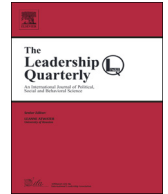


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## The aura of charisma: A review on the embodiment perspective as signaling

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### ABSTRACT

Charismatic leaders have consistently been shown to affect followers' performance, motivation, and satisfaction. Yet, what precisely constitutes charisma still remains somewhat enigmatic. So far, research has mainly focused on leader traits, leader behaviors, or the leader follower-relationship, and the subsequent consequences of each on followers' self-concepts. All of these approaches share the notion that leader charisma depends on an explicit interaction between leader and follower. With the present review paper, we extend extant theorizing by arguing that charisma is additionally informed by embodied signals that flow directly from either the leader or the immediate environment. We introduce the embodiment perspective on human perception and describe its utility for theoretically understanding the charismatic effect. Correspondingly, we review studies that show which concrete embodied cues can support the charismatic effect. Finally, we discuss the variety of new theoretical and practical implications that arise from this research and how they can complement existing approaches to charismatic leadership.

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Charismatic leaders inspire follower motivation, performance, and satisfaction (Babcock-Roberson & Strickland, 2010; Bass, 1985; Conger, Kanungo, & Menon, 2000; DeGroot, Kiker, & Cross, 2009; House, 1977; Howell & Frost, 1989; Jacobsen & House, 2001; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). This influence partly derives from followers' perceptions that the charismatic leader possesses extraordinary abilities that exceed any regular expectation for a leader (Weber, 1925). However, charisma itself remains a rather elusive phenomenon (Antonakis, Bastardo, Jacquart, & Shamir, 2016; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Yukl, 1996), marked by varying definitions and conceptualizations that sometimes border on omnipotence and the presence of almost mystical powers (Bryman, 1992). Many of these follow from Weber (1925), who defined charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities” (p. 241).

Against this background, Antonakis et al. (2016) recently noted that, despite decades of research, the concept of charisma is still not well defined. In response, they drew from signaling theory (Spence, 2002) to define charisma as “values-based, symbolic, and emotion-laden leader signaling” (p. 17). Corresponding research into the behavioral iterations of such leader signals (i.e., what the leader says or does) predominantly focused on leader rhetoric (e.g., Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Holladay & Coombs, 1993; Howell & Frost, 1989). Yet, while research has pointed out that charismatic leaders are often described in terms of their physical attributes (Bryman, 1992), for instance, their facial properties (Bryman, 1992), facial expressions (Awamleh & Gardner,

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1999), body posture (Bass, 1985), or their use of nonverbal tactics (Antonakis, Fenley, & Liechti, 2011; Frese, Beimeel, & Schoenborn, 2003), and recent research suggests to investigate how perceived charisma relates to biological characteristics (Antonakis et al., 2016), the symbolic signaling aspect of charisma that includes embodied cues beyond those displayed in rhetoric is still not understood very well. A symbol is “something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance” (Merriam Webster, 2016). Symbols may stem from the leader's physicality, the leader's verbal and nonverbal behavior, but also from the environment. As such, irrespective of whether symbolic signals relate to the leader's rhetoric or messages, they may by themselves also influence whether followers perceive the leader as charismatic.

In order to extend our understanding of charisma signals, we draw on embodiment theory, a recent development in social and cognitive psychology, that suggests that some bodily cues can lead to inferences about individuals (Barsalou, 2008). By embodied cues, we refer to all potential cues that are grounded in bodily experience—in other words, bodily states can cause cognitive states and vice versa (Barsalou, 2008). Obvious examples include the difference between up and down, hot and cold, or light and dark. This perspective has been referred to as the embodiment perspective or grounded cognition perspective (Lakens, 2014; Niedenthal, 2007). As such, this theoretical fundament can help explain why some ostensibly insignificant leader signals (e.g., physical height) can have surprisingly strong effects on people's inferences of leaders. The purpose of our paper, then, is to review this literature and show how this perspective can extend our understanding of charisma. As such, we also advance the perspective on charisma beyond mere person-effects by adding that such signals do not need to stem from a person (i.e., the leader), but can also flow from the environment (e.g., temperature). In the following, we review how embodied cues—whether related to the leader (e.g., body height, posture, facial expression) or the environment (e.g., temperature, light, physical placement of the leader)—constitute important elements of leader charisma.

