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Charismatic leadership: Eliciting and channeling follower emotions

Thomas Sy^{a,*}, Calen Horton^a, Ronald Riggio^b^a Leadership and Group Dynamics Group, Department of Psychology, University of California, Riverside, 900 University Ave., Riverside, CA 92521, United States^b Kravis Leadership Institute, Department of Psychology, Claremont McKenna College, 850 Columbia Ave., Claremont, CA 91711, United States

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ABSTRACT

Research on charismatic leadership has been criticized for the ambiguity of its central construct. Attempts to define and measure charisma have frequently treated it as a complex construct consisting of multiple components. However, little work has been done to develop a theoretical model that offers a parsimonious rationale explaining why certain leadership attributes are considered “charismatic” while others are not, or how these attributes combine to produce charismatic effects. Addressing these issues, we present a model that situates emotion as the primary variable in the charismatic process. We use recent research on the *moral emotions* to frame a theory of *followership-relevant emotions* (FREs) that describes how leaders use emotions such as compassion, admiration, and anger to compel their followers to act. We then discuss the Elicit-Channel (EC) model of charismatic leadership, positing that the charismatic relationship is a five-step, cyclical process. In the EC model, leaders elicit highly motivating emotions from their followers and then channel those emotions to produce action that, if successful, results in outcomes such as positive affect and trust. These outcomes then enable the leader to continue the cycle, eliciting emotion once more. We conclude by offering a research agenda, addressing potential methodological concerns, and discussing future directions.

Introduction

It has been forty years since Robert House's (1977) chapter on charismatic leadership reignited interest in the elusive construct of charisma. Despite the great body of research that has accumulated in that time, scholars have struggled to define the concept, and this ambiguity has led to questions about its utility in understanding leadership (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Recent theoretical work on charisma has focused on clearly defining the construct, separating it from references to its effects or to exemplars and framing it in terms of leader behavior (Antonakis, Bastardo, Jacquart, & Shamir, 2016). However, an additional challenge remains; charisma has been treated as a construct consisting of multiple components or dimensions, but there has been little focus on developing a parsimonious model that explains how those elements combine to produce charismatic effects, or why those parts should be treated as a unitary concept labeled “charisma” (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

Here, we offer a model of charisma that addresses these points. We argue that charismatic leaders elicit strong emotions from followers which encourage devotion and action, and these emotions mediate the relationship between charisma and its effects. To advance this model, we address four points. First, we examine the controversy surrounding charisma and argue for the suitedness of emotion in addressing it.

Second, we integrate the literature on moral emotions (Haidt, 2003) in order to advance a theory of *followership-relevant emotions* (FREs) that addresses how leaders target emotions such as admiration, compassion, and anger to produce action. Third, we advance a model of charisma that accounts for the position of emotions in the relationship between charismatic leaders and their followers, referred to as the *Elicit-Channel* (EC) model. Finally, we consider possibilities for future research on the relationship between charisma and emotion.

The charisma controversy

Many of the problems associated with defining charisma seem to stem from a misfortune of the lay terminology used to describe it. Some words in the English language, such as *charming* and *irritating*, appear to be trait descriptions but instead denote an individual's tendency to elicit certain responses from others. “Charismatic,” as a word, seems to follow this pattern. A typical example of lay definitions of charisma is provided by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, which defines charisma as an “attribute of awesome and almost magical power and capacity ascribed by followers to the person and personality of extraordinarily magnetic leaders” (Charisma, 2007). In this definition, the actual attributes of charismatic leaders are ignored in favor of their effects on followers. This effect-centric approach to defining charisma has roots in some of

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: thomas.sy@ucr.edu (T. Sy), calen.horton@email.ucr.edu (C. Horton), ronald.riggio@claremontmckenna.edu (R. Riggio).<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.12.008>Received 21 January 2017; Received in revised form 23 December 2017; Accepted 26 December 2017
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the earliest works on the subject. When introducing the concept, Weber (1922/1978) approached charisma with an eye toward describing the impact that charismatic leaders had on society, instead of the attributes that set them apart. This early, effects-based approach appears to be deeply embedded in the lay conception of the term, and might explain some of the difficulty with defining it; the common, “intuitive” understanding of charisma may conflict with the psychological approach, which demands a separation of the construct and its effects.

Early organizational works on charismatic leadership addressed this by arguing that the effects of charisma should be used to identify charismatic leaders so that their unique characteristics could be identified and defined (House, 1977). However, it appears that such efforts were overshadowed by the premature development of questionnaires measuring charisma. Historically, the gold standard has been the charisma subscale of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ; Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 2000). At the time that the MLQ was developed, charisma was a relatively new topic and scholars had not yet isolated the attributes of charismatic leaders. With the subsequent increase in the study of transformational leadership and the MLQ, charisma grew in popularity while remaining underdeveloped theoretically. Some researchers did develop measures, such as the Conger-Kanungo Scale (CKS; Conger & Kanungo, 1994), that assessed charisma as a separate construct. However, these measures were less frequently used and overlapped with transformational leadership (Conger, 1999). This led to a situation where charisma was frequently treated as a sibling construct to transformational leadership, and was often defined implicitly by the measures used to assess it, rather than by a rigorously developed model and clear conceptual definition (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013).

