

**THE POWER AND PERIL OF AWE IN LEADERSHIP: TRANSFORMING  
FOLLOWER IDENTITY AND BEHAVIOR**

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## ABSTRACT

Awe is a profound emotion that has captured significant attention within psychological research. While the potential for leaders to inspire awe in followers has received some recognition, systematic research on the nature and effects of awe in leadership—and within organizational contexts more broadly—remains limited. In this article, we offer a conceptual framework that explains the multifaceted and transformative nature of leadership through the power of awe. Specifically, we identify four leader behaviors—charismatic leadership tactics, exceptional performance, problem reframing, and self-sacrificial behavior—that elicit awe among followers. We further propose three variants of awe-inspiring leaders, describing how variation in a leader’s self-construal (independent, collective-interdependent, or humanity) differentially orients followers toward hero worship, in-group favoritism, or universal prosociality, through follower identification processes. Finally, we argue that a leader’s zero-sum beliefs either intensify or weaken these behavioral consequences. By advancing this framework, we hope to stimulate further research on the effects of awe within organizations and deepen our understanding of how this transformative emotion shapes identity, behavior, and beyond.

**Keywords:** awe, leadership, emotion, identity

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the annals of history, leaders have inspired social unity and evoked intense emotions among their followers. Whether political figures, business leaders, social activists or religious zealots, these leaders have used this ability to inspire to great effect, bringing people together and effecting significant social change. The consequences of such leaders, however, have been remarkably varied. For example, whereas Martin Luther King Jr. catalyzed a social movement through his inspirational vision of a more just society (Carson, 1987), Benito Mussolini used his similarly charismatic rhetoric to unite his followers, leading to mass support for his fascist regime (Gentile, 1998). These examples demonstrate that while leaders who inspire their followers can produce both positive and negative outcomes, we argue the impact of their influence is transmitted through the same means: the power of awe.

Despite the remarkably varied consequences of awe-inspiring leaders throughout history, contemporary research on awe has focused predominantly on the positive psychological effects that emanate from a profound sense of oneness with humanity as a whole (Piff et al., 2015; Seo et al., 2023; Shiota et al., 2007; Yaden et al., 2016). This focus on the benevolent aspects of awe, although valuable, has thus left a significant gap in our understanding of the diversity of leaders who inspire awe and their effects. In addition to the well-documented profound sense of oneness with all of humanity, follower experiences of awe have the potential to produce a cult of personality or strong in-group identification (Dikötter, 2019; Naclerio & Van Cappellen, 2022). Thus, it is imperative that management and emotion scholars expand their scope of inquiry to encompass the full spectrum of awe's effects.

Moreover, awe research in the field of management is surprisingly sparse. This observation becomes more intriguing when we consider that awe's proposed evolutionary

function is to stabilize social hierarchies by instilling in followers reverence and admiration for their leaders (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Indeed, awe is known to increase collective orientations that align goals and encourage team collaboration (Stellar et al., 2017). However, despite this early recognition of the importance of leadership in the elicitation of awe, the primary focus of psychological research has been on how awe is experienced in non-organizational contexts, the most common of which is exposure to nature (Anderson et al., 2018; Piff et al., 2015; Stancato & Keltner, 2021; Stellar et al., 2018; Valdesolo & Graham, 2014). Hence, the literature's departure from leadership as an evolutionary origin of awe, and its focus on other factors such as nature-exposure, may explain why awe scholarship has been dominated by the singular understanding that awe produces positive behaviors that stem from identification with all of humanity.

Our primary goal in this article is to explain how leaders transform followers through the psychological power of awe, shaping their identity and behavior. Drawing from awe and leadership research, we identify observable leader behaviors that are well-positioned to elicit awe (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Awe diminishes followers' self-focus and increases their identification with larger social entities, which we propose includes the leader, an organizational in-group, or humanity broadly. As the 'I' becomes smaller, the 'we' becomes bigger. Leaders influence this process through their own construal of the self—whether independent, collectively interdependent with an in-group, or interconnected with humanity (Cross et al., 2011; Harb & Smith, 2008)—signaling the value of identifying with these entities to followers. Consequently, awe-inspired identification drives distinct follower behaviors: leader identification fosters hero worship (Carlyle, 1993), group identification promotes in-group favoritism (Fu et al., 2012), and humanity identification nurtures universal prosociality (Barragan et al., 2021). Finally, leaders may also weaken or intensify followers' behavioral responses through their beliefs concerning

inter-group dynamics and the finite nature of resources, particularly zero-sum beliefs—the view that gains for one party come at others' expense (Andrews Fearon & Götz, 2024; Davidai & Tepper, 2023). We propose that leader zero-sum beliefs strengthen follower allegiance to leaders or in-groups by portraying out-groups as adversaries (Halevy et al., 2012; Tajfel & Turner, 2004) and reduce prosocial behaviors that benefit all people. Thus, we theorize that awe-inspiring leaders produce distinct follower outcomes based on their self-construal and beliefs about inter-group competition over limited resources.

This article makes several key contributions to the leadership literature. First, we provide theoretical foundations for understanding the role of awe in how leaders transform follower identity and behavior, revitalizing early insights into awe's critical role in leadership (Behling & McFillen, 1996; Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Sy et al., 2018). Refocusing attention on awe's transformative nature enables scholars to better explain findings concerning value-based forms of leadership (e.g., charismatic and transformational leadership) (Antonakis et al., 2016; Siangchokyoo et al., 2020). Second, we clarify the “dark side” of transformational leadership by distinguishing leader behaviors from their effects on followers (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). With this distinction in mind, we show that the same awe-inspiring leader behaviors can produce both positive and negative outcomes depending on how leaders guide follower identification processes. In addition, we contribute to the leadership literature by drawing scholarly attention to humanity identification as an additional pathway, beyond traditional leader and group-based identification (Siangchokyoo et al., 2020), through which awe-inspiring leaders influence followers. Through humanity identification, leaders can foster prosocial workplace behaviors without the negative fallout often linked to narrower in-group identities.

Furthermore, we advance awe scholarship by challenging its predominantly positive conceptualization (e.g., Piff et al., 2015; Seo et al., 2023; Shiota et al., 2007; Yaden et al., 2016) and showing that it can prompt followers to engage in morally questionable behaviors, especially when their leader or group identification overrides moral resistance (Umphress et al., 2010). Finally, our conceptual work brings into focus the critical role of boundary conditions on awe's effects. That is, leaders are both sources of awe and 'sense givers' who guide awe's downstream impact (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). This highlights the importance of social and contextual factors, suggesting that awe's effects are shaped not only by its source but also by the surrounding social context.

### **AWE AND LEADERSHIP: AN OVERVIEW**

In the following section, we provide an overview of awe and its intersection with leadership. We begin by summarizing the psychological foundations of awe, including its central appraisals and social functions. Our discussion then addresses the role of awe in leadership theories, critiquing existing conceptual work and identifying meaningful and relevant limitations. Here, we emphasize the need to disentangle leader behaviors from their resulting effects on followers, setting the stage for conceptualizing how leaders can engage in specific behaviors that engender awe in followers.

#### **Awe**

In their pioneering integrative work on religious, philosophical, sociological, and psychological literatures on awe, Keltner and Haidt (2003) identified two central appraisals—perceived vastness and need for accommodation—as core components of experienced awe. Subsequent conceptual and empirical work has expanded on these insights, clarifying awe's nature and its effects. Most often, people describe awe in terms of feeling wonder, amazement,

and deeply impressed (Cowen & Keltner, 2017). Scholarly consensus situates awe as a positive emotion that engenders positive affect and attendant positive facial expressions that are easily identifiable (Campos et al., 2013; Shiota et al., 2003). Although approximately three quarters of all awe experiences are positive, roughly one quarter are flavored with threat and felt more negatively (Gordon et al., 2017)<sup>1</sup>. We therefore focus on positive forms of awe that inspire profound wonder and amazement.

Like gratitude, admiration and elevation, awe is an other-oriented emotion that involves other-focused outward appraisals beyond the self (Lazarus, 1991). Perceived vastness is a defining quality of awe that can be physical or figurative (Yaden et al., 2016). For example, an office view of the city skyline may provide a physically vast overview, whereas witnessing a leader perform exceptionally in some domain may elicit a sense of figurative vastness. Awe also reshapes cognitive frameworks. Schema incongruence that is caused by awe forces a perceiver to change existing mental structures as the new information cannot be readily assimilated with previous experience (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Taylor & Uchida, 2019; Valdesolo et al., 2017). Although people frequently balance new information with what they already know (Piaget, 1970), awe demands more than assimilation. Instead, it prompts “accommodation,” a stimuli-driven process of reconfiguring one’s mental models to account for experiences that defy previous understanding (Fiedler, 2001). In this way, awe compels individuals to adjust their perceptions and understandings to fully grasp the extraordinary.

