



John Antonakis

Moving psychology forward – with charisma

Ahead of his keynote address at the British Psychological Society's Annual Conference in Nottingham this May, Ella Rhodes heard from **John Antonakis**, Professor of Organisational Behaviour at the University of Lausanne

The theme of this year's British Psychological Society Annual Conference is 'Moving psychology forward'. To me that means asking how we make psychology research more robust, more valid, more reliable, but also more consequential! I think psychology can offer many insights that can help change policies in governments and organisations, and ideally make them more efficient and more effective, and perhaps the world a better place too.

Consider Richard Thaler, who won last year's Nobel Prize in Economics. He fused a lot of economic and psychological insights to show how we can get people to make better decisions and hence help themselves *and* the public good; for instance, increasing organ donations, encouraging people to save more money for retirement, and so on. 'Nudging' people in the right direction is just one way that ideas from psychology

can have an impact on policy. Another is through better leadership – of political institutions, businesses, NGOs. We need better leaders at all levels and in all walks of life. I think psychology can provide great insights in this area, to better understand how leaders can have consequential effects on individuals, teams, even societies.

But – and it's a big but – we've been spinning our wheels a lot in the study of leadership. In some areas we haven't really taken advantage of the best use of designs, methods and statistical procedures. A lot of that's been done in psychology, especially on the topic of charisma; however, this work, particularly as done by management researchers, has not been very consequential or helped us better understand how charisma works and whether it matters. Let me note a few problematic areas.

One of the biggest problems is the definition of charisma. Typically, researchers have defined charisma in a sort of tautological way: 'charismatic leaders are inspirational' or 'charismatic leaders have strong effects on followers'. Well, no kidding, Sherlock! Defining it by its outcome does not identify the essence of the construct. And if something is true by definition, it is not interesting to study. What is the defining feature of charisma? What is it that charisma does to observers? How is charisma different from other constructs? Can hypotheses derived from the definition be empirically challenged? A viable construct has to be refutable. Charisma should not always work irrespective of context; signalling charisma should not necessarily mean the leader will be seen as charismatic by others. Also, charisma should not always engender positive effects. You have Hitler-types who were charismatic yet caused immense harm. You have Barack Obama, who objectively would be scored as charismatic. Yet if you ask Americans who do not agree with Obama's values, many will say he's a clown. Many will say too that Donald Trump's a clown. Some saw Margaret Thatcher as a charismatic Messiah; others saw her as a destroyer of the social state. So why is it someone can be seen as charismatic in the eyes of some and not others, and what are the defining characteristics of charisma? We must distinguish charismatic signalling from whether the charismatic effect will occur, and identify the conditions in which it will work. And this is entirely possible: some, sociologists in particular, have talked of charisma being a gift of grace, having some kind

of extraordinary or alchemic ability, or some mystical charm. For me there is no reason charisma should be beyond scientific study.

The next problem is the use of questionnaire measures. Researchers thought, 'OK, people know it when they see it; we'll just ask them if this person is charismatic, and then we'll ask whether they think this person is effective, or we might even look to see objectively if the person's effective.' But there we have a huge problem. We cannot use perceptions of charisma to predict anything because they may share a common cause with the outcome they are intended to predict. This problem is known as endogeneity. If you see someone as charismatic it may be for many reasons (let's call them Z): it may be because of the way they look, it could be because of their reputation, it could be because they're already effective (and you are aware of it). Maybe they're not objectively charismatic but because of Z you're filling in the blanks in a stereotype-consistent manner. Thus what correlation one finds between charisma and an outcome is due, at least partially, to Z. For someone to be seen as charismatic we have to manipulate charisma and keep everything else constant: the way they look, the way they dress, their voice, their reputation. Only then can we know if charisma causes anything, whether in perceptions of observers or objective outcomes.

So, we have to go back to the mainstay of psychology – the experimental design. One type of study to do is to take an actor and get them to behave non-charismatically with one group of people, then behave charismatically with another group of people, and then see if this behaviour has any consequential effect on outcomes. Or we can randomly assign managers to charisma training or an alternative treatment to see if there is an effect on consequential outcomes. Very few studies have done that.

