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TWO DECADES OF STUDYING CHARISMA: THE LEADERSHIP DIMENSION

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to understand Charisma beginning from Weber's original conception of the term to subsequent theories proposed by mainstream charismatic theorists. It explores all the major charismatic leadership theories proposed in last twenty years which has been the bedrock for hundreds of charismatic leadership research around the globe such as attribution theory, psychodynamic approach, self-theory and etc. Through this article we make an attempt to capture and integrate various explanations regarding the emergence and development of charismatic leaders so as to create a clear and non-conflicting model which will enrich the existing knowledge domain in the field of leadership in general and charismatic leadership in particular. This theoretical paper will help researchers to carry out more empirical research on charisma in order to explore more about charismatic leadership and its applications.

KEYWORDS

Charisma, Charismatic leadership, Psychodynamic approach, Attribution theory.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'charisma' can be traced back to the *New Testament's* Corinthians II, which describes the forms in which the gifts of divine grace appear. The term was introduced into social science by the pre-eminent sociologist- Max Weber, in the early twentieth century. In his massive two-volume work *Economy and Society* (1925), Weber differentiated three types of authority: bureaucratic, as seen in today's society; traditional, as in feudal and primitive cultures; and thirdly, charismatic authority.

Charisma refers to an extraordinary power, and Weber defined it thus: "The term 'charisma' will be applied to 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. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary."

Weber was of the view that a *charismatic* style of leadership because of its mysticism and extraordinariness will be better off than the other two forms of political legitimacy-the *traditional* and the *legal-rational* one. Weber depicted charisma of having three main dimensions:

1. The charismatic leader, who is someone with a sense of great mission (although not necessarily religious), characterised by self-confidence, and great rhetorical skills.
2. The mass following - which is likely to emerge at times of crisis, and to be characterised by features such as a sense of great trust in the leader, and to be largely unconcerned with economic issues.
3. The routinisation of charisma (through party, organisation, etc.), for it is difficult to maintain radical charismatic revolutionary movements.

Weber's conceptualisation of charismatic authority was neither a specific one nor a systematically tested theory (opinion polling was first used for political purposes in the 1930s and focus group were developed much later). Weber relied on his dictum that sociology must use historical materials as its basic data. Post-Weber many political and social scientists have spent several decades examining various aspects of the phenomenon, *charisma* such as transcendent vision and/or ideology (Blau, 1963; Dow, 1969; Marcus, 1961; Wilner, 1984), acts of heroism (Wilner, 1984), the expressions of revolutionary and often "hazardous" ideals (Berger, 1963; Dow, 1969; Friedland, 1964; Marcus, 1961), rhetorical ability (Wilner, 1984), and a "powerful aura" (Wilner, 1984).

One of the disciples of Weber, Ann Ruth Willner (1984), a social scientist who has written a significant treatise on charisma, holds that a charismatic relationship exists when four conditions are met:

1. The leader is perceived by followers to be somehow superhuman.
2. The followers blindly believe the leader's statements
3. The followers unconditionally comply with the leaders directives for action.
4. The followers give the leader unqualified emotional commitment.

Based on in-depth case studies, Willner concluded that charismatic leadership was neither 'personality based' nor 'contextually determined' but rather the phenomenon was largely relational and perceptual: "It is not what the leader is but what people see the leader as that counts in generating the charismatic relationship" (Willner, 1984, p.14).

Dow (1969) and Willner (1984) both differed from Weber regarding a single charismatic personality type and existence of crisis necessary for the emergence of the charismatic leadership. The first assertion was discarded because of the variations in individual personalities are too overwhelming and the second was refuted as it was not compulsorily sufficient for the emergence of charismatic leaders (Willner, 1984, p.60).

The topic of charismatic leadership was conspicuously overlooked by the organisational theorists because of several reasons like, the elusiveness nature and the mystical connotation of the term, lack of systematic conceptual framework, which made it hard to define and operationalise charisma and to identify the variables that influence its development and finally the difficulty in obtaining access to charismatic leaders (Conger et al., 1987).

Last two decades have witnessed a considerable increase in interest in charismatic leadership among many leadership theorists.

