of psychological enhancement through obtaining more work-related benefits. This then enables them to experience excitement, enthusiasm, and satisfaction (Dasborough, 2006). As a result, high-quality LMX team members would tend to perceive such differential treatment as equitable because it is in their favor (Erdogan & Liden, 2002).

Conversely, being in a low-quality relationship is likely to be regarded as a form of punishment, where employees are unable to obtain work-related benefits and psychological enhancement similar to those in high-quality LMX relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Team members in low-quality LMX relationships may thus feel mistreated and disrespected, and experience jealousy, distress, resentment or anger because of interpersonal comparison and perceived unfairness effects (Festinger, 1954; Greenberg, Ashton-James, & Ashkanasy, 2007). This may in turn result in perceptions of leader favoritism because the treatment is seen to be unfavorable (Erdogan & Liden, 2002). As Erdogan and Liden (2002) discuss, these effects are likely to be even more pronounced when the criteria for differentiation is not perceived to be warranted, or is perceived to be unfair.

We intend to explore this apparent contradiction by incorporating perceptions of both prototypicality and favoritism in our meso-model. In our model, a leader can be prototypical (representative of the group and of a typical leader) and can also differentially treat members. This differentiated treatment however should be based on legitimate grounds, such as favoring the high performing members as a reward for their efforts. This type of differentiated treatment would be perceived as warranted, and would not evoke as much negative emotion in other members. This is in contrast to the feeling

that would be evoked if, say, the differentiation was based on personal regard for the individual.

The discussion suggests that dyadic relationship quality can be perceived by in-group and out-group members differently, and that this in turn determines their emotional experience within a team context, thus:

Proposition 2: When individuals perceive unwarranted favoritism by their leader towards some members, individuals not so treated are likely to experience negative emotions.

#### *Followers' Attributions of Leader Insincerity*

The emergence and endorsement of a leader is not a passive process entirely dependent on a leader's conformity with the group prototype, however. Leaders must also be seen to engage in behaviors that are perceived to be beneficial to the groups they lead (Haslam et al., 2001). Across studies in the social identity literature, leaders who engaged in behaviors perceived to be beneficial to the group were also perceived as more effective (Haslam & Platow, 2001; Platow & van Knippenberg, 2001). In view of this, we argue that leaders who engage in self-serving or insincere behavior will be attributed by members as overlooking the group's interests, and consequently perceived less favorably by members.

To deal with this issue, we turn to attribution theory. Attribution theory concerns the perceived causes of events, whereby individuals act as "naïve psychologists" attempting to understand why good or bad events happened (Heider, 1958). Kelley (1973) identified three sources of information people use to make attributions: consistency, consensus, and distinctiveness. Each of these dimensions can be used to

understand causes of behaviors in the workplace, and these along with those identified by Weiner (stability, controllability and locus) have been used widely to understand attributions in the organizational sciences, and leadership in particular (Green & Mitchell, 1979; Martinko, Harvey, & Douglas, 2007).

Following on from Green and Mitchell's (1979) work on attribution theory and leadership, Davis and Gardner (2004) presented a model of attributions and affective responses to the political organizational environment. They highlight the role of LMX relationships in influencing the attribution process. Similarly, Dasborough and Ashkanasy (2002) turned attention to follower attributions of their leaders and the role of affect. Their specific contribution was the new focus on follower attributions of leader intent, tapping into the perceived sincerity of the leader.

We propose that member attributions of leader sincerity constitute another micro-level influence that determines the members' experience of negative emotions, and subsequently their behaviors towards to leader. Dasborough and Ashkanasy's (2004) experimental study provides evidence for the influence of member attributions and emotional responses in instances where true versus 'pseudo' transformational leader behavior is portrayed. The authors found that members were more likely to carry out a leader's instructions if they attributed the leader's behavior as being sincere (group-serving, and not self-serving). Importantly, Dasborough and Ashkanasy (2004) demonstrate the emotional implications of follower attributions. In particular, negative emotions were evoked by attributions of self-serving intentions and insincerity.

