



Was Gandhi “charismatic”? Exploring the rhetorical leadership of Mahatma Gandhi

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ABSTRACT

This study explores a deceptively simple question: was Gandhi a “charismatic” leader? We compare Gandhi’s rhetorical leadership to social movement leaders and charismatic U.S. presidents to examine whether any consistencies in charismatic rhetoric emerge across historical and cultural contexts. Our findings indicate that charismatic themes of articulating the intolerable nature of the present and appealing to values and moral justifications emerged in similar levels across all three samples. In addition, Gandhi’s speeches contained comparable levels of language that emphasized his similarity to followers, followers’ worth, links between the past and future, and abstract, intangible themes as compared to other leaders. In contrast, themes of collective focus and active, aggressive speech varied significantly across the three samples. Recognizing that content analysis should be utilized with caution across cultural settings, we suggest a number of possible explanations for Gandhi’s pervasive appeal and implications for future research into the universality of visionary rhetoric.

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“By re-creating himself, through the power of his passion, in the humble, vulnerable image of India’s poorest starving naked millions, Gandhi could, when moved to do so by his ‘inner voice,’ call upon that unarmed ragged army, whose pain he mirrored and magnified in his own naked body, to follow him barefoot up India’s Via Dolorosa to freedom. And countless millions unhesitatingly did follow him, not as a modern political leader, nor as a medieval native prince or martial maharaja, but as their own Mahatma, India’s “Great Soul.”—Stanley Wolpert (2001, p. 4-5)

Although charismatic leadership has garnered increasing attention from both scholars and practitioners, there has been a growing concern that organizational behavior in general, and leadership theory more specifically, is strongly rooted in Western ideals, values, and beliefs. The study of charismatic leadership stems primarily from a Western tradition, and much of the research has focused on U.S. presidents or business leaders (e.g., Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004a; House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991). As a result, additional research is needed to explore charisma from a cross-cultural perspective, particularly in the face of globalization and technological changes that are rapidly internationalizing the business world (House, 2004; Rousseau, 1997).

We suggest that a comparative study of Gandhi’s leadership rhetoric with charismatic and social movement leaders can provide a number of important contributions. First, a potential benefit of studying historical leaders is that their charismatic appeal and leadership outcomes can be established by historical record, giving researchers an important opportunity to examine consistencies and contradictions among leaders widely considered charismatic. In addition, a study of Gandhi’s rhetoric in

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particular can advance our understanding of how aspects of charismatic content may impact followers. Despite widespread illiteracy and the lack of mass communication outlets, Gandhi effectively reached a wide audience. Moreover, Gandhi is commonly described as an extremely shy person who lacked public speaking skills and whose speeches were frequently described as failures (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1983). In the context of colonial India, Gandhi offered a radical vision in which followers were asked to risk everything for the hope of a better future, impacting millions of Indians in his time and future leaders through his legacy (e.g., Lech Walesa, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr.). Thus, the content of Gandhi's message was a critical component of his leadership impact. In this context, a systematic analysis of Gandhi's speeches may highlight how his message was so successful.

Using a communication-oriented approach that emphasizes the critical role of language in the leader–follower relationship, we undertake a case study of Gandhi's communications to answer a deceptively simple research question: Would Gandhi's rhetoric be considered “charismatic” according to current definitions? We find that the answer spans much of the theoretical terrain of charismatic leadership, including: 1) how we define “charisma”; 2) to what extent charismatic leadership themes vary cross-culturally; and 3) are aspects of charismatic rhetoric generalizable across historical and cultural contexts?

Despite the overwhelming attention charismatic leadership has received in the past few decades, scholars more often agree on who is charismatic than how to define charisma. We first explore previous definitions of charismatic leadership, using Gandhi's example to highlight areas of controversy that challenge our assumptions about how we define charismatic leadership in the business press and contemporary research. We subsequently undertake a comparative analysis of Gandhi's rhetoric with other charismatic and social movement leaders to explore the generality of visionary rhetoric across cultural and historical boundaries.

1. Defining charisma

As Beyer (1999a) points out, a fundamental issue in theorizing about charisma is whether it is the property of a person, a relationship, or a situation. Weber's seminal definition of charisma referred to “an extraordinary quality of a person” (Weber, 1947, p. 295) that evokes a devout following due to “supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (1947, p. 358). In Weber's original conceptualization, charisma was a characteristic of the leader, although its impact was ultimately realized through the eyes of “the charismatically mastered” (1947, p. 140). Thus, Weber's original definition highlights a distinction between charismatic magnetism, the extraordinary qualities of the leader, and charismatic leadership, which results from a complex equation in which a leader has extraordinary qualities that resonate powerfully with followers in a situation of extreme uncertainty.

1.1. Charismatic magnetism

Webster's dictionary defines charisma as “a personal attractiveness that enables you to influence others,” and lists as synonyms “personal appeal” and “personal magnetism.” This approach has been collectively referred to as the neocharismatic approach (House, 1999), emphasizing its psychological roots and focus on the personal characteristics and behaviors of the leader (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; House, 1999; House & Shamir, 1993). Previous research has linked charisma to organizational and leader effectiveness, as well as to desirable outcomes such as increased follower effort, satisfaction, and performance (Bass, 1990; Bryman, 1992; Fiol, Harris, & House, 1999; House, Woycke, & Fodor, 1988; Howell & Frost, 1989).

From a neocharismatic perspective, was Gandhi a charismatic leader? Various anecdotal and historical analyses suggest that Gandhi's physical demeanor and personality lacked widespread magnetic appeal. For example, Orwell (1949) describes Gandhi as possessing an “unimpressive physical appearance,” and Swan (1985) points out that it was not the force of Gandhi's “personal magnetism” that swayed the masses. House (1999, p. 568–9) refers to Gandhi as a “quiet, non-macho charismatic” who did not possess “unusual qualities,” and suggests Gandhi's charismatic appeal lay primarily in his vision and methods of implementation.

1.2. Charismatic leadership

According to Beyer (1999a, p. 325), the neocharismatic emphasis on the characteristics of the leader ignores “the nature and severity of the particular threat, the content of the radical vision and how it deals with that threat, and the magnitude and persistence of particular changes that are accomplished through charisma.” Arguing for a more sociological perspective, Trice and Beyer (1986) attempted to precisely delineate Weber's approach into five necessary and distinct elements for charismatic leadership: 1) a person with extraordinary gifts and qualities; 2) a social crisis or situation of desperation; 3) a radical vision promising a solution to the crisis; 4) followers who are attracted to the gifted person and believe in his or her exceptional powers and radical vision; and 5) the validation of the person's extraordinary gifts and the radical vision by repeated successes in dealing with the perceived crisis. According to this definition, charismatic leadership resonates in the exceptional personal attributes of the leader, as well as the effects of those attributes on the needs of followers, against the backdrop of important situational factors. From this perspective, Gandhi's leadership message is only one piece in understanding the overall puzzle of his pervasive appeal.

In sum, from both neocharismatic and Weberian traditions, attributions of charisma are strongly rooted in a particular cultural and historical context. While leadership scholars have debated the extent and nature of Gandhi's “extraordinariness” or charismatic magnetism (Beyer, 1999b; House, 2000), his leadership qualities clearly resonated with strong needs inside followers, both individually and collectively. The current study examines whether the content of Gandhi's message shares similar themes with those of other charismatic leaders, suggesting that visionary rhetoric may be one common theme that underlies the pervasive appeal of charismatic leaders across cultural and historical contexts.

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