To understand the tight coupling of awe and leadership, it is important to examine awe’s social function (Keltner & Gross, 1999). Human groups have needed to forge strong connections

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<sup>1</sup> Threat-based awe is characterized by greater feelings of fear and differs in its appraisal profile, antecedents, and consequences (Chaudhury et al., 2021). It does not enhance well-being like positive awe does, leading emotion scholars to reason that it “may not elicit self-transcendence” (Gordon et al., 2017; Jiang & Sedikides, 2022). Due to this, threat-based awe is likely to reveal a different pattern of effects on follower identity and behavior.

to attain goals, fend off potential threats, and thus ensure survival (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Dunbar & Shultz, 2007). The wonder and reverence of followers for leaders has served to stabilize social hierarchical structures and ensure the survival potential of tightly bound collectives. In other words, “awe arose from the social function of facilitating a subordinate-leader relationship” (Chirico & Yaden, 2018: p. 225). Consistent with this understanding, we know that awe underlies feelings of belongingness (Shiota et al., 2007), cooperativeness, and being willing to make personal sacrifices on behalf of the needs of the group (Stellar et al., 2017). Later, awe developed into more elaborate forms in response to beautiful physical environments and the virtuous behaviors of others, to name a few (Negami & Ellard, 2021; Shiota et al., 2017).

Overall, the psychological literature on awe provides two important conclusions. First, individuals experience awe when they encounter stimuli that overshadows them and overwhelms their full comprehension. Awe-inducing stimuli evoke two other-focused appraisals: perceived vastness and need for accommodation. Secondly, awe’s effects are adaptive in that they promote group cohesion and aid in prioritizing the needs of the group. Both effects speak to the role of leadership in organizations as hierarchical structures promote effective large-scale collaboration to help the group flourish and protect its interests (Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Stellar et al., 2017). Having provided an overview of awe’s nature, effects, and social functions, it is important to next review existing research that has considered leaders as sources of follower awe and analyze relevant limitations in the leadership literature as a whole.

## **Leadership**

Some conceptual work suggests that charismatic and transformational leaders evoke follower awe (Behling & McFillen, 1996; McCann et al., 2006; Sy et al., 2018). Behling and

McFillen (1996) proposed that charismatic leaders elicit awe by projecting self-assurance and enhancing self-image. However, these authors conceptualized awe as a follower belief rather than an emotion and conflated awe with its potential consequences (like trust, acceptance, and faith). Follow-up empirical work to test this model demonstrated the same conceptual issues by measuring awe with items such as “I trust the leader’s decision” and “I have faith in the leader” (McCann, et al., 2006: p. 11). Alternatively, Sy and colleagues (2018) conceptualized awe according to its central appraisals. However, they did not identify leader behaviors that elicit awe, nor did they theorize about how leaders who inspire awe can produce varied outcomes. This is exemplified in their proposition that awe serves as a mechanism through which leaders promote follower affiliation with “a target located outside the group” (p. 62), emphasizing awe’s capacity to foster undifferentiated social identification. In contrast, we approach awe as an emotion capable of producing identification with multiple targets.

Beyond the limited conceptual work that has considered leaders for their role in eliciting awe, it is also important to consider a problematic limitation of the leadership literature as a whole (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). This is the persistent conflation of displayed leadership behaviors with a leader’s underlying intentions, the quality of the behavior’s execution, or the realized effects of these behaviors (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). As Fischer and Sitkin highlight, this leads to widespread causal indeterminacy: “the impossibility of determining whether a leadership style–outcome link is due to leadership behaviors or other factors” (p. 333). This so-called valence-based conflation highlights why scholars have struggled to conceptualize and empirically validate pseudo-transformational leadership (Mackey et al., 2021), transformational leadership’s dark side. To account for negative consequences of transformational leadership (e.g., follower dependence), the most common approach has been to

identify behavioral differences in pseudo-transformational leaders that produce these consequences (Barling et al., 2008; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Christie et al., 2011; Price, 2003). The problem with this approach, however, is it utilizes behavioral constructs that are conflated with other evaluative components. For instance, discouragement of intellectual stimulation, a construct that conflates behavior with a specified positive effect on followers (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023), has been identified as a supposed marker of pseudo-transformational leadership (Christie et al., 2011). Of course, when common practice has been to conflate behaviors with outcomes, the solution to account for differences in outcomes is to identify differences in behavior, thus exacerbating the issue further. As we will explain, awe-inspiring behaviors in and of themselves do not produce distinct outcomes. Rather, it is how leaders shape awe's downstream effects that account for these differences.

Finally, leadership style research is prone to amalgamation and construct redundancy (Fischer et al., 2021; Hoch et al., 2018), where the overall rationale for bundling behaviors together into a single leadership construct is often underdeveloped. This produces substantial overlap across constructs in terms of their behavior, evaluations of intent, and outcomes (Banks et al., 2018; Bormann & Rowold, 2018). Given these shortcomings, there is a compelling need to reexamine the leadership literature to identify what a leader can do (behavioral content of executed behavior) to elicit awe among followers. Moreover, we focus on behaviors that leaders can engage in, rather than advance a lumped conceptualization of “awe-inspiring leadership” (Carton, 2022), to avoid merely “moving from one type of big, valenced concept (e.g., authentic, ethical, or transformational leadership) to another type of big, valenced concept (e.g., caring, empathic, or inclusive leadership)” (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023: p. 364).

## INSPIRING AWE THROUGH LEADER BEHAVIORS

An examination of the leadership literature for awe-inspiring leader behaviors requires focused consideration of social and cognitive elicitors that exemplify awe's flavoring features of ability and virtue. Across cultures, awe is most commonly evoked by physical, social, and cognitive cues (Bai et al., 2017; Keltner & Haidt, 2003). While leaders in organizations can be potent social and cognitive sources of awe, serving as symbolic representations of the organization and exerting influence through their social standing and the ideas they communicate (Carton, 2022; Shamir et al., 1993), their capacity to evoke awe physically is limited. Instead, aspects of the physical environment, such as workplace biophilic design, are better suited for this (McGuire et al., 2024; Pérez & Lench, 2018). Grounding this analysis further, it is also helpful to connect awe's flavoring features—virtue and ability—to leader behaviors. Virtue encompasses moral, social, or intellectual conduct, while ability accounts for leader behaviors that reflect high performance (Hu & Meng, 2022; Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Both are readily observed in actions taken by leaders. While beauty and supernatural are also flavoring features associated with awe, beauty is subject to subjective evaluation, risking valence-based conflation (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023), and supernatural experiences are largely irrelevant in organizational settings.

Value-based leadership perspectives, such as charismatic and transformational leadership, naturally align with these dimensions of awe. Value-based perspectives emphasize how leaders engage or inspire “followers beyond expectations or self-interest” (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023: p. 356). Such leaders may elicit awe in followers socially through their charismatic appeal, remarkable abilities, and their morally virtuous acts (Antonakis et al., 2011; Shamir et al., 1993). They also may induce awe cognitively through the way they articulate ideas, broaden followers' perspectives and challenge their assumptions (Bass, 1985). Located in each of these awe-

inspiring actions are awe's flavoring features of ability and virtue. Whereas exceptional ability is recognized primarily in the performance of awe-inspiring leaders, virtue is found in their charismatic appeal, intellect, and commitment to moral conduct.

Therefore, we identify awe-inspiring leader behaviors by drawing carefully from value-based leadership perspectives (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023), using awe as the lens through which we interpret this literature. Specifically, we focus on (1) charismatic leadership tactics, (2) exceptional performance, (3) problem reframing and (4) self-sacrificial behavior as leader behaviors that carry the capacity to inspire follower awe. These exemplars of leadership behavior are intended to be representative rather than exhaustive.