In addition, Newcombe and Ashkanasy (2002) showed that subordinates' attributions and leader regard (LMX) can be determined by perceptions that the leader is

displaying sincere versus insincere affect. In a laboratory study, participants watched a video of a leader giving positive or negative performance feedback accompanied by positive or negative facial expressions. Results showed that insincere affect (especially positive feedback accompanied by negative affective display) led to lower subordinate ratings of leader LMX. The authors concluded that the negative reactions were a response to a perception that the leader was being insincere (see also Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2004).

In summary, we argue that a leader's affective displays trigger member attributions as to the sincerity of the leader's intentions. Combined with our earlier discussion of the effects on members of a leader's self-serving insincere intentions, this leads us to propose:

Proposition 3: Individuals attributing leader affective displays to insincere intentions will experience negative emotions.

### **Meso-Level Processes**

#### *Emotional Contagion*

Thus far, we have argued that member perceptions of leader behaviors may serve as triggers that arouse negative emotions. Clearly, such negative feelings are going to lead to member displays of negative affect. In this respect, the process of emotional contagion, which involves the tacit conveyance, mimicry, and synchrony of emotional states (Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson, 1994), is a means by which members experiencing negative emotions might influence others. The effects of this negative affect expressed toward leaders may be seen at the dyadic, group and, organizational levels. We posit

therefore that emotional contagion may be a key mechanism for negative affect to travel across levels; in this instance contagion constitutes a meso-level process.

Hatfield, Cacioppo and Rapson (1994: 5) define emotional contagion as “the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize facial expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person, and consequently, to converge emotionally.” Hatfield and colleagues conceptualize emotional contagion as a largely subconscious and tacit process by which affective states are transferred or shared amongst individuals. The process of emotional contagion can be attributed to two underlying processes of (1) emotional mimicry or synchrony and (2) emotional experience and feedback. This infers that an individual’s affective state is linked with their own or other individuals’ verbal and non-verbal expressions of emotions, and that a change in either will automatically trigger a congruent response in the other. The contagion effect, therefore, occurs when a second individual or party ‘catches’ the portrayed affective state of the conveyor, and subsequently, converges on the affective state of the conveyor (Barsade, 2002).

Researchers including Totterdell and his colleagues (1998; 2000) and Barsade (2002) have provided empirical evidence of emotional contagion and mood linkage amongst group members, and demonstrated its implications for group performance. Considerably less attention has been given to the study of emotional contagion in a leadership context, however.

Exceptions include studies by Bono and Ilies (2006), Johnson (2008), and Sy, Côté and Saavedra (2005), who examined emotional contagion flowing from leaders to followers. In particular, Bono and Ilies found that leaders can elicit positive mood to

enhance perceptions of effectiveness from their followers. More recently, Johnson (2008) also demonstrated the effect in a field setting and highlighted the impact of susceptibility to emotional contagion.

In addition, emotional contagion can flow from followers to leaders. Most of the research we discussed earlier was based on the assumption that greater positional power allows the leader greater opportunity to express and to transmit emotions. We argue that leadership processes need to be examined from more holistic, follower-centric perspectives, and this includes examining upward emotional contagion. In this sense, we are responding to Meindl's (1995) and call for researchers to re-evaluate their focus to encompass follower-related actions that influence leadership outcomes (see also Meindl, Ehrlich & Dukerich, 1985).

The initial evidence supportive of the idea of upward contagion comes from a laboratory study conducted by Tee and Ashkanasy (2008). These authors found that leader performance was associated with followers' collective mood, such that leaders in positive-mood groups made faster decisions and were more effective than leaders in negative-mood groups.

Hence, we contend that leadership research will benefit from more follower-centric perspectives, as reflected in our proposed model. We suggest in particular that emotional contagion processes may serve as a key mechanism by which followers can affect a leader's influence. In effect displays of followers' negative affect and the resulting emotional contagion effects serve to minimize a leader's influence. The impact of emotional contagion is seen in leader-member exchange relationships (LMX), team-

member exchange relationships (TMX), and the team climate (affective climate and trust climate) that develops over time (Johnson, 2008).