Also, in psychology, those laboratory studies using confederates or actors made use of undergraduate students working on some non-consequential task in the lab. Economists, if they were to examine whether charisma works, would test charisma against a strong counterfactual treatment like economic incentives; they would also try to observe a consequential outcome like rate of work (e.g. quantity and quality of piece rates). Randomise workers to do a task where in one condition they're exposed to a standard speech with no economic incentives, in another condition to a standard speech with economic incentives, and in the last condition to a charismatic speech with no incentives. In this way, we can see if charisma does anything beyond a 'placebo' effect (i.e. speech with no charisma) or incentives. In psychology, we tend not to want to use these kinds of methods. I don't know why – one reason may be that we seem to believe that incentives crowd-out intrinsic motivation. So there is no such published study yet; though below I will come to such a study we recently ran.

So what is charisma? For me, it is symbolic, value-based and emotional leader-signalling. I use the word



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‘signalling’ here because, by the use of verbal and non-verbal techniques, the leader signals, or sends information, to the follower about what’s important, what the follower should do, and the conviction of the leader. (I’ll focus on verbal techniques here, which are less well-known than non-verbal aspects such as gesture, but which my research suggests far outweigh them in producing charisma.) These signals also convey to the follower how confident the leader is, or how competent the leader seems to be; importantly, for these signals to be credible, they should correlate with some underlying abilities that the leader has. The signals should send honest information to the follower, just like the assumptions made in signalling models in evolution or in economics.

Michael Spence won the Nobel Prize in Economics a few years ago on signalling. He said signalling was useful because if someone sends a signal that’s credible it conveys information to players in a market and reduces information asymmetries. He used the example of a university diploma. For simplicity, let’s assume that degrees don’t help you directly in doing your job; and let’s also assume it’s more difficult for a less smart or a lazy person to get a psychology degree as compared to smart individuals or hard workers. What Spence says is that the market will sort in such a way that only smarter and harder working people will attempt the degree, and people who are not so smart or lazy won’t attempt to get the degree because there’s such a huge cost involved that it’s not worth even trying. So, when an employer hires someone with a degree they assume that person has some underlying abilities because they know it’s difficult to get this piece of paper. The same applies with charisma: it’s the ability to communicate in symbolic ways and it is not easy to emulate.

Symbolic communication means you’re able to communicate in extremely vivid ways, a picture that people can see, that people can touch, and people can smell. How do you communicate this picture? You have to be able to give rich descriptions, you have to give symbolic meanings. For instance, one can use metaphor or tell a story in a very vivid way. (A lot of religious teachings are symbolic, metaphorical and value-laden.) Not just anyone can do this. Again, it’s usually the smarter people who can do this, or people who are more creative and original. Through signalling and being able to communicate symbolically, people then assume this person must be smart; of course, the correlation is not perfect between the signal and the underlying ability, but the signal is a pretty good probabilistic cue.

Signalling includes values too: what’s right, what’s wrong, what we should do and shouldn’t do. They also have a different kind of cost because by signalling transparently what the important values are, the leader will pay a cost by doing that in two ways. For example, Barack Obama communicates his values, but he pays a cost because by communicating values people who identify with him will like him more, but those who don’t appreciate his values will loathe him. Consequently, that Obama signals charisma doesn’t mean he’ll be seen as charismatic. He’ll only be seen as charismatic if the person to whom he signals charisma shares the same values and identifies with the message. Obama must also ‘deliver the goods’ and ensure too that his actions are consistent with the values he communicates; this is the other cost that is involved by signalling values. One can also signal what has to be done (i.e. goals) and the confidence in whether the goals can be achieved. Again, this is a costly action.

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There are other techniques that are useful to be more charismatic. Take contrasts, which counter what should be done against what should not (e.g. Kennedy’s famous ‘Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country’ line). Rhetorical questions are useful because they point to an obvious answer, or create an intrigue, a puzzle that the leader will solve. For example, when Obama was running against

McCain, he said the following: ‘Now, I don’t believe that Senator McCain doesn’t care what’s going on in the lives of Americans; I just think he doesn’t know. Why else would he define middle-class as someone making under \$5 million a year? How else could he propose hundreds of billions in tax breaks for big corporations and oil companies, but not one penny of tax relief to more than 100 million Americans?’ To see some of these techniques in action, interested readers can refer to my analysis of a famous speech by Margaret Thatcher in my new book (see link opposite).