***Charismatic leadership tactics.*** Charismatic leadership is “values-based, symbolic, and emotion-laden leader signaling” (Antonakis et al., 2016: p. 304) and charismatic leaders possess “a special magnetic quality that fills followers with awe and adoration” (Lipman-Blumen, 1996: p. 30). By signaling charisma, leaders can enact changes to followers’ self-concepts by engaging in “leader behavior that projects self-confidence and enhances the leader’s image” (Shamir et al., 1993: p. 165). Indeed, the positive effect of charisma on distal follower outcomes may be mediated by follower emotions, such as awe (Menges et al., 2015; Sy et al., 2018). Consistent with our contention that leader charisma evokes awe is theorizing that it changes followers’ self-concepts and increases their prosocial and team-oriented behavior (Shamir et al., 1993; Sy et al., 2018). Convergent evidence demonstrates that the way charisma impacts subordinates is aligned with the effects of awe-inducing stimuli—both change cognitive frames of reference and alter self-concepts (Piff et al., 2015; Shiota et al., 2007). Charismatic leadership tactics (CLTs) are effective behavioral devices that leaders can leverage to signal charisma, influence followers’ emotions, and build a shared sense of purpose (Antonakis et al., 2011). These tactics include nine

verbal (rhetoric) tactics and three nonverbal tactics (Jacquart & Antonakis, 2015). The verbal tactics include use of metaphors, contrasts, lists, rhetorical questions, stories and anecdotes, demonstrations of moral conviction, sharing the sentiments of the collective, setting high expectations, and communicating confidence that expectations can be met. The nonverbal tactics include use of body gestures, facial expressions, and an animated tone of voice. CLTs are trainable techniques that significantly enhance a leader's attributed charisma (Antonakis et al., 2011). Importantly, CLTs have been lauded for their precision in focusing on behavioral content (what a leader does) and not conflating this with other factors such as follower or organizational outcomes (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). This brings us to our first proposition:

*Proposition 1a: Charismatic leadership tactics exhibited by leaders are positively related to follower experiences of awe.*

**Exceptional performance.** In addition to displaying CLTs, leaders who demonstrate exceptional performance are likely to fill followers with awe. Exceptional performance can be differentiated from follower evaluations, underlying leader intentions, or other factors, because personal results (e.g., sales record) or the attainment of accolades (e.g., industry-specific award) are objective and observable benchmarks for performance. It also naturally speaks to ability as an important flavoring feature of awe and draws primarily from the transformational leadership literature because exceptional performance conveys high standards and enhances a leader's idealized influence (Antonakis, 2012; Keltner & Haidt, 2003). When a leader performs exceptionally in some area or has accomplished a remarkable achievement, followers are often left asking, "*how did they do it?*". Consider Warren Buffett, Chairman and CEO of Berkshire Hathway. Buffett's exceptional performance as an investor, spanning decades, has resulted in him becoming one of the most revered investors in the world. Industry experts and competitors

are in awe of his abilities (Hagstrom, 2013). Relatedly, a salesperson working in an organization would equally experience awe when observing their team leader close a record-breaking sale. People are particularly drawn to the exceptional performance of individuals because it fills them with awe (Walker & Gilovich, 2021). Exceptional performance is important in shaping how followers feel and think toward their leaders, even leading them to perceive their leaders as more charismatic (Agle et al., 2006). We propose that a leader's exceptional performance evokes follower awe by eliciting appraisals of vastness (e.g., followers perceive the level of performance to be vast) and challenging existing ways of thinking. Followers are compelled to comprehend how such performance is possible, hence the question: "*how did they do it?*". Thus, both vastness perceptions and the need for accommodation are appraised when followers witness their leader perform exceptionally.

*Proposition 1b: Exceptional performance exhibited by leaders is positively related to follower experiences of awe.*

**Problem reframing.** Leaders can also present organizational problems in ways that stimulate intellect, expand awareness, nurture imagination, and in doing so provide fresh perspective. Bass (1985) has referred to this as a facet of transformational leadership, *intellectual stimulation*, and the displayed leadership behavior in this process which we propose best elicits feelings of awe is *problem reframing*. Problem reframing occurs when a leader attempts to "make sense of a given situation by articulating or relating it to different objectives that can sometimes appear conflicting" (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2002: p. 92). Problem reframing therefore involves presenting an issue in a novel way by shifting its context, uncovering new relationships, or connecting it to different or conflicting objectives, thereby challenging conventional assumptions and opening pathways for alternative solutions. Unlike intellectual stimulation,

which specifies an assumed positive effect on followers as part of its conceptualization (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023), problem reframing is simply the displayed behavior of articulating or relating a problem to different objectives or perspectives that are often not typically related (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2002). Leaders who engage in problem reframing foster “followers’ conceptualization, comprehension, and discernment of the nature of the problems they face” (Bass, 1985: p. 99). Indeed, leadership is a ‘language game’ that relies heavily on the ability to reframe problems and challenges (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Pondy, 1978). Just as epiphanies and revelations have been theorized to promote awe (Keltner & Haidt, 2003), we suggest that leaders provide the impetus for followers to experience this themselves through problem reframing.

*Proposition 1c: Problem reframing exhibited by leaders is positively related to follower experiences of awe.*

***Self-sacrificial behavior.*** Recent conceptual and empirical work suggests that awe can be elicited through the virtuous acts of others (Graziosi & Yaden, 2021; Thomson & Siegel, 2013, 2017). It therefore follows that leaders, through their morally virtuous actions, may foster follower experiences of awe. Drawing primarily from the charismatic leadership literature, we identify an act of self-sacrifice as an observable leader behavior that exemplifies awe’s flavoring feature of virtue (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Self-sacrificial leader behaviors include putting the needs of the group ahead of oneself, admitting wrongdoing in a public setting, or suffering a personal loss or setback to uphold personally held beliefs (De Cremer et al., 2006). When leaders engage in acts of self-sacrifice, this enhances attributions of leader charisma, promotes follower collective identification, and enhances cooperation (De Cremer 2002; De Cremer & Van Knippenberg, 2002). Self-sacrificial behaviors suggest the leader will set aside personal interests for the sake of the group or organization. At the same time, self-interested or narcissistic leaders

might use self-sacrificial behavior to reap these benefits, strategically promoting the image of a martyr (Morf et al., 2011). Nonetheless, these behaviors are likely to induce awe in followers because of their theoretical connection to *elevation* (Shiota et al., 2017), the emotional experience of being moved by the moral acts of others (Haidt, 2000). Elevation and awe are distinguished by their differing physiological and motivational responses, with elevation activating stronger prosocial tendencies (e.g., a desire to help others) (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Schnall & Roper, 2012). However, given that most interpersonal experiences of awe are derived from observing virtuous acts (Graziosi & Yaden, 2021), we view this as a dynamic affective process in which observing virtuous acts first elicits awe, after which feelings of elevation follow. This brings us to our next proposition:

*Proposition 1d: Self-sacrificial behavior exhibited by leaders is positively related to follower experiences of awe.*

### **The Role of Follower Attributes**

Although awe-inspiring leader behaviors can ignite a spark in followers that produce experiences of awe, the degree to which followers feel awe depends on their personal attributes. In other words, to borrow from Klein and House's (1995) analogy of charisma and fire, followers vary in their degree of flammability. Just as more 'flammable' followers lead to a greater charismatic 'fire', awe-enhancing follower attributes lead to greater follower experiences of awe. Indeed, some people are more open to experiencing awe than others (Anderson et al., 2020; Shiota et al., 2006; Shiota et al., 2007). Openness to experience is a personality dimension that reflects an individual's sense of curiosity, open-mindedness, and acceptance of novel experiences (McCrae & Costa, 2003). This heightened sense of curiosity leads followers to appreciate and attend to their surroundings more. Indeed, people who are more open to

experiences are more likely to agree with statements such as “I feel wonder almost every day” and ‘I often feel awe’ (Shiota et al., 2006). Openness to experience is also more strongly associated with experiences of awe than the remaining four personality dimensions (conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism), indicating its particularly strong ties to awe (Silvia et al., 2015). Therefore, because of the cognitive, motivational, and individual difference markers which characterize followers’ high openness to experience, we argue that awe-inspiring leader behaviors result in greater experiences of awe for these followers.

*Proposition 2a: The positive relationship between awe-inspiring leader behaviors and follower experiences of awe is stronger when follower openness to experience is high (vs. low).*

In addition to openness to experience, the need to belong is a further follower attribute that may strengthen the impact of awe-inspiring leader behaviors. Humans have a fundamental drive to form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 2017). When this need to belong is high, individuals are more sensitive to social cues and interactions that can fulfill this need (Pickett et al., 2004). Awe, as we discussed, arises from witnessing something vast that challenges and expands one’s current frames of reference (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Leaders who display awe-inspiring behaviors not only fulfill a follower’s need for new perspectives and inspiration but may also address their need to belong by promoting social unity and a shared purpose (Stellar et al., 2017). This relationship between awe and the need to belong is often found among members of cults, especially for those who seek affiliation out of a strong desire for belongingness and group membership (Salande & Perkins, 2011). Cult leaders use awe as a tool to inspire and create social unity among individuals who are already hungry for this (Shapshay et al., 2018; Wexler, 1995). Followers with a high need to belong are therefore likely

to be more receptive to and affected by awe-inspiring leader behaviors, intensifying their experience of awe as they recognize it as an opportunity to connect deeply with those around them.