NEO-CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

The neo-charismatic theories incorporate some of Weber's original ideas, but they are more particular in explaining the motives and behaviours of charismatic leaders, the psychological processes that describes how these leaders influence followers and the circumstances that lead, to the emergence of charismatic leaders (Jacobsen & House, 2001).

Although, there are several theories on charismatic leadership proposed by various sociologists and organisational theorists, many of them are components of transformational and visionary leadership theories (e.g., Bass, 1985; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Sashkin & Fulmer, 1988; Tichy & Devanna, 1986) that leave us with only five theories that can be arguably called mainstream charismatic leadership theories. These five theories are not just the most popular explanation of charismatic leadership but also are the most researched one too.

ATTRIBUTION THEORY OF CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

This theory was proposed by Conger and Kanungo (1987) and subsequently was refined by Conger (1989) and then by Conger and Kanungo (1998). The theory is based on the assumption that charisma is an attributional phenomenon. It is attributed by followers to leaders displaying certain distinct and remarkable behaviours. The duo identified six behaviours exhibited more frequently by charismatic leaders than by non-charismatic leaders. These include:

1. Vision and articulation;
2. Sensitivity to members needs;
3. Sensitivity towards environmental needs;
4. Displaying unconventional behaviour;
5. Taking personal risk;
6. Challenging status quo

According to the authors, charismatic leaders are more likely to advocate a vision which is highly discrepant from the status quo, but is still within the latitude of acceptance by the followers. That is, the vision should be radical enough to the followers who are fed up with the status quo at the same time shouldn't be too radical to be considered impossible and unrealistic. Charismatic leaders portray the status quo as negative or intolerable and the future vision as the most attractive and attainable alternative. While articulating the vision charismatic leaders use powerful verbal cues which paint positive and compelling pictures of the future.

Charismatic leaders are highly sensitive towards the needs of their followers and understand the importance of aligning it with the goals of the organisation. They are adept in identifying individual and collective needs of their followers thereby create an impression of being their well wishers. It is imperative for the leaders to enjoy the trust of their followers and this can be achieved when the leader demonstrate a concern for the followers needs rather than their own self-interest (Walster, Aronson, & Abrahams, 1966).

Charismatic leaders carry out realistic assessments of the environmental resources and the constraints which can derail their vision. Their ability to understand and appraise both physical and social environment and employ innovative strategies to overcome the constraints separate them from non-charismatic leaders. Charisma is more likely to be attributed to a leader who acts in unconventional ways to achieve the vision. Attribution of charisma to leaders depends on followers' perception of their revolutionary and unconventional qualities (Berger, 1963; Friedland, 1964; Marcus, 1961). The revolutionary qualities of leaders are manifested in part in their discrepant idealised vision. Charismatic leaders are not high on consensus rather engage in behaviours that are novel, unconventional and counter normative.

Charismatic leaders are known for their exemplary acts that followers perceive involves great personal risk, cost and energy (Friedland, 1964). The higher the personal cost or sacrifice, the greater the credibility of the leader. Two examples amply explain this phenomenon one is of Lee Iacocca's reduction of his salary to one dollar during his first year at Chrysler (Iacocca, 1984) and the second is of John DeLorean's confrontation with senior management at GM (Martin & Siehl, 1983).

The two major primary influence processes that arrest the commitment of followers of charismatic leaders to the mission or task are personal identification and internalisation of new values. The strong urge of the followers to be part of the grand plan or scheme of the leader and winning their approval is worth the subordination. Many subordinates idolise their leader and want to be like them because of their insight, strong convictions, self-confidence and dynamic energy although this may sometimes leads to hero worshipping. The internalisation of the leaders' values and beliefs by the followers to carry out the idealised vision is the second influence process that plays significant role in the attribution of charisma to the leader by their followers. Conger (1989) emphasised that it is more important for followers to internalise the leaders values and beliefs than merely imitate superficial aspects of the leader's behaviour such as mannerisms, gestures, speech patterns.

Unlike Weber (1947), Conger and Kanungo do not consider an objective crisis to be necessary condition for the emergence of charismatic leadership. However, in the absence of a genuine crisis, a leader may be able to create a sense of urgency by injecting dissatisfaction among followers regarding the existing state of affairs, thereby tactfully create a situation favourable for the emergence of a charismatic leader.

