

Charismatic leaders

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The scope of charisma

Charisma arises in a relationship of unequal power. It transforms both parties. It is a dynamic constellation of attributes. The courage to resist and redefine traditional power structures is central. It entails the skilled capacity to appeal to the unspoken (and often unacknowledged) longings and fears in others and to animate desires for transformation in those others by embodying and giving voice to a vision of a new, possible future which offers solutions to crises relevant to the cultural moment. Embedded in the vision of the future is an ideology systematising what is wrong now, the source of difficulties and outlining what can be done to improve it. The leader, as an exemplary person, may embody the transformation promised. Charisma forms a powerful emotional bond to leader and group of followers. The leader's rhetorical style contributes to this; the language in which the vision of the future is enunciated. This may entail at first negating present features of the political situation, using inclusive language to define a group to which the message appeals and using visual imagery to make the vision seem real now.

The transformation offered transcends the current values of the time and the limited individual capacities of followers. The leader offers an immediate relationship to him/her and his/her vision of the future, both of which may be idealised. In place of alienation, she or he offers selfless communion. Rather than powerlessness and loneliness, where followers might have felt small, unimportant or overlooked, they can feel identified with a charismatic leader, achieving a sense of union with a quasi-divine, romantic hero who invites each to be part of a new vision of a possible future. The leader inspires commitment and remarkable levels of self-sacrifice - of labour, wealth and sometimes life itself.

The outcome of charisma depends on how well the leader deals with adulation. This is in part determined by the nature of the leader's personality and motivation for acquiring power. To avoid the possible explosive tyrannical excesses of charismatic power (exemplified by Hitler, by Jim Jones' perverse domination leading his followers to their death by having them drink cyanide and by Idi Amin's documented tendency to send home in body bags those in his inner circle who dared to criticize him (Post, 1997)) a number of important features must be in place. The leader must have humility (Morris, Brotheridge & Urbanski, 2005) and the capacity to; resist the romantic vision of leadership (that is to recognise her or his status as catalyst rather as unique cause of change) to see what the situation, now, requires; to delegate; to keep dissenting voices within her or his advisory circles (rather than surround him or herself by sycophantic advisors); to include non-believers in the vision of the future; to recognise the full human status of followers rather than seeing them, at any stage, as means to an end. The outcome of charisma also depends on how the traditional power structure meets the challenge that charisma represents to the status quo.

Many disciplines contribute to the understanding of charisma: anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, organisational behaviour theorists, cognitive scientists, and psychiatrists involved in political studies. Some offer psychobiographies (Erikson, 1958, 1969; Kets de Vries, 1988; Lasswell, 1930; Storr, 1996), others theoretical analyses, while yet others use empirical methods (quantitative or qualitative) measuring and exploring leadership styles or attributes of leaders' messages. Rather than outline different theories, charisma is analysed here in terms of the attributes that contribute to its formation, change and impact. The contributions and strengths of each disciplinary approach will be apparent.

Charismatic attributes

Theologically charisma meant 'gift of grace' (a phrase coined by Rudolph Sohm, 1892-1923, see Friedrich, 1961, Smith, 1998). The connection to the supra-personal or 'divine' is also central to the hero's innate ability to lead signified by the Roman concept of *facilitas*. This refers to an oratorical eloquence inspired (in part) by a source external to the speaker (Norton, 1975). For Christians charisma is the sense of the saint's intimate contact with God. However, that one person can gain charismatic power from claiming a highly personal connection to the 'divine' presents a real threat to the established order, as was demonstrated in the events leading to the deaths of almost all followers of the Branch Davidian sect in Waco Texas (Reavis, 1998). Knox (1950) details the fraught history of such personal connections to the divine in his meticulous study of *Enthusiasm*. Charisma in political contexts is viewed as a capacity to embody an extraordinary supra-personal power.

Some criticise this extension of the term beyond the religious context (Friedrich, 1961). Whether or not the leader is seen as having connection to the 'divine' (however that is culturally conceived) there is enduring emphasis on charisma defined by the personal qualities of the leader. Exceptional personal qualities and skills constitute personalised charisma - the least developed of Weber's two variants of charisma and the one most emphasised here. The second variant, 'routinised charisma' derives from institutional power accorded by social roles. It is not the central focus here. In personalised charisma there is the felt sense in the here and now of a leader's almost divine uniqueness in being extraordinarily empowered to draw others into participatory, selfless communion to bring about innovative social transformation. Within personalised charisma there is a further subdivision: the leader embodies (Weber's 'emulatory charismatic') and/or gives voice to (Weber's 'prophetic or messianic charismatic') a vision of the future she or he convinces followers s/he can make real.