*Proposition 2b: The positive relationship between awe-inspiring leader behaviors and follower experiences of awe is stronger when follower need to belong is high (vs. low).*

### **WHEN THE SELF IS SMALL, WHO IS BIG?**

Awe-inspiring leader behaviors are likely to affect follower identity because awe is a self-transcendent emotion that binds “individuals together in social relationships by promoting cooperation and group stability” (Stellar et al., 2017: p. 201). We propose that awe-inspiring leader behaviors impact follower identification because experiences of awe can alter their self-schemas and identities in enduring ways (Rousseau, 1998; Scott et al., 1998). Consistent with this understanding, Keltner and Haidt (2003) describe awe as possessing the power to “transform people and reorient their lives, goals, and values”, and awe-inducing events as potentially “one of the fastest and most powerful methods of personal change and growth” (p. 312). Distinct from positive emotions like joy, pride, and excitement that do not require major accommodative processing (Lazarus, 1991), awe is a positive emotion with a unique capacity to foster lasting change in a follower’s social identity. Indeed, although general positive feeling states can promote changes to peripheral aspects of our self-concept, they have no effect on central aspects (Sedikides, 1995).

Self-transcendent emotions differ from other positive emotions that generate self-relevant appraisals directing attention toward the self (Lazarus, 1991). Instead, other-focused appraisals are formed in which individuals turn attention from themselves toward others (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Awe leads to the diminished valuation of personal needs relative to the needs of others,

which is reflected in the “small self” phenomenon (Piff et al., 2015; Perlin & Li, 2020; Preston & Shin, 2017). In one study, participants induced to experience awe drew themselves smaller than before and focused their depictions on the wider community rather than on themselves (Piff et al., 2015). In another study, awe enhanced perceptions of interconnectedness in social ties and universal group membership (Shiota et al., 2007). This is because being confronted with something that is both vast and beyond comprehension leads individuals to shift their “attention toward larger entities” (Piff et al., 2015: p. 884), resulting in a desire to connect with something that is larger than the self (Mattingly et al., 2013). As Tyson and colleagues noted (2022), “rather than ‘losing’ or shrinking the self, fusion with bigger forces expands the horizons of the self” (p. 401). Being in the presence of something vast promotes self-expansion, not a shrinking of the self. Awe induces the ‘I’ to become smaller so that the ‘we’ can become bigger.

At the same time, the affective experience of awe works in concert with awe’s cognitive appraisals to cultivate an absorb and accommodate thought-action tendency (Fredrickson, 2013). Awe experiences are humbling (Stellar et al., 2018) and the affective feeling of wonder and amazement that forms awe drives a search for meaning and social connection (Danvers et al., 2016). Positive affective states, like awe, promote exploratory social cognitions and behaviors. For example, employees experiencing greater positive affect at work are more likely to help their colleagues and evaluate the quality of their social interactions more positively (Berry & Hansen, 1996; Lin et al., 2019). Positive affective states also enhance trust in others (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005), expand the inclusiveness of social categories (Dovidio et al., 1995), and foster in-group identities (Dovidio et al., 1998). It is therefore through awe’s affective component—the positive feeling of wonder and amazement—in addition to appraising something vast that requires accommodation, that follower awe produces an expansion of the self to include others. This also

reinforces why threat-based awe, awe's negative form, is unlikely to produce similar effects on follower identity (Hughes et al., 2020; Monroy & Keltner, 2023).

Follower experiences of awe that stem from awe-inspiring leader behaviors result in self-diminishment and identification with other social entities. However, this does not inform us who followers will form a strong identification with. As we noted, awe shifts “attention toward larger entities” (Piff et al., 2015: p. 884), but to which ones? While followers are likely to develop greater social identifications across the board (Shiota et al., 2007), the leader as the source of awe can have influence over this process. Leaders who inspire awe are likely to be granted a leader identity from followers because awe is evolutionarily rooted in leader-follower dynamics and the elicitation of awe in followers aligns with implicit theories of leadership (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Lord et al., 2020; Sy & Van Knippenberg, 2021). Leaders that have been granted this identity therefore have greater subsequent influence over the thoughts, beliefs and behaviors of followers (Gardner & Avolio, 1998). In other words, they can engage in the “process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others” (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991: p. 442). Thus, in their search for larger entities, we suggest that followers are heavily influenced by awe-inspiring leaders as they discern the value of groups or individuals in the social environment (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978).

A fundamental means through which leaders signal this value is how they construe themselves in relation to others. Self-construals are concerned with “how individuals define and make meaning of the self”, more typically with respect to “how individuals see the self in relation to others” (Cross et al., 2011: p. 143). How leaders construe themselves has consequences for affect, cognition, motivation, and behavior (Cross et al., 2011). For example, a leader with a predominantly independent self-construal will highlight contrasts between

themselves and others, whereas a leader with a collective-interdependent self-construal will highlight convergent interests that produce group-oriented behavior (Ellis & Wittenbaum, 2000; Kühnen & Hannover, 2000). Leaders may also possess a humanity self-construal, where the self is construed primarily as belonging to and interdependent with all of humanity (Harb & Smith, 2008). This self-construal level is strongly correlated with the value dimension 'universalism', which predicts prosocial behavior (Schwartz, 1992, 2012). Drawing from a social information processing theory perspective (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), the manner in which leaders construe themselves produces observable cues that followers can draw from when seeking “larger entities” to identify with. The level of a leader’s self-construal is therefore an important determinant of the degree to which followers form personal identification (leader identification), social identification with an organizational in-group (group identification), or social identification with a superordinate social group (humanity identification) following leader-inspired awe (see Figure 1).

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 Insert Figure 1 about here  
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### **Leader Identification**

Some awe-inspiring leaders direct attention toward themselves and the critical role they serve within an organization. For example, Steve Jobs was characterized as an “independent spirit” and “an individualist”, with some even speculating that he had narcissistic tendencies and viewed himself as special and different from others (Salsman, 2011). Such leaders, who view themselves as distinct from others, often garner fascination and interest from followers who come to idolize and personally identify with them. An independent self-construal refers to a

construal of the self that is fundamentally individual and distinct from others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). It emphasizes autonomy and self-reliance (Singelis, 1994). Leaders with an independent self-construal thus define themselves by their unique set of traits, abilities, and preferences, rather than by their relationships or roles within a group (Cross et al., 2011).

When a leader holds an independent self-construal, there are profound implications for both the leadership approach and follower dynamics. Leaders holding an independent self-construal are likely to be assertive and report greater levels of Machiavellianism and narcissism (Jonason et al., 2017; Konrath et al., 2009). Additionally, an independent self-construal may inadvertently attenuate collaborative efforts, minimize the perceived value of collective input, and underemphasize group aspects that are critical for social cohesion within an organization (Wisse & Rus, 2012; Utz, 2004).

Followers with a diminished sense of self following awe are likely to identify with an awe-inspiring leader when that leader draws attention toward their personal distinctiveness. Leader identification is a psychological process by which followers in an organization associate with, and incorporate aspects of a leader's values and characteristics into their own self-concept (Kark et al., 2003; Pratt, 1998). According to Pratt (1998), leader identification occurs either when followers recognize that they share similar values with a leader or change their values to emulate the leader's values. A leader with an independent self-construal portrays a unique self-image that emphasizes their distinctiveness from others, meaning followers are more likely to revise their values and self-concepts to align with their leader. In other words, followers may identify the leader as a worthy target in their search for "larger entities" (Piff et al., 2015) because the leader makes their own social importance salient. Followers are thus likely to infer this as they tune into information in their social environment (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978),

prompting awe-inspired followers to identify with the awe-inspiring leader. Hence, we propose the following:

*Proposition 3: Leader-inspired follower experiences of awe are positively associated with leader identification and this relationship is stronger when leader independent self-construal is high (vs. low).*

### **Group Identification**

Not all awe-inspiring leaders, however, divert attention toward themselves and their personal uniqueness. Some awe-inspiring leaders think of themselves primarily as belonging to a group. As an example, a Director of Finance tasked with a major cost-cutting initiative may choose to consult all stakeholders first rather than decide unilaterally on a plan of action. This more collaborative form of decision-making contrasts with more assertive methods typically adopted by leaders who view themselves as distinct. Such leaders divert attention away from themselves by making the group's importance salient. Therefore, while some leaders possess an independent self-construal, other leaders possess collective-interdependent self-construals, defining themselves in relation to the groups they belong to, and incorporating the values, norms, and objectives of these groups into their own self-concept (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). Possessing a collective-interdependent self-construal goes beyond merely being committed or loyal to a group; it signifies deeper integration whereby the boundaries between the individual's self-definition and the group become permeable (Cross et al., 2011; Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Important to note, a collective-interdependent self-construal is not to be mistaken for a relational-interdependent self-construal, which construes the self primarily through close, dyadic relationships, rather than group membership (Kashima et al., 1995).