SELF-CONCEPT THEORY OF CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP

Robert House (1977) was the first management thinker to demystify and decode the term 'charisma' by the help of testable propositions involving observable processes in contrary to the original definition promulgated by Weber (1947). The theory was successful in explaining the leader's extraordinary traits, superhuman behaviours and the conditions favouring the emergence of charismatic leader. But, one major shortcoming of this theory was the ambiguity regarding the influence process. Shamir, House and Arthur (1993) later revised and refined the theory by introducing motivational theory and a detailed description of influence processes.

The self-concept based motivational theory of charismatic leadership, proposes few assumptions which forms the main basis of the theory (Yukl, 1994);

1. Behaviour is expressive of a person's feelings, values, and self-concept as well as being pragmatic and goal oriented;
2. A person's self-concept is composed of a hierarchy of social identities and values;
3. People are intrinsically motivated to enhance and defend their self-esteem and self-worth;
4. People are intrinsically motivated to maintain consistency among the various components of their self-concept, and between their self-concept and behaviour.

According to Shamir, House and Arthur (1993) charismatic leaders strongly engages followers' self-concept in the interest of the vision articulated by them. The theory also suggests that charismatic leaders increase the intrinsic valence of efforts and goals by aligning them to cherished and valued aspects of follower's self-concepts. Charismatic leaders by the sheer force of verbal and symbolic behaviour, raises the salience of certain values and collective identities in followers self concept thereby persuade them to exert efforts towards the attainment of the goals.

The theory highlights the leader behaviours that raise the salience of certain values and identities in followers' self-concepts and frame group's mission and followers' roles in terms of those values and identities. The leadership behaviours that explain how a charismatic leader influences the attitudes and behaviour of the followers are, articulating an ideological mission, interpreting the past, the present and the future in terms of group's values and identities, communicating high expectations, linking the amplified values and identities by using labels, slogans and metaphors, modelling behaviours consistent with the vision, empowering the followers etc.

In addition these behaviours, which demonstrate the leaders verbal and written communication and on symbolic devices such as rituals and ceremonies, the leaders personal behaviour is also emphasized by the theory. This category of behaviours includes such acts as displaying self-confidence, high involvement in the task, engaging in self sacrifice to show commitment to the mission, demonstrating determination, and optimism and showing social and physical courage. Furthermore, the leader's setting a personal example increases identification with and admiration for him or her (Shamir et al. 1998).

According to Shamir and his colleagues, although, a crisis condition is not prerequisite for the emergence of charismatic leadership but if the organisation is in serious trouble, if the organisation is not clear about the survival plan and there is considerable anxiety, panic among the members (Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004; House et al., 1991; Pillai, 1996; Pillai & Meindl, 1998) there is good chance for a charismatic leader to emerge and rescue the failing organisation.

PSYCHODYNAMIC PROCESSES

This theory is an attempt to understand charisma with the help of Freudian psychodynamic processes in followers (Kets de Vries, 1988; Lindholm, 1988). The theory explores the unusual and irrational influence enjoyed by the leaders possessing superhuman or divine powers on their followers who have feelings of inadequacy, guilt, fear and alienation.

The intense personal identification of followers with such charismatic leaders can be explained with the help of psychodynamic processes like regression, transference, and projection. *Regression* explains a return of feelings and behaviours that were typical of a younger age. *Transference* happens when feelings towards an important figure from the past (e.g., a parent) are shifted to someone in the present. *Projection* involves a process of attributing undesirable feelings and motives to someone else, thereby shifting the blame for things about which one feels guilty (Yukl, 1994).

According to one psychoanalytic explanation, followers suffering from guilt, fear or alienation may experience a feeling of euphoric empowerment and transcendence by submerging their identity in that seemingly superhuman leader. For example, it was the result of a severe economic depression coupled with the ignominious defeat of Germany in WW I that led to the emergence of Hitler. Post WW I the German economy was in shambles and the common German was seething with rage over the humiliation in the hands of other European powers, this suffering, alienation and trampling of national pride was enough for the Germans to look forward to a messiah or crusader who can unite the entire nation and free them of their miseries, this drove the Germans to endorse the leadership of Hitler.