In his notion of personalised charisma, Weber outlines a charisma that 'is opposed to all institutional routines, those of tradition and those subject to rational management' (Weber, 1946, p. 52). According to Weber, "Charisma" shall be defined to refer to an extraordinary quality of a person, regardless of whether this quality is actual, alleged or presumed. "Charismatic Authority", hence, shall refer to a rule over men, whether predominantly external or predominantly internal, to which the governed submit because of their belief in the extraordinary quality of a specific person' (Weber, 1946,

p. 295). Charisma defined by personal qualities is distinct from position, hierarchy or social advantage, which underpin Weber's notion of routinised charisma. 'Charisma is a gift that adheres in an object or person simply by virtue of natural endowment. Such "primary charisma" cannot be acquired by any means' (Weber, 1922, p.2).

The power accruing to the leader derives in part from the appeal of her or his exceptional personal qualities (which may be real or consensually ascribed). These include; personal magnetism (Shils, 1965), one individual's 'naked capacity of mustering assent' (Jouvenel, 1958, p.163); a capacity to 'give an impression of greater force and of more freedom of libido' (Freud, 1921), dominance, courage, and confidence in the moral righteousness of their convictions (House, 1977) and a contagious emotional expressiveness (Greenfeld, 1985, p.122).

According to Lindholm (1990), 'the basis of the legitimacy of the leader is the immediate 'recognition' of his miraculous quality whereby the follower becomes lost in personal devotion to the possessor of this quality' (p.25). This is 'a devotion born of distress and enthusiasm' (Weber, 1946; 249). These emotional, motivational precursors in the follower promote a lock and key fit between leader and follower attributes (Toch, 1965; Goldberg, 1983; Post, 1997).

Charisma's relational appeal: might and message

Charismatic appeal arises in a relationship and while it may be prompted by the remarkable qualities of one person, sociologists emphasise the importance of context for the social validation of charisma (Friedland, 1964; Beyer, 1999). Charisma is relative to the perceiver. For Katz (1972) charisma is like imputations of love; 'Nine-tenths of its cause are in the lover for one tenth that may be in the object' (Santayana, 1905, p. 22). However, some attributes are more likely to have broad appeal in conjunction with a particular message or vision at a given cultural and historical moment. The charismatic leader is attractive due to might, message and audience uptake. The intensity and breadth of appeal is in part due to the timeliness, pertinence and scope of the message to address and resolve shared threats and chagrins that are personally, historically and culturally relevant at a given time.

The Charismatic Vision

The charismatic political vision is innovative, non-traditional, sometimes 'explosively novel' (Shils, 1965, p. 199), outlining possibilities and implicating changes to the personal identity and social affiliation of followers, with ramifications for the system of meanings and institutional power within the host culture and wider political milieu. It can promote change within a system or change of a system (Whitebook, 1995). Ideology, wherever one finds it 'provides a picture of the world as it is and as it should be. It provides a guide for action by which the desired changes can best be achieved. At the same time it underscores what is wrong, attributes blame and responsibility...' (Zurcher & Snow, 1981, p. 456). The message 'gains acceptance because it is aimed at, relevant to, and meaningful for collective definitions of distress, trouble, and agitation arising from perceptions of an emergency

or crisis' (Trice & Beyer, 1986, p. 119). What is unique to how ideology operates in charismatic relations is that through the leader the vision is given voice (Weber's notion of 'prophetic charisma') or is embodied by the person and lifestyle of the leader (Weber's 'emulatory charisma', called 'personalised leadership' by House & Howell, 1992). It is a charisma of the body (Lindholm, 1990). Presidents whose inaugural address 'contained more words like "heart," "dream", and "hunger" were later judged to be more visionary or charismatic' (Emrich, Brower, Feldman & Garland, 2001, p. 548). It is also inspired by the leader's non-verbal expressiveness and freedom of libido, and is frequently intensified by the excitement and contagion of a group setting (which Hitler capitalised on, see Fromm (1973)). It makes a direct emotional appeal to the follower (Cherulnik, Donley, Wiewel & Miller, 2001).