We propose that awe-inspiring leaders who construe themselves through group membership will promote group identification among followers. As with leader identification, this occurs because the leader makes the importance of the group salient to followers as they search for ‘larger entities’ to identify with (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). However, this begs the question of *which group?* Here, we permit variation in the group a leader primarily defines themselves in relation to because (1) multiple groups of practical significance exist within organizations (e.g., organization, division, team), and (2) leaders occupying positions at distinct hierarchical levels may vary in the group they primarily define themselves in relation to. For example, the CEO of an organization may define himself in relation to the organization more than a team leader, who may define himself more in relation to the team they lead. We therefore do not deny the possibility that leaders at different levels within organizations may construe themselves somewhat differently, even if they all do so in a collective-interdependent manner.

Group identification is the extent to which a follower perceives “oneness or belongingness” to the group and experiences group successes and failures as personal successes and failures (Ashforth & Mael, 1989: p. 21; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Following the example of a CEO that construes him/herself primarily in relation to the organization, we propose that this will lead to follower identification with the organization. The same logic, however, can be applied to identification with a division or team, depending on whether the leader’s self-construal is defined accordingly. Taken together, we propose the following:

*Proposition 4: Leader-inspired follower experiences of awe are positively associated with group identification and this relationship is stronger when leader collective-interdependent self-construal is high (vs. low).*

## **Humanity Identification**

Finally, some awe-inspiring leaders evoke a deep sense of connection to all of humanity rather than a specific group. Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop, was a trailblazer whose leadership approach emphasized an interconnectedness with all people. One illustrative example of this was her approach to fair trade. Roddick initiated "Trade Not Aid" partnerships with marginalized communities around the world, embodying a commitment to addressing global issues of economic inequality (Pless, 2007). Leaders like Roddick, who view themselves as interconnected with all of humanity, direct followers to consider their relationships with others that extend beyond narrowly defined social groups.

When Markus and Kitayama (1991) first coined the term self-construal, they recognized that independent and interdependent self-construals were “only two of many possible self-construals” (Cross et al., 2011: p. 143). Further extending the idea of a collective-interdependent self-construal, Harb and Smith (2008) empirically validated the existence of a humanity self-construal, documenting variation in this self-construal across cultures. For instance, the authors found that Jordanian and Syrian participants reported greater humanity self-construals than British and Lebanese participants. A humanity self-construal is a collective-interdependent self-construal defined at a group-level of inclusiveness that encompasses all of humanity (Harb & Smith, 2008; Markus & Kitayama, 2003). Leaders holding a humanity self-construal are less likely to define themselves in relation to particularistic social groups, such as race, nationality, ideology, or an organization. Instead, their self-construal is largely defined by human connectedness, fostering a culture of inclusion, tolerance, and global responsibility (Schwartz, 1992).

In the face of leaders with strong humanity self-construals, awe-inspired followers may experience a reorientation towards their membership as global citizens and modify their self-concepts to include such memberships (Seo et al., 2023). Humanity identification is “viewing all humanity as family” (McFarland et al., 2012: p. 1). It is positively predicted by empathy and universalism—an understanding, appreciation, and tolerance for the welfare of all people (Schwartz, 2012)—and negatively predicted by social dominance orientation and ethnocentrism (Hamer et al., 2019). Leaders with strong humanity self-construals display these values to followers by engaging in observable behaviors that make the importance of humanity as a superordinate social group salient. Such leader behaviors that followers draw from to infer the value of humanity include setting organizational goals that benefit humankind and articulating an interconnectedness with all people in public speeches or team meetings. This may lead followers to embrace and integrate similar values and self-concepts for themselves (Pratt, 1998). Therefore, under this type of leadership, we propose awe-inspired followers will develop stronger humanity identification.

*Proposition 5: Leader-inspired follower experiences of awe are positively associated with humanity identification and this relationship is stronger when leader humanity self-construal is high (vs. low).*

### **BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES OF LEADER-INSPIRED AWE**

Drawing from awe’s evolutionary function of facilitating leader-follower relationships, promoting group collaboration and social cohesion, (Chirico & Yaden, 2018; Keltner & Haidt, 2003), we now theorize that leaders who inspire awe engender behaviors that support and serve a follower’s primary target of identification, which could be the leader, the group or humanity. Specifically, we propose that leader identification gives rise to *hero worship*; group identification

produces *in-group favoritism*; and humanity identification leads to *universal prosociality*. Thus, we conceptualize three variants of leaders who inspire awe that account for remarkable variation in both follower and organizational outcomes.

Building on this, while leader self-construals guide followers toward specific ‘larger entities’ they can identify with, leaders may also intensify or weaken the behavioral consequences of these identity changes through their beliefs. We propose that the zero-sum beliefs of leaders—believing that gains for one party necessarily entail losses for another (Andrews Fearon & Götz, 2024)—play a pivotal role in shaping how followers behave in light of the groups with which they identify. These beliefs are “culturally transmitted social axioms about the general antagonistic nature of interpersonal relationships”, reflecting a “general mindset about the rules that govern social relations” (Davidai & Tepper, 2023: p. 473; Rózycka-Tran et al., 2015). A leader’s zero-sum beliefs can thus model to followers the point of view that social interactions are competitive (ten Brinke et al., 2015). In doing so, allegiance to the leader or an organizational in-group is strengthened through the adversarial portrayal of out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), steering followers towards tribal behavior and away from behaviors that indiscriminately help all people. In essence, a leader’s zero-sum beliefs signal to followers how their primary target of identification relates to others. As a whole, awe-inspiring leaders may therefore not only guide followers towards identification with specific targets (leader, group or humanity), but also intensify or weaken the behavioral consequences of identifying with such targets.

### **Hero Worship**

Hero worship is a set of behaviors characterized by an intense admiration for and idealization of an individual (Carlyle, 1993; Klapp, 1949). While hero worship has been depicted

as a societal good (Carlyle, 1993), we also draw attention to its problematic facet. For instance, excessive admiration for and idealization of a leader may produce uncritical acceptance of the leader's ideology, conformity, loss of critical thinking, fear of dissent, and in extreme cases, even the willingness to commit violent acts (Dikötter, 2019; Reyes, 2020; Tucker, 1979). Indeed, it has been observed that "... hero worship leads naturally to excesses, to blind devotion to leaders" (Klapp, 1949: p. 53). Countless awe-inspiring business leaders, from Steve Jobs to Elon Musk, have suggested this observation to be correct. Followers have worshipped awe-inspiring leaders and gone to great lengths to demonstrate their devotion. In organizations, the most notable behaviors located in hero worship are follower dependence on and loyalty toward their leader. Dependence on the leader occurs when a "subordinate is limited in his or her ability to proceed with work and make decisions without the leader's guidance" (Kark et al., 2003: p. 246). Such followers "depend on receiving recognition and approval from the leader" in order to be motivated and have high self-esteem (p. 246). Follower loyalty to the leader, on the other hand, is present when followers defend the leader against threats, positively contribute to the leader's reputation, and cooperate with others to serve the leader's interests (Graham, 1991). The loyalty-oriented behaviors of followers are behavioral manifestations of their affective commitment to their leader, conveying a sense of allegiance and emotional attachment (Rhoades et al., 2001; Whiting et al., 2008).

Of course, when followers are emotionally attached to the leader they worship, this can produce some positive outcomes. Loyal and dependent followers are likely to demonstrate dedication to the leader's cause, work long hours, and be highly engaged in their tasks (Ibrahim & Al Falasi, 2014; Schrag, 2001). As a result, hero worship may indeed lead to greater job performance (Guillon & Cezanne, 2014), though burnout is a high-risk factor. However, being

dependent on and loyal to awe-inspiring leaders can also cause followers to self-justify engaging in immoral behaviors that benefit their leaders (Hildreth, 2024). In fact, the dependence that hero worship entails increases the risk of unethical behavior considerably because such followers are vulnerable to unethical directives from leaders (Desai & Kouchaki, 2017). This is because a follower's sense of self is implicated in everything their leader does. Beliefs about their leader become self-referential, leading followers to revise their own values and behaviors, even at great cost, to be in alignment with those of their leader (Pratt, 1998; Shamir et al., 1993). It is for these reasons that hero worship, relative to in-group favoritism, carries a pronounced risk of follower unethical behavior. The emotional intensity of awe, combined with the psychological need to depend on and be loyal to idealized leaders, creates fertile ground for this. As we theorized, leader identification is likely to occur when awe-inspiring leaders define themselves as distinct and separate from others ("I am special"). When followers identify strongly with their leader, they wish to closely align themselves with the leader in terms of values, attitudes, and behavior. We therefore argue that awe-inspired leader identification cultivates hero worship, resulting in dependence on and loyalty towards a revered leader.