This combination of early, underdeveloped theory and subsequent definition-by-measurement has interfered with building a clear understanding of the cause-and-effect relationships between charismatic leader attributes and subsequent outcomes (Antonakis et al., 2016). Moreover, researchers have yet to develop an adequate model that explains how the multiple subcomponents of charisma work together to produce effects on organizational outcomes (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Without such a model, it is difficult to explain why the different elements identified by researchers should be considered “charisma” instead of a simple cluster of valued leader behaviors, grouped together arbitrarily.

Resolving the controversy

Recent theoretical work on charisma has focused on resolving the issue of clarity. Antonakis et al. (2016) recently advanced a definition of charisma that frames the construct in terms of signaling theory. Their definition is built on an economic premise that treats leader selection as a market where leader candidates signal their qualities to potential followers and to “selectors” who can appoint them to leadership positions. Accordingly, charisma is defined as “values based, symbolic, emotion-laden leader signaling.” This definition separates charismatic leader attributes from its effects and resolves the issue of clarity. However, it still consists of multiple elements that are conceptually separate from each other. Emotion-laden signaling is different from values-based signaling, and both in turn are different from the use of symbolism. Without a model of charisma that shows how these elements fit together, it is difficult to articulate a sound reason these attributes are part of the charismatic “set” while others are not.

Ideally, a model of charisma addressing this would incorporate the various components of charismatic leadership as independent variables and would specify a mediation process that unites them and links them to more distal outcomes such as follower motivation. To accomplish this, we suggest that the relationship between charismatic leadership and distal effects is mediated by a proximal outcome germane to charisma. A hypothetical model of this type of relationship can be seen in Fig. 1. Such a model would provide a logical rationale that resolves

the ambiguity in definitions of charisma.

Emotion and charisma: a possible solution

For the most part, researchers have treated the many effects of charismatic leaders as isolated nodes in conceptual space without developing a parsimonious mediation model that considers their causal sequence (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). There is evidence that emotion should be considered a candidate for a central node in the network, mediating the relationship between charismatic leadership attributes and more distal effects.

Recent findings suggest that the emotions leaders elicit in followers influence attributions of charisma. Attributions of charisma are associated with leaders' displays of positive emotion, which is mediated through the transfer of emotion and arousal to followers (Damen, Van Knippenberg, & Van Knippenberg, 2008). In addition, charismatic leadership and emotions share conceptual parallels as constructs involving multiple components. Discrete emotions such as anger or happiness are often treated by researchers as complex processes that include the cognitive appraisals of the environment that elicit the emotion, the physiological and psychological experience of the emotion, and a resulting *action tendency* that involves shifts in cognition and motivation (Frijda, 1986; Scherer, 1984). Research on charismatic leadership has identified several leader attributes that parallel the cognitive appraisals that elicit certain emotions, and several charismatic effects that parallel the resulting action tendencies of those emotions.

For example, House (1977) identified nine separate effects associated with charismatic leaders. Of these effects, two (affection for a leader and emotional involvement in a mission) contain a clear emotional component. Two more (unquestioning acceptance of a leader and willing obedience to a leader) are forms of deference while another two (similarity of beliefs to leader and identification with/emulation of leader) are forms of emulative behavior. Deference and emulation have been identified in multiple theoretical works as action tendencies characteristic of admiration (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Keltner & Haidt, 2003) and have been associated with it empirically (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Galliani & Vianello, 2012; Sweetman, Spears, Livingstone, & Manstead, 2013). The remaining three (trust in correctness of leader's beliefs, heightened goals, and confidence in success of the mission) have not been implicated with any specific emotion, but there is evidence that suggests that trust is predicted by emotion (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005) and similar evidence for heightened goals and confidence through related constructs such as goal regulation (Ilies & Judge, 2005).

Additionally, one of the few candidates for a proximal charismatic outcome in the literature also shares significant conceptual overlap with the emotions of awe and admiration. Shamir, House, and Arthur (1993) emphasized two classes of charismatic leader behavior (role-modeling and expanding followers' cognitive frame of reference) and argued that these produce distal effects such as increased pro-social and team oriented behavior via the proximal outcome of self-concept alteration. This corresponds with recent research on admiration and awe.

The cognitive appraisals associated with awe include *perceptual vastness* and *need for accommodation*, suggesting the encounter with a new and expansive stimulus that requires individuals to adjust their mental frame of reference to accommodate it (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). This appears to parallel leader behaviors intended to expand followers' cognitive frame of reference (Shamir et al., 1993). Similarly, admiration and elevation are sub-types of awe and are thought to be elicited by appraisals of exemplary behavior (both in terms of skills and values) in an individual (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). These appear to parallel leader role-modeling of ideal behavior. Together, these suggest that charismatic leadership has the aim of producing appraisals in followers that elicit awe, elevation, and admiration. These emotions in turn have been associated with changes in self-concept and an increase in motivation to engage in pro-social behavior (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Piff, Dietze,

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