### *Exchange Relationships*

*LMX*. The focus of LMX theory is on the differentiated exchange relationships that leaders develop and maintain with organizational members (see Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995, for a review). Here, the unit of analysis is the dyad, comprised of the leader and member. Considerable empirical research has been focused on developing an understanding of LMX relationships, and substantial evidence has been found for the influence of LMX relationship quality on employees' organizational commitment, job satisfaction, task performance, helping behaviors, and turnover intentions (see Gerstner & Day, 1997).

From this dyadic perspective, we suggest that organizational members' displays of negative affect and the emotional contagion that follows will have implications for leader-member exchange relationship quality. In particular, we suggest that members may portray negative affect, such as jealousy, resentment, and distress, as a result of leaders who are perceived to be favoring specific group members over others, or leaders perceived to be insincere. Dasborough (2006) demonstrated the range of negative emotions that employees may feel towards their leaders. We argue further that, over time, these negative emotions will spread across various members, and will impact the quality of the leader-member exchange relationships. This includes not only the LMX relationship between the organizational members who initially display the negative emotion, but also the LMX relationships of other members who have been 'infected' through the meso process of emotional contagion. Thus:

Proposition 4: Over time, individual member negative emotions will spread through a process of emotional contagion, negatively affecting the quality of their own and other members' dyadic LMX relationships.

*TMX.* According to Seers (1989) and Seers, Petty and Cashman (1995), team-member exchange (TMX) is a theoretical extension of leader-member exchange (LMX), emphasizing the quality of social exchanges between an individual and his/her team members. It provides an indication of the effectiveness of the members' ongoing relationships within the team. Specifically, TMX involves the individual's willingness to help other members, to share feedback and to contribute ideas with them (Seers, 1989).

TMX is also related to, but distinct from, other similar variables such as collective efficacy or group potency. Group potency refers to group members' collective perceptions or shared belief about how efficacious and capable their group is (Jung & Sosik, 2003). TMX, on the other hand, emphasizes the ongoing reciprocal relationships between individuals and other team members (Seers, 1989). Although these constructs are conceptually similar, they have a different focus and are empirically distinct.

As Tse and Dasborough (2008) have recently shown, the quality of TMX relationships is associated with the emotions experienced by the individuals in the relationships. Moreover, individual members displaying emotions (regardless of the source of the emotion) may influence the quality of their relationships with other team members. In the context of the model we are proposing, such negative affective displays may also be specifically directed toward team members who are perceived to be favored by the leaders. In this respect, the negative affective displays can influence TMX. Thus, as a result of proximity and constant social interaction, negative affective displays can

determine other team members' perceptions of their exchange relationships (e.g., Kelly & Barsade, 2001). It seems reasonable to assume that team members are unlikely to develop high-quality TMX relationships if they experience negative emotions displayed by other members.

Proposition 5: Over time, individual member negative emotions, spread through a process of emotional contagion, will negatively impact the quality of group-level TMX relationships.

### *Affective climate*

Choi, Price, and Vinokur (2003) define affective climate as an overall interaction pattern or a shared positive perception among members, and the atmosphere that characterize interactions within a team. Although climate perceptions originate within individuals, affective climate is conceptualized and operationalized as a group-level construct that represents a shared perception of affect within the group (Anderson & West, 1998; Ashkanasy & Nicholson, 2003). Research suggests that climate perceptions influence how individuals think and behave collectively by stimulating their perceptions and feelings about the ambient stimulus of their team context (De Rivera, 1992). With this notion in mind, characteristics of the affective climate – including the level of warmth, support, acceptance, sincerity and enthusiasm – serve as social control mechanisms guiding team members on how to interpret events, develop appropriate attitudes, and understand expectations concerning their behaviors (Choi et al., 2003; De Rivera, 1992).

The role of team affective climate in leadership has been empirically examined by Tse et al. (2008). In their study, they found that, at the team level, the relationship

between LMX and workplace friendship was moderated by affective climate.