This kind of behaviour of hero worship and personal identification is more likely to occur among adolescents who have low self-esteem and a weak social identity. This theory explains why many people who are normal and sane join cults and radical movements.

SOCIAL CONTAGION THEORY

Meindl (1990) was the first theorist to question the extension of previous explanations of attribution of charisma by followers on a leader without any direct interaction and in some cases the followers even do not even have the opportunity to observe the leader at a distance or on television. Unlike previous theories on charisma, social contagion theory focuses on the influence processes among the followers than on how the leader directly influences individual followers.

This theory explains how followers influence each other through spontaneous spread of emotional and behavioural energy among a group of people. It goes on to explain that people get vicariously content by observing others exhibit or do things which they themselves are not capable of exhibiting. According to Meindl, many people have a heroic social identity in their self-concept, which motivate them to get emotionally involved in a righteous cause for which they are willing to make self-sacrifices and exert extra effort. This social identity is usually inhibited by other social identities, by social norms about appropriate behaviours. This heroic social identity can be activated in these people by a leader or a cause worthy enough to arouse such passion in them like a social crisis which threatens their self esteem.

Meindl was of the view that the process of social contagion begins with few insecure, marginal members who do not have strong social identification with the organisations and more inclined to deviate from its norms. The heroic social identity is activated in these people by an emergent leader who articulates an appealing ideology or symbolizes it. They imitate non-traditional behaviour by the leader and do things that symbolize allegiance to the new cause. Other members may initially view the behaviour of the new disciples as bizarre and inappropriate. However, as the inhibitions of more people are released, some initial doubters will become converts and the process of social contagion spreads rapidly and to rationalise their new behaviours the followers attribute charisma on their leader. The entire process of social contagion is based on stories and legends about the leader and his/her supernatural abilities which attracts prospective followers. For example, the magical or divine quality of a social movement leader or cult leader is cherished by its followers.

DRAMATURGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF CHARISMA

Charismatic leaders are known for their gift of gab, they use rhetoric skilfully so as to generate passion and loyalty among followers. For example, the famous speech of Martin Luther King "I have a dream" was full of metaphors which successfully stroked the passion among the civil right movement workers. Howell and Frost (1989) studied the verbal and non verbal ways which prompts followers to attribute charisma to leaders. The duo used trained actors in a laboratory setting to differentiate charismatic leaders from the structuring and considerate leaders on the basis of positive body language, tone and pitch of the voice and selection of words. In their charismatic character roles, actor were coached to use nonverbal cues such as extended eye contact, using vocal variety, speaking in a relaxed posture, and using animated facial expression. The more structuring and considerate leaderly-characters said the same line but with less dynamic nonverbal cues. The characters using more nonverbal cues and passionate language were considered charismatic then those who used less non verbal cues.

Gardner and Avolio (1998) were the first to propose a dramaturgical framework to describe the "processes whereby social actors use impression management to create and maintain identities as charismatic leaders" (1998, p.32). According to them charismatic leadership is an impression management process enacted theatrically, which involves both internal and external organisational players like followers, suppliers, competitors, and customers. The leader impression management model, involves four phases: a) framing; b) scripting; c) staging; d) performing.

FRAMING: A frame refers to overall perspective according to which a message can be interpreted (Goffman, 1974). The framing process thus involves meaning management and the construction and articulation of a particular world-view within which specific communication make sense. It is a quality of communication that causes others to accept one meaning over another. Gardner and Avolio (1998) stated that in framing their vision, charismatic leaders choose words that amplify audience values, stress importance on efficacy and if necessary, will denigrate their opponents (e.g. competitors).

SCRIPTING: Scripts are "built upon" frames (Benford and Hunt, 1992, p.38). The difference between framing and scripting is that the latter proposes actionable ideas. It translates the frames into more practical and doable action plan. The script provides a set of stage directions that guide the performance, and embraces aspects such as the casting of characters, the creation of dialogue, and direction of the performance (Benford and Hunt, 1992, p.39).