The rhetorical power and manner of enunciating the message (House, Spangler & Woycke, 1991; Chung & Park, 2010), its content in addressing sources of dissatisfaction and possible avenues of remediation and transformation shape its emotional impact and uptake (Westen, 2007). Attributes of the leader's message that are important in evoking charisma include visual metaphors which paint for followers 'a verbal picture of what can be accomplished' with the leader's help (Emrich, Brower, Feldman & Garland, 2001, p. 527).

The Context of Charisma

Some suggest crisis is not required for charisma (Bass, 1999). However, historically charismatic relations are most likely to form and charismatic leaders to arise and be recognised as charismatic where there is some social crisis. Where there has been a threat to or disintegration in the structures of meaning that inform problem-solving attempts at personal, group, national or global levels - charismatic power can arise. It can address the threats by offering means to stabilise personal identity, provide clarity of group belonging and group status. Fromm's (1973) analysis of Hitler's rise to power suggests that the weakening of Germany's pride as a result of post-war sanctions paved the way for the rise of Hitler as much as his personal attributes of malignant narcissism. Weber's (1922) analysis of charisma entails the occurrence of a social crisis involving a weakening of traditional values, an emergence of group conflicts and a sharpening of class differences. The traditional order is then challenged by the emergence of a charismatic authority.

Hummel combines the work of Weber and Freud to define charisma psychosocially. 'Charisma exists as the experience of the follower when there is: 1) a moment of distress/object loss, 2) complete personal devotion to a leader /love projection, 3) experiencing the leader's qualities as extra-ordinary or supernatural/sense of the uncanny produced by unconscious nature of the projection' (Hummel, 1975, p. 760). For Freud (1921) the experience of the uncanny 'suggests something old and familiar that has undergone repression' (p. 125).

The importance of combining Weber and Freud is evident in the role attributed to societal circumstances as well as individual psychohistory. The possibility of a charismatic movement is said to lie in the existence of people who "have found

themselves footloose and unable to identify with and therefore make a firm commitment to the dominant values and ethos of their society" and who are regarded as marginal by those who have made that commitment (Goldberg, 1983, p.170). Those drawn to Jim Jones as leader in the People's Temple in Guyana were marginalised and disadvantaged, (Naipal, 1980). Feeling marginalised may weaken a person's sense of connection to the established order, and may be the first stage of identity transformation and charismatic political affiliation.

There are three stages in personal change that may arise prior to, or as a result of, contact with charismatic authority. Followers are rendered 'charisma-prone' where: 1) early or recent disruptive life circumstances induce some form of *separation* from identity-maintaining contacts and beliefs, thereby promoting potential followers' embarkation on 2) a phase of *transition* where social relationships, beliefs and ways of life are renegotiated. This is followed by 3) a *reintegration* of follower identity within a new group where problems are addressed from within a newly acquired or restructured ideology in the context of a social and cultural landscape frequently changed by the rise of the charismatic group around a leader (Van Genep, 1908; Knox, 1950; Schein, 1957; Lifton, 1963; Lofland & Stark, 1965; McHugh, 1972; Snow & Phillips, 1981; McIlwain, 1990, 2009). The leader's message is portrayed as producing frame alignment, frame movement and frame realignment. The followers' passage through these phases may be shaped by the charismatic appeal of a leader at any stage. With forcible or deceptive recruitment, the rupture of existing bonds may occur due to the intervention by the leader, his or her message or representatives. Actual physical or psychological encapsulation may arise, where normal contact with identity-sustaining social bonds is not permitted. Schein (1957) documents how, in prisoner of war camps, the threat of informers in their midst prevented men from confiding in each other, resulting in a psychological group becoming a mere physical assemblage of men. Bar capture, the separation stage in personal change occurs in the course of contingent life circumstances.