*Proposition 6: Follower identification with the leader stemming from awe-inspiring leader behavior is positively related to follower hero worship.*

Furthermore, we theorize that this positive relationship between leader identification and hero worship is strengthened when the leader possesses greater zero-sum beliefs. As we highlighted, zero-sum beliefs reflect the understanding that resources are limited and that gains for one individual or group necessitate a corresponding loss for others (Davidai & Tepper, 2023). The result is a worldview in which interactions are framed as win-lose scenarios. From this perspective, the value of desirable outcomes—be they wealth, success, or power—is fixed,

making their pursuit an inherently competitive endeavor (Kuchynka et al., 2018; Meegan, 2010). Within the context of leadership, a leader who possesses strong zero-sum beliefs will perceive advantages gained by competitors, or indeed even other departments or teams within the same organization, as implicit losses on his/her own side. In turn, these beliefs shape the behavior of followers, engendering a tendency toward hostile behavior where the primary focus becomes out-competing others in order to secure the position of one's leader or group (Kakkar & Sivanathan, 2022; Sirola & Pitesa, 2017).

Leader zero-sum beliefs, we contend, will strengthen the positive effect of awe-inspired leader identification on hero worship. Drawing from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), we theorize that hero worship will intensify when leader zero-sum beliefs are high (vs. low) because the relationship followers share with relevant out-groups is portrayed in an adversarial manner (Charness & Chen, 2020). The leader's zero-sum beliefs therefore amplify follower dependence on and loyalty to the leader (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2005). They also produce an even greater commitment to protect the leader's interests, even if doing so involves behaving unethically. In environments characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, the allure of a leader's zero-sum beliefs can be particularly strong, as employees seek social affiliation and belonging in the face of perceived threats (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; Leary, 2010). This formalizes much of what we see in practice, where awe-inspiring leaders who perpetuate zero-sum thinking through the portrayal of salient opposition often produce fanatical follower responses (Dikötter, 2019). A leader's zero-sum beliefs therefore are likely to give rise to greater demonstrations of hero worship.

*Proposition 7: The positive effect of follower identification with the leader on follower hero worship is stronger when leader zero-sum beliefs are high (vs. low).*

## **In-Group Favoritism**

We propose that awe-inspired group identification in followers will lead to in-group favoritism behavior. Demonstrations of in-group favoritism reflect a pattern of behavior that is biased in favor of an in-group and what the in-group stands for (Fu et al., 2012; Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel et al., 1971). In organizations, the in-group that followers favor over out-groups may include the organization as a whole or smaller groups, such as divisions and teams. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004) explains that when group members feel strong affiliation and identification with their group, they are more motivated to support group success and viability, to perceive group success as equal to personal success, and to be intrinsically concerned about meeting group needs (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Blader & Tyler, 2009; De Cremer & Van Vugt, 1999). Strong group identification promotes affiliative, promotive, and cooperative citizenship behaviors that benefit the group (Van Dyne et al., 1995). At the same time, a strong group identification may also lead to unethical behaviors that benefit the in-group at the expense of out-groups (Umphress et al., 2010). For example, although Satya Nadella—CEO of Microsoft—emphasizes with humility the importance of Microsoft as an organizational collective (Ibarra et al., 2018), his followers have nonetheless engaged in questionable behaviors for organizational gain, such as collecting and retaining personal information from children without notifying parents or obtaining their consent (Federal Trade Commission, 2023).

More specifically, awe-inspired group identification leads followers to engage in parochial citizenship behaviors that specifically benefit members of the group, such as providing constructive feedback to fellow colleagues and helping them to achieve collective goals (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). Indeed, followers who identify strongly with the group are other-focused, cooperative, and committed to helping other colleagues who are members of the group (Van

Dick et al, 2006). Awe-inspired in-group favoritism may therefore cultivate organizational groups that are tightly bound, well-coordinated, and highly collaborative. At the same time, beyond these constructive helping behaviors, awe-inspired group identification also poses the risk of unethical behaviors “that are intended to promote the effective functioning of the organization or its members and violate core societal values, morals, laws, or standards of proper conduct” (Umphress & Bingham, 2011: p. 622). In this case, strongly identifying with the group can motivate followers to engage in behaviors that favor the group, even if doing so means violating widely held ethical norms. This is because awe-inspired followers who identify strongly with an organizational in-group are more likely to engage in moral disengagement, rendering select unethical acts in the group’s service as morally justified (Moore et al., 2012). This logic is equally applicable to all groups within the organization, where identification with a division or team can lead to unethical behaviors that benefit the division or team at the expense of others.

Although awe-inspiring leaders who emphasize the importance of group membership—whether the organization, division, or team—aid in producing groups of followers that are tightly bound, well-coordinated, and highly collaborative, it may also create conditions for followers to behave unethically when doing so benefits the group. Relative to hero worship, which incurs significant risks for followers and organizations, in-group favoritism therefore provides a more balanced portfolio of both positive and potentially problematic follower behaviors. Taken together, we propose that awe-inspired group identification leads to in-group favoritism.

*Proposition 8: Follower identification with the group stemming from awe-inspiring leader behavior is positively related to follower in-group favoritism.*

Just as we argued that high (vs. low) leader zero-sum beliefs reinforce hero worship, we also propose they strengthen the positive effect of follower identification with the group on in-group favoritism. A leader's zero-sum beliefs reinforce a strong in-group focus among followers. Drawing again from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), leader zero-sum beliefs promote a competitive orientation in employees which strengthens the distinction between an in-group (e.g., the organization, division, or team) with salient out-groups (Halevy et al., 2012). This produces a work environment in which the tendency of followers to behave in ways that benefit the group is intensified (Ellemers et al., 2004). This is different from cultivating behaviors that solely benefit the leader (e.g., hero worship), which enhance loyalty and dependence. Intensified in-group favoritism will not only deepen cooperation and cohesion within a group but also further elevate the risk that groups members will engage in unethical behaviors for the group's benefit. Therefore, we propose that leader zero-sum beliefs intensify followers' desire to serve and further the interests of the group.

*Proposition 9: The positive effect of follower identification with the group on follower in-group favoritism is stronger when leader zero-sum beliefs are high (vs. low).*

### **Universal Prosociality**

Universal prosociality is concerned with behaviors that promote the welfare and well-being of all people, regardless of their social or cultural backgrounds (Penner et al., 2005; Tsang et al., 2021). It involves actions aimed at fostering a sense of shared responsibility for the betterment of society (Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008). A follower who exhibits universal prosociality will behave with the constructive aim of achieving "helpfulness to all mankind, present and future" (Adler, 1964: p. 78). This type of awe-inspiring leadership, which fosters universal prosociality, captures the well-documented side of awe that promotes self-

transcendence and a profound sense of oneness with humanity (Chirico & Yaden, 2018; Shiota et al., 2007). Any leader within an organization, whether team leader or Director, may embody this variant of awe-inspiring leadership insofar as they advocate for the wellbeing of all people and go beyond narrowly defined social boundaries.

Identification with humanity among followers fosters universal prosociality by creating a sense of shared identity and common fate with individuals from disparate backgrounds (McFarland et al., 2012). Followers who identify with humanity are more likely to indiscriminately engage in prosocial behaviors that benefit others, irrespective of whether the beneficiary is their leader or a member of the organizational in-group (Barragan et al., 2021; McFarland et al., 2013). Identification with humanity and engagement in universal prosociality can have several positive outcomes for followers through enhanced psychological well-being, physical well-being, and life satisfaction (Bai et al., 2021; Monroy & Keltner, 2023). When followers identify with humanity and behave in ways that benefit others, they are likely to experience more meaning and purpose in their work (Klein, 2017). In turn, this heightened sense of meaning and purpose can serve as a buffer against burnout (Shanafelt, 2009), as followers feel their efforts contributing to a greater good, thereby increasing their resilience in the face of work-related stress (Ishida & Okada, 2011).

Universal prosociality therefore positively contributes to an organizational culture in which followers can contribute and perform effectively without bringing about the emergence of competitive unethical behaviors. This suggests that awe-inspiring leaders who engender humanity identification may be able to create effective organizations in which followers work well together but do not feel obligated to compromise their moral compasses (Jiang & Sedikides, 2022). Excessive prosociality, however, may entail some noteworthy risks. For instance, a darker

side to prosocial behavior has been considered (Bolino & Grant, 2016), where followers are sometimes exploited or suffer from emotional exhaustion (Bolino et al., 2015). In addition, because prosocially minded followers devote more time to helping others, they spend less time on core tasks, potentially hindering job performance (Bergeron et al., 2013; Grant 2008). Followers motivated toward the betterment of society may also engage in social activism, which can be disruptive to operations and even contravene organizational policies and practices (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). Therefore, although universal prosociality brings about benefits to followers and others, there are some facets of this that warrant consideration.