Our approach diverges from extant approaches, which often try to explain charisma in terms of how leaders and followers interact, whether that involves leaders' traits (Weber, 1925), specific behaviors (Bass, 1985; Fanelli & Misangyi, 2006; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991; Waldman & Yammarino, 1999), relation to followers (Bass, 1990; Howell & Shamir, 2005), or how they inspire changes in followers' self-image (Howell & Shamir, 2005; Shamir et al., 1993). Instead, our perspective overlaps with more recent insights, which reveal that perceptions of others occur very quickly and often unconsciously. Such perceptions are informed by people's external features as well as a variety of sensory, motor, and perceptual cues in the environment (Barsalou, 1999, 2008; Lakens, 2014). For example, people infer others' traits based on facial appearance in as little as 100 ms (Willis & Todorov, 2006). Importantly, because judgments about people are deeply rooted in these seemingly superficial perceptions, they have a remarkable predictive value for later interactions (cf. parliamentary candidates, Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009), irrespective of whether they are always accurate (cf. Todorov, Olivola, Dotsch, & Mende-Siedlecki, 2015).

To support our embodied perspective, we first briefly review existing approaches to charisma and charismatic leadership. Next, we describe how an embodiment perspective can generally help explain the symbolic signaling of charisma. Subsequently, we review specific findings on the embodiment effects of physical cues in both the person and the environment. Finally, we discuss the implications for the literature on charismatic leadership, the possible ways that embodied signals can be processed, some recent criticism on empirical findings in this field of research, and potential boundary conditions for their effects.

In doing so, we offer several contributions to the literature. First, we complement the existing literature on leader charisma with an embodiment perspective that can explain how perceptions of a charismatic “aura” arise even in the absence of a behavioral leader-follower interaction. Second, in contrast to previous reviews (Bonaccio, O'Reilly, O'Sullivan, & Chiochio, 2016; Hall, Coats, & Smith LeBeau, 2005), our review is based on a coherent theoretical fundament that considers embodied cues in general (i.e., they can flow from the leader as a person and from the environment). Third, our approach of focusing primarily on objective embodied cues to explain leader charisma may fruitfully enrich future leadership research by addressing recent discussions on causality issues (Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010, 2014). Finally, our embodiment focus can explain why aspirational leaders may *do* everything right in terms of textbook knowledge on charismatic behaviors, but may find it hard to be *perceived* as charismatic. Indeed, building on models of categorization (Gilbert, Pelham, & Krull, 1988), we discuss how early impressions resulting from physical cues may relegate these leaders to a non-charismatic category (cf. Gray & Densten, 2007; Lord & Maher, 1991) that is difficult to escape. Or, as Antonakis and Jacquart (2012) phrased it, “Leaders who make it to the top may do so, not because of the skills they possess but because they ‘look the role’” (p. 155). By the same token, our theoretical perspective reveals the usefulness of seemingly narcissistic behavior—such as that exhibited by Nicolas Sarkozy, former president of France, who frequently manipulated the perception of his height in order to appear taller than he actually is (Allen, 2009). Although our review may unwittingly inspire more practical applications of these tactics, we primarily hope to raise awareness of such manipulations among those who evaluate leaders.

## Charismatic leadership

Charismatic leadership has been a subject of growing interest in leadership research during the last few decades (Yukl, 2013), with different theoretical approaches coming to the fore in order to explain the underlying process (Babcock-Roberson & Strickland, 2010; Bass, 1985; Bono & Ilies, 2006; Brands, Menges, & Kilduff, 2015; Conger, Kanungo, Menon, & Mathur, 1997; DeGroot et al., 2009; House, 1977; Nohe, Michaelis, Menges, Zhang, & Sonntag, 2013). The conceptual interest in charisma can be traced back at least to the ancient Greeks, who provided the base word, *kharisma*, which means ‘favor’ or ‘divine gift’. True to its origins, charisma has long carried a mystical connotation—in the Christian Bible, for instance, the Holy Spirit's charisma is associated with qualities such as prophecy, ruling, teaching, wisdom, and healing (Bryman, 1992). However, charisma did not truly enter the scientific purview until Weber (1925), who pioneered the argument that charisma can serve as a source of leader

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