Against a cultural and temporal backdrop of crisis, alienation (Seeman, 1970), shallow bonds rather than real intimacy (Lasch, 1979), loss of ideals or weakening of values (Hoffer, 1951; Hummel, 1975; Trice & Beyer, 1986, 1993), charisma arises as a lock and key fit between leader and follower (Toch, 1965) whereby a leader's qualities and message appeal to (and dynamically transform) the personal needs (Goldberg, 1983) and ideological orientation of the follower (Snow & Zurcher, 1981).

The Charismatic Bond: Between love and leadership

The charismatic relationship is poised between love and leadership (Lindholm, 1988, 1990; Person, 1990), elaborated empirically as 'idealised influence' in contemporary transformational leadership research (Bass, 1985; Bass & Steidelmeier, 1999).

Charisma is a cultural form of transference (whereby one attributes to a person in the present qualities and power that were in fact experienced in relation to a person in the past) where fears and longings mobilised in followers lead them to perceive (Shamir & Howell, 1999) and/or ascribe (Beyer, 1999) (sometimes idealised) exceptional capacities to a leader and to take unique, personalised significance from the leader's

message which forms an uncanny bond (Freud, 1921; La Barre, 1980; Post, 1989; McIlwain, 1990; 2009) to both leader and the way of life she or he embodies. Boundaries between leader and follower are blurred or lost. The more conscious the leader is of the mechanisms of power the less symmetric or mutual the loss of self. While the follower may come to believe that she or he shares the attributes of the leader, the leader retains a clear awareness of personal boundaries and does not derive a grandiose sense of power from assimilating the follower.

Uncanny mechanisms of devotion

We know little about how leaders have the remarkable and sometimes frightening effects they have on followers, such as inspiring them to die for a cause (Atran, 2003; Naipal, 1980). La Barre uncovers the mechanism by which selfless devotion arises. The message has to be sufficiently consonant with the (often unconscious) longings of the followers to produce the seemingly 'magic' and 'irrational' conviction of the leader's rightness and to produce a sense of there being a unique bond between leader and follower despite the group or mass following often in evidence. The leader's message taps unspoken and unacknowledged longings that are already there in the follower. This, from La Barre's psychoanalytically-inflected anthropology, is the origin of charisma's supernatural 'miraculous quality': 'Charisma, which seems to be a 'supernatural rightness' streaming from the charismatic individual, is merely the emotional welcomeness of his message, *deja' vu* in the prepotent unconscious wishes of each communicant' (La Barre, 1980, p.29).

Charisma's seemingly other-worldly power is merely due to the fact that the follower felt their longings to be unique and private. Therefore the leader must have special powers to discern them. La Barre notes: 'The compelling force comes not from the great man as he voices some new supernatural Truth: he speaks to the powerful anti-commonsensual fantasy already present in the unconscious wish of each communicant . . . the voice of the vatic has an 'uncanny' consistency with each one's private wish' (p.52). This forms an uncanny bond (Freud, 1921) since, in acknowledging unexpressed wishes, or seeming to see into one's heart and/or mind, the charismatic leader transgresses the boundaries of personhood. The leader-follower relationship may be one of identification (where one forms an emotional tie to another and assimilates their attributes) or fusion (where one comes unconsciously to believe that one is part of another and shares their fate). The nature of the bond is determined by how much the leader's vision is consonant with unacknowledged wishes and fears on the part of the follower. Further, hearing someone else voice what has never been verbally formulated or shared with others broaches the sense of having an intact subjectivity and produces an unusual sense of intimacy. The produces the sense of a unique, powerfully insightful, previously unimaginable bond and shapes what the followers are prepared to offer to achieve it and how selfless they become in working towards the realisation of that vision. Whether it is the person or the message with which followers identify is linked to their degree of dependence and empowerment (Kark, Shamir & Chen, 2003).

Kohut (1977) suggests that some charismatic authorities have ‘a keen grasp of even the subtlest reactions in other people which are related to their own narcissistic requirements’. On this account charisma requires skilled insight which causes the ascription of remarkable and magical qualities to the leader by the follower. The skill consists in picking up on the message that matters to that person (and broader group) at a given cultural moment. A second skill entails being able to access and give voice to fears, longings and doubts in the follower who has no awareness of them. When embodying or propounding in a compelling way an ideology or vision which has the potential to remediate those difficulties, the leader addresses and promises resolution of the followers’ difficulties without the follower having to own them as their own. Thus the follower’s unconscious conflicts and longings contribute to the ascription to the leader of an ‘uncanny’ giftedness - a truly magical form of visionary insight. This process is reminiscent of Freud’s (1912) account of therapeutic transference where unvoiced residues of past longings and difficulties influence the analysand’s perception of the analyst (for good or bad). So charisma may be a cultural form of transference.