Specifically, their findings showed that high-quality LMX relationships were associated with enhanced workplace friendship between employees, especially when affective climate is strong. Hence, affective climate has implications for the relationship between team members and for relationships with leaders. Our focus is on negative affect, so that:

Proposition 6: Through the meso process of emotional contagion, individual negative emotions contribute to a negative affective climate at the group level.

### *Trust climate*

Trust is especially important within the context of leader-follower relationships (see Burke, Sims, Lazzara, & Salas, 2007 for a review). It has been examined from both perspectives of leader trust in followers (Brower, Schoorman, & Tan, 2000), as well as follower trust in leaders (Burke et al., 2007). McAllister (1995) defines interpersonal trust as the extent to which a person is confident in, and willing to act on the basis of, the words, actions, and decisions of another. As Mayer and colleagues (1995) outline, overall trust depends on perceived ability, integrity and benevolence. Ability reflects competence, integrity reflects behavioral consistency, and benevolence is defined as the perception that the trustee wants to do good to the trustor, aside from self-centered profit motives (Cook & Wall, 1980). In the case of leadership, followers must trust their leader if they are to comply with leader requests.

While the importance of trust in leaders has been established at the individual level (Burke, et al., 2007), we argue that it should also be considered at the group level in the form of trust climate. Lau and Lam (2008) recently examined team trust in leadership, and they found that subordinates' trust for leaders and team citizenship behaviors were

positively related at the group level of analysis. Further, they found that when leaders felt more trusted, teams showed more citizenship behaviors. Based on a positive climate of trust, leaders realize that their capabilities, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al., 1995) are assured by their followers (see Lau & Lam, 2008). A positive climate of trust contributes to organizational level outcomes, such as endorsement for the leader; and on the flip-side of this, a negative climate of trust would lead to organizational cynicism.

As explained earlier, we propose that individuals' negative emotions spread via emotional contagion through teams of individuals. When this occurs, the negative emotions of the group contribute to lower levels of trust in the leader (at the group level) and a lessened climate of trust. Hence:

Proposition 7: Through the meso process of emotional contagion, individual negative emotions contribute to building a climate of trust (mistrust) at the group level.

### **Macro-Level Outcomes**

#### *Organizational Endorsement of the Leader*

Leadership endorsement has previously been examined from the perspective of individual employee perceptions, with regards to individual level antecedents and outcomes. For example, Platow and van Knippenberg (2001) found that leadership endorsement is positively related to levels of social identification, and negatively related to perceived leader self-interest. In their study, leadership endorsement refers to individual in-group leaders. Also at the individual level of analysis, Ashforth (1994) discussed the effects of negative leader behavior on subordinates. Moreover, in addition

to individual affective outcomes, he also argued that such behaviors would result in lower levels of leader endorsement.

In our model, we are concerned with leadership endorsement at the organizational level. We build on the previous work by Platow and van Knippenberg (2001) and Ashforth (1994) by including the process of emotional contagion, which influences the relationships within the organization (LMX and TMX), and the affective climate and trust climate. While we suggest that leaders may be endorsed depending on the degree of trust and the quality of LMX and TMX relationships they foster with followers, we are also aware that leadership endorsement is also largely a function of the impressions and perceptions that leaders create amongst their followers (Giessner & van Knippenberg, 2008). As such, we also suggest that leaders may deliberately engage in impression management tactics that allow them to be perceived as being favorable towards followers.

We acknowledge that leadership endorsement is a function of the attributions that followers impart on the leader, and that endorsed leaders may not necessarily be the most effective in managing group processes. This argument is in line with findings from Luthans (1988) and his colleagues (Luthans, Hodgetts & Rosenkrantz, 1988), who found that managers who were often promoted rapidly were those who were skilled in impression management and networking abilities, as opposed to the quality of their relationships with followers. Palmer and colleagues (2001) found similar results, in that managers were also often predisposed to using impression management tactics to garner approval from followers.

