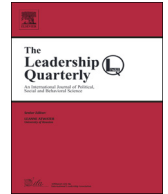


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

## The Leadership Quarterly

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/leaqua](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/leaqua)The innate code of charisma<sup>☆</sup>Omri Castelnuovo, Micha Popper<sup>\*</sup>, Danny Koren

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 16 October 2015

Received in revised form 22 November 2016

Accepted 23 November 2016

Available online xxx

## Keywords:

Innate receptivity

Cultural transmission

Over-imitation

Epistemic trust

Natural pedagogy

Charisma

## ABSTRACT

We argue that the sources of charisma are innate and can be explained as part of unique human cultural transmission mechanisms. Recently, developmental models and experiments have been presented, for example, natural pedagogy theory (Csibra & Gergely, 2006, 2009, 2011) and over-imitation studies (Lyons, Young, & Keil, 2007; McGuigan, 2013). Inspired by these, we maintain that certain universal principles of conspicuous influence are embraced with very little critical thinking, on the basis of certain signals the charismatic leader radiates in a particular communicative manner (“evolutionary syntax”). We point out expressions of these principles in charismatic leadership and propose a conceptual framework that can advance the formulation of a general theory on charisma anchored in evolutionary processes.

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## Introduction

The phenomenon of charismatic leadership has preoccupied philosophers, sociologists, political scientists and psychologists (Carlyle, 1841; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; House & Howell, 1992; Lindholm, 1990; Popkin, 1993; Shils, 1965; Weber, 1946). The early writers on charisma—the philosophers—perceived it as “God’s gift” (the literal translation of the Greek word). In other words, charisma was perceived as an innate characteristic of leaders (Carlyle, 1841). More recent writers see it as a more complex phenomenon related to sociological and psychological aspects beyond an individual leader’s personal characteristics (e.g., Shils, 1965). A significant milestone in this direction was passed when Max Weber argued that charisma is in the eye of the beholder and results from the follower’s tendency to believe in “the extraordinary quality of the specific person” (Weber, 1946, p. 295). This observation served to expand the discussion to broader social and psychological contexts. Shils (1965), for example, presented a sociological perspective in which charisma derives from the centrality of values in a given society. The charismatic leader is a representative of such values in his or her followers’ eyes.

Such conceptual directions have led researchers to ponder the sources of followers’ attraction to charismatic leaders (Popper, 2012). Scholars of the psychoanalytic school, for example, explained this attraction as arising through unconscious processes. These may be regressive yearnings for the parent figure, perceived as providing a sense of security (Hill, 1984; Kets de Vries, 1988), or a follower’s resolution of his or her narcissistic longing for an idealized self-concept gained through identification with a glorified leader (Lindholm, 1988; Post, 1986). Similarly, social psychologists have used notions such as “self-concept,” “self-worth” and “self-esteem” to explain followers’ attraction to charismatic leaders. The rationale behind these explanations is essentially that identification with a leader perceived as charismatic enables followers to feel an enhanced sense of self-worth (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993).

<sup>☆</sup> We express our deep gratitude to the late Boas Shamir who showed us the way, to Professor Ofra Mayseless from the University of Haifa, and to three anonymous reviewers for their useful and insightful comments.

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Other social psychologists (with a more cognitive–psychology orientation) have treated charisma as an attributive phenomenon. They believe followers attribute charismatic qualities to certain leaders out of a need to achieve a sense of causality or order to explain the complex reality engulfing them (Popper, 2014; Weick, 1995). Meindl, Erlich, and Dukerich (1985) and Meindl (1995) claim that such followers' needs lead to a romanticizing of leadership—a feature further intensified through social contagion processes (Meindl, 1990). Other researchers discuss charisma in behavioral terms, arguing that certain behaviors, for example, those perceived as assertive and decisive, increase charisma inferences (Conger & Kanungo, 1987).

In a comprehensive review of the concept and studies of charisma, Antonakis, Bastardo, Jacquart, and Shamir (2016) point to Weber's outstanding contribution. Of the 280 articles they reviewed on charisma, 74% refer to Weber's work. Two features are highlighted by Weber's contribution. First, the emotional component is central to the charisma phenomenon. In fact, argued Weber—as did many charisma scholars who followed him (e.g., House & Howell, 1992; Kets de Vries, 1988; Lindholm, 1990), the charismatic impact is felt on an emotional level; it is “revolutionary and transvalues everything, it makes a sovereign break with all traditional or rational norms” (Weber, 1968, p.24). Second, the outcomes of charisma (termed “charismatic effects” by Antonakis et al., 2016) are particularly evident “in times of psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious and political distress” (Weber, 1968, p. 18). Antonakis et al. (2016) point out that despite the consensus that emotions play a major role in charisma, research ambiguities and inconsistencies still arise regarding the definition and measurement of charisma. This is mainly due to the confusion between charisma's antecedents and outcomes.