*Proposition 10: Follower identification with humanity stemming from awe-inspiring leader behavior is positively related to follower universal prosociality.*

On the other hand, leaders who embrace non-zero-sum beliefs (i.e., low rather than high zero-sum beliefs), believe that gains for one party do not necessitate losses for another (Davidai & Tepper, 2023). This perspective fosters an expansive view of cooperation and collective success that goes beyond group-based categories (Andrews Fearon & Götz, 2024). For example, leaders within organizations who espouse non-zero-sum beliefs are more likely to conceptualize outcomes as win-win and do not make use of competitors as common enemies to drive followers to advance the interests of the group. By modeling and reinforcing a non-zero-sum worldview, awe-inspiring leaders can strengthen a follower's tendency to engage in universal prosocial behavior (Pratt, 1998; Shamir et al., 1993). This is because an expanded conceptualization of a superordinate 'in-group' attenuates 'out-group' distinctions and attributions (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Wright et al., 2014). In other words, when leaders frame organizational pursuits as win-win, the salience of an "out-group" is diminished, leading followers to perceive the differences between in-groups and out-groups as less meaningful (Gardner et al., 2002). In turn, this

strengthens the motivation to improve the betterment of humanity, rather than engage in behaviors that advance the interests of only a select few (Boitano et al., 2017). Leaders holding non-zero-sum beliefs are therefore likely to reduce the salience of an out-group and intensify a follower's desire to engage in universal prosociality.

Alternatively, if leaders possess strong zero-sum beliefs, particularly if they simultaneously hold pronounced humanity self-construals, this will likely cause internal conflict among followers and disrupt the behavioral effects of identifying with humanity. Followers in this case may question the authenticity of their leader's humanity self-construal or doubt the leader's motives. Such a combination may also result in leaders employing polarizing rhetoric, where humanity-focused pursuits are framed as a competitive endeavors between 'good' and 'evil'. For example, these leaders may engage in dehumanization and moral exclusion of all but 'legitimate' individuals, resulting in a zero-sum orientation that positions a legitimate class of humanity against social groups of 'lesser' value (Opatow, 1990). As a result, followers' desire to behave prosocially to all people is likely to be weakened.

*Proposition 11: The positive effect of follower identification with humanity on follower universal prosociality is stronger when leader zero-sum beliefs are low (vs. high).*

## **DISCUSSION**

Throughout history, awe-inspiring leaders have brought people together and driven significant social change, producing both positive and negative outcomes. While leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. inspired a broader human identity that transcended racial categories, others like Benito Mussolini leveraged awe to promote ideologies that were socially divisive. Recent psychological research on awe has largely focused on its positive effects, such as fostering identification with all of humanity, but overlooked its potential to strengthen narrower

social identities that can lead to inter-group conflict. By revisiting awe's theorized evolutionary roots in stabilizing social hierarchies and instilling in followers reverence and admiration for their leaders (Keltner & Haidt, 2003), we argue that scholars can better understand the power and peril of awe-inspiring leaders. The primary objective of this work, therefore, has been to advance a conceptual framework that explains the multifaceted and transformative nature of leadership through the power of awe.

## **Leadership**

First and foremost, we contribute to the leadership literature by establishing awe's central role in how leaders inspire and transform follower identities and behavior. Doing so is important for several reasons. First, we breathe new life into theorizing concerning awe's capacity to bind followers together under the guidance of a prominent leader (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). Despite a few notable examples of research acknowledging awe as a response to charismatic and transformational leadership (e.g., Behling & McFillen, 1996; Menges et al., 2015; Sy et al., 2018), this perspective has not gained traction. Keltner and Haidt (2003) argued that awe should occur with greater frequency when leaders' power increases, the concentration of power increases, and the need for social hierarchy increases. They also noted that social rituals—such as the speeches of leaders to large audiences and their strategic use of grand architecture—have evolved to enhance the awe-inducing impact of leaders. It is therefore surprising that scholars have been slow to integrate what we know about awe into the leadership literature. By reaffirming awe's social function in leader-follower dynamics, we enable scholars to better understand the processes and conditions under which leaders are effective in transforming the minds and behaviors of followers. Through our conceptualization of follower awe as a linchpin in this process, we significantly shift the conversation in the leadership literature.

We also advance the leadership literature by explaining when and how transformational forms of leadership—often referred to as "pseudo-transformational leadership" or the "dark side of transformational leadership"—can be detrimental (Barling et al., 2008; Mackey et al., 2021; Tourish, 2013). Existing research in this area has focused mostly on identifying differences in leader behaviors to account for negative follower outcomes (e.g., Christie et al., 2011). Our approach, however, is focused on leader behaviors that do not conflate behavioral content with follower outcomes, and we position follower identification as a key explanatory mechanism that leaders influence. We therefore contribute to this literature by explaining how the same set of awe-inspiring leader behaviors can produce both positive and negative outcomes for followers. What causes this, we propose, is a leader's role in determining a follower's subsequent target of identification. The behavioral consequences of strong identification with a leader, group, or humanity as a whole characterize the nature of these outcomes (Caprar et al., 2022).

The leadership literature has also been focused primarily on the role of leader and organizational identification as mechanisms through which leaders 'transform' followers (Bass, 1985; Shamir et al., 1993; Siangchokyoo et al., 2020). As a result, the constructive role of other forms of social identification within leader-follower dynamics has been overlooked. We address this oversight by incorporating identification with humanity as a consequence of leaders who inspire awe. Bringing focus to awe-inspiring leaders' capacity to promote humanity identification yields a novel theoretical contribution. Namely, it reveals that humanity identification can foster an array of prosocial workplace behaviors that are not predicated on in-group (vs. out-group) dynamics and do not require leader- or group-based identification. By extending beyond the traditional boundaries of the workplace, humanity identification has the potential to promote cooperative, helping behaviors (McFarland et al., 2013) without the

elicitation of potentially negative consequences that stem from leader or group identification, such as in-group bias, unethical pro-organizational behavior, dependence, and even burnout (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Umphress et al., 2010; Van Knippenberg et al., 2002). Humanity identification also draws attention toward a potential path forward for leaders and scholars seeking to tackle the world's grand challenges through multilateral engagement. For example, the safety risks of increasing artificial intelligence use is one of many challenges today that requires global cooperation and a shared human identity (Erdélyi & Goldsmith, 2018). We therefore contribute to leadership research by shedding light on humanity identification as an overlooked means through which leaders can transform followers to collaborate effectively.

### **Awe**

Our conceptual work makes important theoretical contributions to research on awe. First, we demonstrate how awe's benevolent qualities in organizations can be harnessed for good. We submit that leaders, as prominent and symbolic members of organizations (Shamir et al., 1993), are influential in shaping how followers make sense of their awe experiences. Our theoretical model illustrates that awe-inspiring leader behaviors, in and of themselves, can lead to different identity and behavioral changes because leaders signal to followers which "larger entities" are salient and important (Piff et al., 2015: p. 884; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). This importantly shows that it is not only the source of awe that matters, but also the surrounding social context that shapes how awe's effects are manifested in changes to identity and behavior. This has profound theoretical implications for awe research. Namely, it demonstrates that the quest for meaning and social connection following an experience of awe can be guided by aspects of the social environment. While our conceptual work is focused on leaders as both sources and 'sense givers' of awe, these roles may also be distinct. That is, other sources of awe (e.g., observing a

beautiful and vast environment or having an epiphany) and their downstream effects can similarly be shaped by the social environment (e.g., collective experience or social norms). As awe research currently lacks an adequate account of social and environmental factors that moderate awe's effects, we contribute to this body of work by casting light on such possibilities.

In addition, against the backdrop of initial work that has portrayed awe as an emotion that fosters group collaboration and reverence toward leaders (Keltner & Haidt, 2003), we unpack a broader set of awe's effects and behavioral outcomes. Namely, we demonstrate that awe-inspiring leadership may lead to unethical behaviors that benefit followers' target of identification at the expense of others or out-groups (Umphress et al., 2010). Despite early recognition of the important role leaders historically served in eliciting awe (Keltner & Haidt, 2003), most awe research has been conducted in non-organizational settings and has elicited awe through images, videos, or recalled experiences of vast natural landscapes (e.g., Anderson et al., 2018; Piff et al., 2015; Stancato & Keltner, 2021; Stellar et al., 2018; Valdesolo & Graham, 2014). Unsurprisingly, such studies have almost exclusively documented awe's positive behavioral outcomes as awe elicited by vast natural landscapes promotes identification with humanity as a whole rather than any one specific person or social group (Shiota et al., 2007). Therefore, our model contributes to theory on awe by highlighting a pressing need to consider alternative sources of awe, as doing so is important for understanding its resulting effects on identity and behavior.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Our conceptual model provides promising and concrete guidance for researchers who seek to model the social dynamics of awe. Nonetheless, we readily acknowledge that our framework provides only a starting point and many important issues remain to be fleshed out.