STAGING: Staging incorporates non linguistic semiotic systems into performance (e.g. physical appearance, props, symbols, etc). History is full of examples, where a leader is attenuating and emphasizing his/her charisma with the help of an external prop. Examples like, General George Patton always carry his pearl handled pistol whereas General Douglas MacArthur wore strangely formed hats and a long pipe. Mahatma Gandhi wore clothing which he knit himself as an inspiration and example for others to defy British colonial rule, since at that time manufacturing cotton clothing was banned in India.

PERFORMING: This is the final phase of impression management which involves the "actual enactment of scripted behaviours and relationships" (Gardner and Avolio, 1998, p.44). Charismatic leaders like Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi exemplifies trustworthiness and moral responsibility and they portrayed this through their clothing (Gandhi's wearing of loin cloth), speeches (King's "I have a dream") and actions (Gandhi's call for Civil disobedience movement and King's massive rally to protest against racial discrimination). They also perform in ways that promotes their vision of the future, and promote the organisation or cause they lead/serve/embod. Performing, according to Goffman (1967) also includes "facework". Facework is the way a leader defends itself or save its own skin during a controversy.

When leaders cast themselves in the charismatic roles and their followers as allies in pursuit of their vision (Gardner and Avolio, 1998:42; Harvey, 2001:254) they face daunting challenges which are paradoxical in nature. Jones and Pittman (1982) describe the push and pull between the authenticity and impression management, in which the individual must "decide on the best strategic combination in his dealings with others". The three paradoxes that the charismatic leader has to wrestle with are;

- Charismatic leader balances self-consistency over the longer term with the desire for the shorter term social goals (Jones and Pittman, 1982, p.233).
- Charismatic leaders project themselves as one of us through leader's appeal to collective identity, shared history, values and aspirations (Shamir et al,1993; Shamir et al,1994). At the same time, charismatic leaders are typically attributed with great and sometimes extraordinary personal power (Weber,1947). Thus the relationship between charismatic leader and the followers exhibits elements of inclusiveness and exclusiveness.
- Although Burns' (1978) interpretation of charismatic leadership as a form of "heroic" leadership characterised by an absence of conflict is refuted by Yukl (1999), who points out that charismatic leaders also use manipulative behaviours, such as "exaggerating positive achievements and taking unwarranted credit for achievements", "covering up mistakes and failures", "blaming others for mistakes," and "limiting communication of criticism and dissent" (p.296).

Charisma is a co-constructed theatrical event, which takes casting of both leaders and followers as protagonists and competitors as antagonists to bring off the charismatic effect.

CONCLUSION

The study of charisma and charismatic leadership is very important in management, politics, and also in general administration. Our discussion in this paper focuses on primarily the theories which revolves around charisma as either a personality trait, or as behaviour and vision of the leader perceived to have extraordinary capabilities. Conger and Kanungo (1987) proposed that followers attribute charisma to a leader who is thought to possess superhuman power. They further expanded the behaviours that will convince their followers of their supernatural and superhuman abilities. According to them, it's not what the leader is but what his followers think he is decides the charismatic feature of the leader.

Shamir and his colleagues stressed on the followers' self concept which they believed are key to follower's acceptance of a leader as charismatic. A leader is perceived to be charismatic if he/she creates a vision or behaves in certain way which aligns the self concept of the followers with the social identity or collective identity of the group. The followers then see themselves part of something bigger and meaningful.

The psychodynamic theory attempts to explain the pathological need of a follower to accept someone as charismatic or extraordinary. The theory proposes three psychodynamic processes (regression, transference and projection) which explain the personal identification of followers with leaders perceived to be charismatic.

Social contagion clarifies how followers are influenced by a leader even without meeting him/her in person or seen him/her on television. This theory throws light on how the heroic social identity of followers is activated by a leader who espouse an appealing ideology which offers them a conduit to express their suppressed emotions which in normal conditions is hard to demonstrate.

Dramaturgical theory explains the crucial role rhetoric plays in the establishment of the leader as charismatic. It further elaborates the impression management a leader employs to reconcile with few incompatible aspects of their relationship with followers.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Charismatic leadership has always intrigued and interested leadership scholars and researchers but there are many aspects of charisma like routinization of charisma or dark side of charisma that has not been adequately defined or empirically proved. Unless we delve further into the operationalisation of this sociological construct our understanding of this extraordinary leadership will be far from being complete. Till then charisma will remain as an elusive gift.

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