This article offers an evolutionary view of charisma, suggesting answers to questions that still preoccupy charisma scholars (e.g., Allison & Goethals, 2011; Antonakis et al., 2016), namely: (a) What is charisma?; (b) What are the antecedents and effects of charisma?; and (c) Are there conditions conducive to the emergence of charisma? An evolutionary approach to these questions may shed light on the foundations of charisma as well as delineating ways to conduct empirical studies on it.

The point of departure for the present discussion is anchored in Weber's claim that the followers determine who is a charismatic leader. That is, followers perceive certain signals that a charismatic person displays and consequently are willing to act in a manner described by Weber and others (e.g., Meindl, 1995; Lindholm, 1990; Popper, 2001) as “non-rational.” In this article we attempt to decipher the ambiguous elements underlying people's perceptions of charisma and the reactions such perceptions trigger. To deal with these aspects, we adopt Antonakis et al.'s definition of charisma: “*Charisma is value based, symbolic and emotion-laden leader signaling*” (Antonakis et al., 2016, p. 304). We find this definition apt, as it distinguishes signaling as a central radiation channel, and it touches on *emotions, symbols and values*. Each of these aspects will be discussed.

We begin with the foundations of signals that clearly exert conspicuous influence and can be seen in an initial and pure manner in infants and young children (thus they illustrate well the evolutionary aspect). Then we discuss how these signals are expressed in adults where values and symbolic aspects are more abstract and implied more indirectly. Inspired by new directions presented by Csibra and Gergely's (2009, 2011) work, indicating evolutionary biases affecting children's imitating behaviors in learning missions, we seek to expose the evolutionary base of charisma. We argue that *charisma is rooted in an evolutionary foundation*, as part of a unique, powerful human capacity to transmit knowledge through cultural learning processes.

The article is structured as follows:

1. Presentation of the evolution-based perspective, which allows us to analyze the developmental origins of charisma's signals and effects.
2. Analysis of key aspects related to charisma: (a) the behavioral consequences of charisma; (b) the signaling of charisma; and (c) the context in which charisma is maintained.
3. Illustrations of the effects of charisma demonstrating the described evolution-based principles.
4. Discussion of two issues: (a) the connection between the discussed evolutionary principles and charisma; and (b) the different susceptibility levels of various collectives to different leadership cues.

### The early foundations of charisma

In a classic experiment (Meltzoff, 1988), 14-month-old infants sat with their mothers opposite the experimenter. The experimenter looked at an infant, then at a “magic box” set on the table in front of her, and then performed this surprising action: she bent forward toward the box and by pressing her forehead on it turned on a light attached to its top. A week later the infants returned to the lab and were allowed to play with the box. Most of them leaned toward the box spontaneously and turned on the light using their heads, although they could easily have used their hands. In a later version of the experiment (Gergely, Bekkering, & Király, 2002), the same conditions were applied except one: the experimenter's hands were hidden under a blanket, indicating that they were not accessible. In this case, most of the infants turned on the light with their hands, rather than their heads. And in a still later version (Király, Csibra & Gergely, 2004, in Csibra & Gergely, 2006, p. 12), no eye contact preceded the demonstration. Again, most of the infants turned on the light with their hands, emulating (but not imitating) the experimenter's actions. What can explain the surprising fidelity of the infants' imitation (termed in the literature over-imitation; Lyons et al., 2007; McGuigan, 2013) in Meltzoff's original study, even though the behavior was actually quite inefficient compared with using their hands? What caused the difference in the replications?

Csibra and Gergely's (2006, 2009, 2011) theoretical model—“natural pedagogy,” based on their empirical studies—suggests an answer. They claim that humans have a unique, specific mechanism for vertically transmitting cultural knowledge and practices. This learning mechanism is much more efficient than others, such as trial and error. It enables a naïve learner (small figure) to immediately trust a figure perceived as competent and benevolent (large figure), demonstrating for him/her some relevant but opaque (for the learner) cultural knowledge. This ability of the naïve figure to efficiently learn and generalize the knowledge (her pedagogical stance) is anchored in the following evolutionary propensities (Csibra & Gergely, 2006, 2009):

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