The key argument here is that leadership endorsement is largely the result of how much followers approve of their leaders. Leaders who are endorsed may not necessarily be the most effective, and may under certain contexts be serving personal (as opposed to group) interests. Nonetheless, our model and theories tie in with these arguments. We propose that leaders may engage in impression management tactics in order to create the impression that they are prototypical, or are engaging in interests that will benefit the group in the short-term. In the short term, leaders may be endorsed, and this often leads their emergence in groups (van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003) and promotion within the groups they lead (Palmer, et. al., 2001). In the long term, however, these behaviors may serve only to advance the leader's personal interests. Hence, our current model suggests that leader endorsement is a function of followers' attributions and perceptions of the leader. Whether leaders ultimately exploit their followers' endorsement for group or self-serving interests is beyond the scope of our current model. We do however; argue that this caveat reflects reality to a greater extent, as it is unlikely that all leaders engage in behaviors purely for the benefit of their followers.

Together, these group-level processes and relationships influence overall support for the organization, and endorsement of the leader's behavior. Organizational leaders act as agents for their employer and thus require endorsement and support from top-level management. A leader who fails to maintain high-quality relationships with his or her followers and whose work groups exhibit high levels of internal conflict (low TMX quality), negative affective climate, and low trust, is at risk of being evaluated poorly by the organization, especially within the context of 360° evaluation models (Atwater & Brett, 2006). Thus, our next proposition is:

Proposition 8: The level of organizational endorsement for the leader will be influenced by the quality of exchange relationships in the organization (LMX, TMX) and the nature of the team climate (Affective Climate, Trust Climate).

*Organizational Cynicism toward the Leader*

Dean, Brandes, and Dhwardkar (1998) suggest that cynicism could be understood as a result of organizational processes involving leadership. Cynicism is defined as the attitude that an organization, group, or individual lacks honesty, sincerity, integrity and fairness (Davis & Gardner, 2004). As with all organizational attitudes, cynicism specifically involves three components: (1) belief that the organization lacks integrity, (2) negative emotion toward the organization, and (3) behavioral tendencies to be critical and disparaging towards the organization (Dean et al., 1998).

Cynicism may be directed towards business organizations in general, corporate executives and leaders, or other workplace objects (Andersson, 1996; Andersson & Bateman, 1997). Dean et al. (1998) specifically operationalized cynicism as an individual level variable, although they also acknowledged that individuals within an organization may have similarly cynical attitudes. In fact, the notion of a climate of cynicism is recognized in the communication and political science literature (e.g., see Schenck-Hamlin, Procter, & Rumsey, 2000). If this is so, then it follows that cynicism may also be regarded as an attitude held by organizational members as a whole. Thus, the negative emotions towards leaders spread through emotional contagion from individual to individual, resulting in an overall cynical attitude towards organizational leadership.

Davis and Gardner (2004) proposed a model whereby LMX and attributional processes influence perceived organizational politics and ultimately, cynicism toward the organization. We build on this earlier work, by incorporating emotional contagion as the mediating mechanism. Emotions are closely tied in with cynicism. In particular, as Dean et al. (1998) note, cynicism in organizations is associated with negative feelings, such as contempt, frustration, disappointment, and hopelessness. Further, these scholars explain that cynical employees may feel shame, distress, and disgust when they reflect on their organization.

In an empirical study, Andersson and Bateman (1997) found that cynicism toward a hypothetical organization was related to high levels of executive compensation, poor organizational performance, and organizational layoffs. In our model, we suggest that individual members who perceive the leader as showing favoritism to their detriment will become cynical, especially after the associated negative emotions spread amongst organizational members over time through emotional contagion. Further, this cynicism will become more pronounced over time and will spread throughout the organization. The level of cynicism will be indirectly determined by meso emotional contagion process, via the resulting quality of exchange relationships and the nature of the group climate. This leads to our final proposition:

Proposition 9: The level of organizational cynicism toward the leader will be influenced by the quality of exchange relationships (LMX, TMX) and the nature of the team climate (Affective Climate, Trust Climate).