First, our model does not address the role of collective experience in awe-inspiring leadership. Being in the presence of a leader who inspires awe as part of a group is likely to heighten a follower's self-diminishment and sense of connection to others (Menges & Kilduff, 2015). Keltner and Haidt (2003) theorized that many social rituals in organizations, such as public speeches to large audiences, have evolved to enhance the awe-inducing capacity of leaders. Awe is likely a contagious emotion (Barsade, 2002), and being in the presence of others who are experiencing awe should make it more likely that we ourselves feel awe. Collective experiences of awe have been examined in the contexts of religious ceremonies, celebrations, and musical festivals (Monroy & Keltner, 2023), but no empirical work to date has sought to understand whether similar experiences occur in organizations. We strongly encourage future research to examine this.

Second, we have addressed follower experiences of awe that are elicited through leadership, but it will be important to address how awe that is elicited in non-work contexts interacts with workplace identities and behavior (e.g., Belinda & Christian, 2022). For instance, our conceptual model argues that awe-inspiring leaders can strengthen leader and group identification in followers, but awe elicited outside of work through nature-exposure (e.g., mountain hiking) may impose challenges to the possession of narrow social identities. For example, a profound experience in nature may lead to identification with humanity at large, thus undermining any held views about belonging to a specific social group. Alternatively, such profound experiences may strengthen existing humanity identification for followers working under leaders who embody this broader self-construal. If true, leaders may leverage this to reinforce shared identification with humanity. We therefore recommend scholars to research further how awe experienced outside of work affects followers' identities.

Finally, although much of the earliest work examining awe and its transformative role in society has roots in religion (Otto, 1923), religiosity in most developed nations has been in decline for decades (Jackson et al., 2023). Given this declining influence, it is fruitful for future research to examine whether modern organizations are fit for purpose as newfound fountains of awe. While it would be a stretch to argue that organizations can or will supplant religion as gatekeepers of the sublime, organizations are increasingly places of identity formation and sense-making in society (Inglehart, 2020; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). This has led some scholars to stress the importance of seeking awe in secular life (De Botton, 2012), with one sociologist even proclaiming to be an “Aweist” (Zuckerman, 2009). Awe-inspiring leaders who promote humanity identification and universal prosociality may be particularly important in fulfilling our human desire for awe, meaning, and self-transcendence not met by religion (Monroy & Kelner, 2023). This transition suggests an intriguing trajectory for future research, addressing the extent to which modern organizations can be places where people meet not only to satisfy their needs for achievement and belonging, but also their deeper spiritual and aesthetic needs (Silvia, 2012).

### **Implications for Practice**

Our work has important practical implications for organizations and practitioners. First, we show that awe can foster more collective self-views through identification with organizational groups, and through identification to affect a broad range of employee work outcomes, including engagement and turnover (Cole & Bruch, 2006; Hirst et al., 2009; Scott et al., 2003). In addition, followers who work under awe-inspiring leaders may feel greater meaning and fulfilment in their daily work lives (Sheprow & Harrison, 2022). Thus, leaders may choose to cautiously elicit feelings of awe for its beneficial effects on cooperation and social cohesion, and to do this especially during challenging periods of organizational transformation or

when onboarding new recruits (Klein et al., 2015; Newman, 2000). Here, leaders can utilize awe to break down old ways of thinking and open followers to new pathways forward, forging a shared identity and purpose in the process (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). At the same time, we recommend exercising caution in light of awe's potentially deleterious effects, such as unethical behavior that benefits the leader or group. It is therefore advisable that if leaders adopt this approach, they put guardrails or preventative measures in place, such as cultivating a strong ethical culture through organizational policy (Kaptein, 2011).

Our work spotlights the capacity for awe to generate strong identification with the leader and group, but such identification also increases the likelihood of morally questionable follower behaviors that benefit these parties. Plenty of examples in organizations indicate this to be the case. Elizabeth Holmes, founder of Theranos, used her charisma and vision to make followers extraordinarily committed, resulting in the concealment of fraudulent claims concerning Theranos's blood-testing technology (Pollman, 2020). Relatedly, Adam Neumann, co-founder of WeWork, made working for his company awe-inspiring by communicating a vision that promised to change the world and organizing large-scale company events, giving followers a strong sense of collective effervescence (Gabriel et al., 2020). As a result, followers did not speak out against many of Neumann's controversial practices because their identities were bound to WeWork (Wiedeman, 2020). Thus, it is incumbent upon leaders to be aware that awe presents a double-edged sword because it elicits narrow social identities in followers.

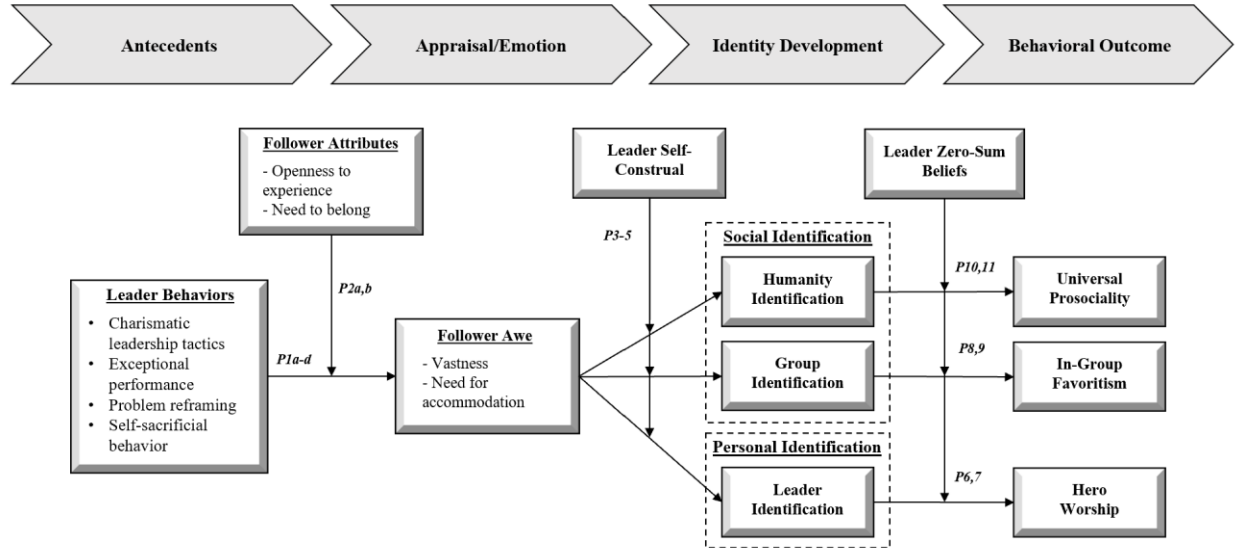
Finally, our work demonstrates that awe-inspiring leaders can actively cultivate a sense of shared humanity among followers by emphasizing our interdependence with all people. Moreover, universal prosociality among followers is strengthened when leaders conceptualize goals and ventures as non-zero-sum, promoting a meaningful work climate that is not predicated

on competitive inter-group conflict. Actionable takeaways for practitioners include incorporation of inclusive policies that celebrate diverse global perspectives and promote tolerance (Schwartz, 2012), establishing organizational goals that benefit not just the organization but all of humanity, and emphasizing the interconnectedness of human life and social relationships in a company's vision statement (Harb & Smith, 2008; Pless, 2007). As we mentioned, humanity identification is particularly valuable for tackling the world's grand challenges (George et al., 2016) such as climate change, global pandemics, and regulating artificial intelligence. By deliberately integrating humanity identification into the fabric of their organizations, leaders can not only improve interpersonal relationships and reduce conflict, but also unlock a greater commitment to global citizenship that drives both social impact and organizational performance.

## **Conclusion**

Organizational scholars have taken limited steps to integrate conceptually and empirically what we know about the phenomenology of awe into the management literature. Our work explains how and when awe-inspiring leaders produce transformative and distinct effects on follower identity and behavior. We hope that our propositions serve as a fruitful basis for future research and inspire more management scholars to consider the role of awe and its fascinating effects in organizations.

**Figure 1**  
 A Theoretical Model of Awe-Inspiring Leaders and Their Role in Transforming Follower Identity and Behavior



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