SOCIAL DISTANCE AND CHARISMA: THEORETICAL NOTES AND AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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The article addresses the relationship between social distance and charismatic leadership. Current theories of charismatic leadership in organizations have borrowed ideas from the literature on socially distant charismatic leaders and applied them to leadership situations that involve direct contacts between leaders and their immediate subordinates. This article argues that while social distance is not a necessary condition for charismatic leadership, there are fundamental differences between distant charismatic leadership and close charismatic leadership. The article attempts to identify these differences through a theoretical analysis of the two leadership situations and through an exploratory content analysis of interviews about close and distant charismatic leaders.

INTRODUCTION

The notion of charisma was traditionally applied to prominent figures in large social systems, mainly to top-level political, military, religious or social movement leaders. The sociological and political science literature on charisma (e.g., Weber, 1947; Shils, 1965; Eisenstadt, 1968; Geertz, 1977; Burns, 1978; Willner, 1984) was primarily concerned with kings, presidents, prime ministers, and leaders of large social or religious movements.

For many years, it was assumed that the concept of charisma was inapplicable to lower-level leaders or close leadership situations. The dictum "No man is a hero to his valet," attributed to the Duke of Conde in the reign of Louis XIV, was uncritically adopted by the organizational leadership literature. Several writers (Etzioni, 1961; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Hollander, 1978) argued that charismatic leadership could be found only at the top echelon of the organization and was irrelevant to lower-level leadership or

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close leader-follower relationships. Etzioni (1961), for instance, noted that "Top executives, heads of state and kings who have charisma in the eyes of the public ... may have little (or none) in the eyes of (their) private secretaries, valets and cabinet ministers" (p. 361). He further concluded from this observation that the chances of occurrence of charismatic leadership were a positive function of the social distance between the followers and the leader.

In contrast, several more-recent theories of charismatic leadership in organizations (House, 1977; Bass, 1985; Boal & Bryson, 1987; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993) share the assumption that such leadership can be found at all levels of the organization. These authors regard the notion of charisma as applicable both to top-level, distant organizational leaders and lower-level, close, immediate superiors. In support of this assumption, Bass (1985, pp. 56-67) reports results of empirical surveys indicating that charisma is widely distributed at all organizational levels. Bass and Avolio (1993, p. 74) explicitly claim that the notion of transformational leadership (which includes charisma as a major component) applies to all levels of leadership: microleadership (leadership of small groups), macroleadership (leadership of a large organization), and metaleadership (leadership of movements and societies).

Traditionally, however, organizational leadership theories and research have focused almost exclusively on microleadership processes involving direct relationships between the leader and the led (e.g. Hollander, 1964; Fiedler, 1967; House & Mitchell, 1974; Graen & Cashman, 1975). Therefore, the current theories of charismatic leadership in organizations have faced the task of combining ideas about charisma that were borrowed from the traditional literature on distant charismatic leaders with ideas and methods of research that characterize social-psychological approaches to microleadership in organizations. Consequently, the adoption of charismatic and transformational leadership notions by the organizational literature resulted in a subtle, yet very clear shift of focus from meta and macroleadership to microleadership processes.

For instance, House (1977) developed his theory of charismatic leadership on the basis of a review of the sociological and political science literature on the topic, which focuses on top-level leaders who are socially distant from their followers. In contrast, the empirical research testing House's theory has focused on immediate and proximal leadership situations (e.g., Howell & Frost, 1989). Even when the research was concerned with metaleadership, charisma was operationalized at the microleadership level. Thus, when House, Spangler, and Woycke (1991) studied the relationship between U.S. presidents' charisma and presidential performance, their evaluation of presidential charisma was based on content-analysis of cabinet ministers' biographies, namely, on manifestations of the president's charisma in proximal relationships with their immediate followers.

In a similar vein, Bass (1985) borrowed the notion of transformational leadership from a study of political leaders (Burns, 1978). In extending this construct (which contains charisma as a main component) to the organizational sphere, Bass relied on descriptions of leader behavior and leader effects by the leaders themselves and by others (followers, colleagues, and superiors) who were in direct contact with the leader. Empirical tests of this theory have examined it primarily in the context of leadership situations that subsume direct contact between leaders and subordinates. In these studies

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