## **Contextual Variables as Potential Moderators**

There are several contextual variables that may potentially moderate the relationships proposed in the model. The three contextual variables that we deem most relevant are: task interdependence, the timeframe, and reward systems. Due to constraints we cannot discuss all possible contextual factors; however, we do acknowledge that others exist, such as: organizational norms of egalitarian treatment, organizational level, mutual liking of members, and so on. A range of situational factors will impact the proposed relationships, with unique situations arising in different organizations, with different individuals involved, at different points in time.

We briefly outline three contextual factors here; yet we do not put forth formal propositions, for the sake of model parsimony. Our intention is to address the calls by Rousseau and Fried (2001), and Johns (2006), to explore the underlying effects of context in organizational research. Contextual influences are an essential aspect of meso-modeling, and empirical examinations of meso relationships should highlight the context in which the phenomena are studied.

### *Task Interdependence*

Task interdependence refers to the degree to which individuals work closely with their team members to share information, related-knowledge and expertise in order to complete their assigned tasks (Stewart & Barrick, 2003). Schnake and Dumler (2003) explain that task interdependence increases the time and effort required for team members to ensure effective coordination with other team members. Hence, the higher the level of task interdependence, the greater need for good communication, information exchange and coordinated effort among team members for achieving group-level goals

(Stewart & Barrick, 2003). On this basis, we argue that in situations of high task interdependence, member perceptions of leader non-prototypicality, unwarranted favoritism, and insincerity may be perceived as more unacceptable and members might therefore experience greater negative emotions in response to their leader. Further, the negative emotions will spread via emotional contagion at a faster rate in highly interdependent situations (Barsade, 2002), as members are required to work closely with each other and engage in frequent interaction for task accomplishment. This creates more opportunities for emotional contagion to occur (see Liden et al. 2006 for an empirical study of LMX and the impact of task interdependence).

#### *Temporal Context*

Here, we discuss the issue of consistency of leader behaviors that lead to negative emotions in members. If the behavior is consistent over time and situations, then the behavior will have a different meaning for the member perceiving it. This notion of behavioral consistency is underpinned by attribution theory, which explains whether observed behavior is seen to be determined by the person (internal factors) or the environment (external factors) (Heider, 1958). We argue that, if a leader consistently displays non-prototypical behaviors, unwarranted favoritism, or insincere behaviors, these are more likely to be attributed to internal causes (the leader) (see Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002). As a result, members perceiving these behaviors will experience more negative emotions toward the leader, and experience them more often over time (Dasborough, 2006). On the contrary, the less frequently these negative leader behaviors are observed, the less likely the members will have negative emotional reactions, because they will tend to attribute the behavior to be isolated incidents only. Clearly, this has

implications for the spreading of the negative emotions in the proposed model through emotional contagion and the subsequent organizational outcomes for the leader. Hence, temporal context is an important consideration.

### *Organization Reward System*

Financial rewards not only repay individuals for their contribution to organizational objectives, but also symbolize success and reinforce achievement (Rynes, Gerhart, & Parks, 2005). In this respect, leader substitute theory (Kerr & Jermier, 1978) can be used to explain the contextual influence of organizational reward systems on the relationships proposed in our model. Specifically, we suggest that individual and team rewards will moderate the relationship between perceived leader non-prototypicality, unwarranted favoritism and insincerity, and members' emotions. Leader substitute theory emphasizes that there are potential contextual factors that reduce the implications of leadership (Kerr & Jermier, 1978); rewards are one such contextual factor, which serve as 'neutralizers' reducing the effects of a leader's actions.

While reward systems do not make a leader's actions redundant, they do reduce the potential impact of a leader's actions on members (Kerr & Jermier, 1978). It is conceivable that an organization's individual and team reward systems could nullify the effects of perceived leader favoritism on team members' emotions for example. For instance, if individual team members receive direct access to organization's benefits and resources for meeting individual performance goals regardless of leader treatment, negative perceptions about their leaders' differential treatment becomes less important (triggering less negative emotions).