The Challenges of Charisma

A charismatic bond mobilises attributes of followers motivating them to sometimes astonishing levels of commitment and sacrifice, sometimes of their lives (Atran, 2003), as they work to realise a vision of a future.

The impact of the charismatic bond can undermine the stability of the leader’s personality (Deutsch, 1983) which plays a large role in determining the degree to which the transformative personal, cultural and global outcomes are ennobling or destructive. The impact of the bond and the outcomes of gaining power also reveal the degree to which the charismatic’s quest for power was narcissistically-based (Akhtar & Thompson, 1982; Kohut, 1971; Kernberg, 1975, Popper, 2000). Volkan (1980) characterises leaders accordingly as either ‘reparative’ or ‘destructive’ leaders (paralleling House & Steidlmeier’s ‘transformational’ and ‘pseudo-transformational’ leaders). Many have been concerned by the destructive, dark side of charisma (Fromm, 1973; House, 1977; Howell, 1988; Conger & Kanungo, 1998). Concern rose due to the ‘mass suicides of Jonestown, the Manson murders and the rise of violent religious fanaticism as a mode of government’ (Lindholm, 1988, p.4). These occurrences suggest, notes Lindholm, that ‘some human groups at least, are acting on principles that stand beyond ordinary understanding, and that explanations of these groups based on rational interest are wholly inadequate’ (p. 4).

Ensuring positive charisma

Whether charisma is destructive or positively transformative depends on a number of factors: the degree of narcissism of the leader’s personality (Kohut, 1971, 1977; Post, 1986, 1989, 1997); capacity to delegate and retain dissenting voices within her or his inner circle optimising corrective feedback concerning sources of discontent regarding the exercise of power rather than surrounding himself, or herself, with sycophantic advisors (Post, 1997, p. 212-213); humility, resisting a romanticisation of leadership (Meindl, Ehrlich & Dukerich, 1985) enabling recognition of his or her role as catalyst

rather than sole cause of social change despite follower's wishes to see the leader as being in control (Trice & Beyer, 1986); whether the vision of the future is socially inclusive, welcoming those currently seen as out-groups (Post, 1997), ethically informed (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999), transcends the self-interests of leaders and followers alike (Beyer, 1999), and is dedicated to more than assuaging personal fears or those of the followers and the perpetuation of powerful influence itself; 'there is a useful difference...between having a skill – being admirable or emulatable – and needing to dominate people' (Phillips, 1997, xiii; see also Burns, 1978;) For transformational leaders to be truly charismatic their messages must offer inspiration and innovation, with goals which transcend time, place and the satisfaction of individual interests. Many attributes of the ethically-aware, 'authentic' transformational leader delineated by Bass & Steidlmeier (1999) such as: concern for self and others, absence of manipulation and hypocrisy and a vision which followers can accept or reject - demarcate a relative absence of narcissism.

Charismatic leaders unite groups, but they can also create out-groups and scapegoats if their vision is not inclusive. The division into 'us' and 'them' may arise from a leader's tendency towards 'splitting'; a tendency to see those who share one's vision as wholly good, and those who do not as wholly bad. The mechanism of splitting is common in grandiosity of narcissistic origin. However, the ascription of all negative attributes to outgroups is more likely with acquisition of unquestioned power where the leader comes to occupy a position of tyrant not subordinate to law or principles higher than self (Whitebook, 1995). Some suggest only ethically good leaders can truly be transformational (Friedrich, 1961; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). However, dark charisma can be equally transformative of the milieu of values within a nation (Fromm, 1973) which in turn has global impact.

The outcome of charisma hinges on the capacity for having insight into and conscious respect for the mechanisms of power. This conscious awareness is less possible the more narcissistic the leader, or the more that the situation lacks checks and balances for difficulties to be voiced and redressed regarding the exercise of power. The outcome of charisma also depends on how the extant social powers respond to the challenge it represents (Reavis, 1998).

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