## **Suggestions for Future Empirical Explorations of the Model**

The model we have presented in this article involves variables at different levels of analysis, and a meso-process of emotional contagion linking these levels. This makes empirically testing the model a difficult endeavor. In the following section, we present some suggestions for tackling these issues.

### *Measures of Variables*

Most of the variables presented in the model have established measures. The measures we suggest are: Leader Prototypicality (Platow & van Knippenberg, 2001), Perceived LMX Variability/Favoritism (Hooper & Martin, 2008), Attribution of Leader Sincerity (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2004), Negative Affect (PANAS: Watson et al., 1988), LMX-7 (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), TMX (Seers, 1989), Trust (McAllister, 1995), Climate of Fear (Ashkanasy & Nicholson, 2003), Cynicism (Andersson & Bateman, 1997), and Endorsement of Leader (Platow & van Knippenberg, 2001).

Our meso process variable, emotional contagion is more difficult to capture. While there are scales to assess individuals' susceptibility to emotional contagion (see Doherty, 1997), it is necessary to capture this phenomenon in real time (e.g., see Fisher, 2008). However, accurately measuring emotion and emotional processes in real time is itself problematical. Dasborough, Sinclair, Bennett, and Tombs (2008) discuss some of the challenges in assessing emotional responses in real time, and discuss some alternative methods of assessment to overcome the limitation of self-reports. For example, they discuss the use of physiological measures of emotion, including changes to blood pressure, heart rate, adrenaline levels, neural images, perspiration, posture, and muscle activity (when smiling or frowning). However, these physiological measures would also

fail to accurately capture the intricacies of the emotional contagion processes within organizations.

Recent developments in the study of complexity theory may however shed light on measuring the dynamic processes presented in our model. The complexity theory of leadership proposed by Hazy (2006) explains that leadership plays an important role in managing organization's complex systems in response to a constantly changing environment. To assess the complex interaction dynamics between leaders, followers, and coworkers within the network of human interaction systems, Hazy proposes the use of computational modeling. Hazy (2007) discusses the use of computer models of leadership, and we argue that such techniques may be relevant for testing our theoretical model. Computational modeling techniques may help deal with exploring the internal complexity of the organization (Hazy, 2007), and we specifically suggest that computational modeling may be used to explore the complex meso process of emotional contagion.

#### *Data Analytical Strategy*

The meso-model presented includes variables at different levels of analysis. This means that if using more traditional statistical techniques (as opposed to the alternatives discussed above), it is necessary to justify why the group-level variables can be aggregated as group-level constructs for model estimation. In other words, scholars need to establish that there is agreement on the group-level variables among group members within groups, and that there is sufficient between-group variance for the same variables because the individuals' data are nested within teams. There must be within-group agreement in order to justify the use of aggregate measures for affective climate, trust

climate and TMX. We suggest that scholars follow the recommendations outlined by Chan (1998), Hofmann (1997), and Klein, Dansereau, and Hall (1994) regarding multilevel research.

We encourage the use of hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to test the proposed relationships across levels in the model. This method deals with multilevel data and cross-level models without the shortcomings of the aggregation and disaggregation biases. Hence, HLM allows the analysis of multiple level data simultaneously. It is possible to examine interactions between variables at different levels of analysis while accounting for their different sources of variance (Griffin, 2001; Hofmann, Griffin, & Gavin, 2000). In addition, HLM is effective for modeling cross-level interaction effects between group-level predictors and individual-level independent variables on outcome variables (Hofmann et al., 2000). Of course, if using HLM, it is important to have adequate sample size for testing the relationships.

### **Conclusions**

A key theoretical contribution of this meso approach to leadership is that, consistent with Ashkanasy and Jordan (in press), it takes into account the complexity that exists in organizations and portrays a more integrative approach towards the study of leader-member relationships across organizational levels. In particular, our follower-centric model suggests that followers are not merely passive onlookers in the leadership process, but are instrumental in shaping organizational leadership endorsement (Hollander, 1992). In the present article, we consider how micro-level follower perceptions and attributions have implications for meso-level emotional processes, and macro-level organizational leadership. Specifically, we propose that followers'

perceptions of leader prototypicality and favoritism, and attributions of leader sincerity, form the basis for followers' experience of, and displays of affect towards to leader. We pay specific attention to the portrayal of negative affect by followers, and suggest that through the meso process of emotional contagion this may be a source of followers' disapproval of leadership at the dyad level, group level and subsequently, at the organizational level.

As with all theoretical models, ours is subject to several limitations and boundary conditions. The first is that we focus exclusively on negative emotion. This is not to say that positive emotions are not important in leader-member relationships, however. On the contrary, consistent with Positive Organizational Scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003), we recognize that positive emotions are vitally important. For example, Bono and her colleagues (2007) used experience sampling methodology (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1987) to demonstrate that transformational leadership can lead to members reporting positive emotional states, resulting in higher satisfaction and performance. Nonetheless, it is also true that the dynamics of positive emotion are different from negative emotion (Ashkanasy & Ashton-James, 2007). Moreover, Dasborough (2006) showed that employees recall more negative affective events than positive affective events, and recalled them with more intensity. Thus, coverage of positive emotion is beyond the scope of the present article.

A second boundary condition is that our model addresses the role of the leader in a position of appointed authority, where the relationships between leaders and members is assumed to be pre-determined within an organizational structure rather than fluid (e.g., as described in Pearce & Manz, 2005). Our focus was exclusively on fixed leader-

member relationships in a formal organizational setting. In this respect, we took no account of the effect of shared leadership (Pearce & Manz, 2005), where leaders and followers engage dynamically to define their working relationships.

Third, our model is presented as if a linear process where leader behavior reflected in member emotional reactions determined organizational support and cynicism toward the leader. We adopted a follower-centric perspective, which left out the active role that leaders can take to motivate their followers or even the dynamics of contagion that flow from leaders to members (e.g., Sy et al., 2005). Clearly, in reality, there is feedback loop from the organizational outcomes of endorsement and cynicism back to individual leader behavior in a cyclical process.

Finally, we acknowledge the possibility of other variables influencing the processes in the model. Some of these were mentioned earlier in the section on contextual variables as potential moderators. For the sake of parsimony however, we consider these other potential variables as beyond the scope of our model and explain that the posited relationship presented are not exhaustive.

Of course, these limitations also open up opportunities for future research and extensions of our model. Shared leadership, leader proactivity, positive emotions, feedback loops, and other potential variables all represent opportunities for further development of our ideas. In addition, many of the processes that we outline in this article are still in relatively early stages of theoretical and empirical development. Studies of emotional contagion, and especially upward emotional contagion, are only just now appearing in the literature. And, the social identity theory of leadership is in the early stages of empirical validation. Research based on the social identity theory of leadership,

however, has yielded promising and consistent findings which highlight leader prototypicality and group-serving behaviors as key antecedents to leadership endorsement and perceived effectiveness.

From a practical perspective, our model suggests that leaders need to consider the broader context of group membership when fostering relationships with followers. In addition to displaying prototypical behaviors, leaders need to consider how they treat individuals in teams. We suggest that in-group favoritism may not necessarily yield positive outcomes, as leaders may be seen to emphasize the interests of one individual over the entire group. In-group favoritism must be portrayed as being collectively beneficial to the entire group, and not just specific, individual group members. Further, leaders need to be aware that their actions are subject to follower attributions and perceptions (Dasborough & Ashkanasy, 2002). Individual followers influence leadership outcomes via their displays of negative affect and through the meso process of emotional contagion. This may be how followers communicate their disapproval of leader behaviors, negatively impacting exchange relationships and group level climate, and is ultimately reflected at the organizational level as reduced endorsement and heightened cynicism toward the leader. We encourage scholars to utilize this model as a basis for future research, so we may learn more about the emotional meso processes influencing organizational leadership.

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Figure 1: Conceptual model