To reiterate, charisma is not a catch-all, lovey-dovey thing like other leadership theories, including ethical leadership or authentic leadership, which are assumed to be effective by definition. At the end of the day, it is hard to understand why many believe that some kinds of leadership styles are always effective; it’s just not true. As scientists, we need to discover the boundaries of theories and we need to define them in a way that makes the theory refutable. If a theory always works or has the effects one believes it does, that’s a tautology, it’s untestable. A lot of the theories we have in leadership right now are exactly that – what Jeffrey Pfeffer talks about as ‘Leadership BS’!

In my talk I will also discuss the importance of charisma in different spheres. For instance, in a recent paper we’ve published in the *Academy of Management*

Journal, we've shown that charisma predicts who would win the US presidential elections. In another paper in the *Academy of Management Learning and Education* we showed we can train charisma and help people become more charismatic. To make individuals more charismatic, we first measure their level of charisma (prior to training) usually via a recorded (or written) speech. Then we explain to them what charisma is by breaking it down to its components, show how they affect observer inferences, and give lots of examples in film scenes to show how charisma is projected. To ensure that participants learn, they have to then practise using the charismatic techniques by redoing the speech and getting feedback from others.

When training individuals to become more charismatic it is important too to show participants that charisma really matters; in this way, they pay more attention to what they may miss out on if they do not use charisma. For instance, charisma can have a strong economic effect in work settings. In a paper we are working on now, we show that workers exposed to an actor, who briefs some workers exposed to a charismatic speech work as hard as those given economic incentives. We have some lab experiments too which show that charisma can help players coordinate actions in a public goods game where one has a 'free rider problem'. People are willing to risk their money after seeing a charismatic speech, because charisma not only affects people's preferences but also their beliefs about what they think other people will do. It creates a strong social norm to be cooperative. But, for charisma to work, a common identity must be made salient. These are things we talk about too with participants so that they understand that as leaders they have the responsibility to project a vision, solve problems, and to use their influence to help their organisation adapt to the external environment.

Why did I begin studying charisma? A while back I published a paper in *Science* showing that naive individuals, even little children, could predict who'd win parliamentary elections by rating the facial appearances of the winner and the runner-up. Inferences of competence can depend on how one looks and these were elections where the voters didn't have a lot of information on the candidates; thus, it's quite rational they would use the look as one indicator of the person's ability or competence. That really bothered me. Typically, observers make inferences very quickly on the using the target's age, sex, height, look, ethnicity, and what have you. They very quickly put a 'price' on our tag. If we look like a million dollars, they assume we have lots of positive characteristics; and if we don't, then we have a problem.

What motivated me to study charisma was to see if the price put on a tag could be altered by charisma. I figured out being charismatic can help individuals overcome initial impression others have of them. We showed this in the *Academy of Management Learning and Education* paper, where we took the same person and recorded them giving a speech before and after having received charisma training. Each person served as their own control so we could remove the fixed-effect of look, voice, clothing and what have you. We got other people to watch the speeches, and our results showed that charisma has a strong causal effect on how leader-like the targets are seen. In another study I took a random sample of 240 TED talks, controlled for how attractive the speakers were, and used the charismatic tactics to predict which talks will go viral.

Where am I going with my research? I will talk about that too in my keynote and some of the experiments and field studies we are doing. One exciting avenue is a project we code-named 'Deep Charisma'. We are using 'deep learning' (i.e. artificial intelligence) to see whether a computer can emulate how people appreciate a speech! We are getting very strong correlations between human ratings of speeches and those done by Deep Charisma. It all goes to show what may be possible as we move psychological science forward and reach out to other disciplines like computer science! This project is important because human coders are slow, take a long time to train, and after a while get bored. Yet, archival measures of charismatic signalling are very useful for researchers. Once Deep Charisma works well, we will be able to get 'big data' on leader speeches and do interesting field studies to estimate the effect of charisma on outcomes. However, once computers can code charisma as well as a human, perhaps the day will come when computers will be able to write charismatic speeches for us; can you imagine interacting with a charismatic robot? So much for charisma being some sort of mystical gift of grace! But, I am still a romantic and want to think that some things will be always in the purview of humans... unlike computers, we have feelings.

To download a free chapter from Antonakis's new book, which examines one of Margaret Thatcher's most famous speeches for its signs of charisma, see tinyurl.com/y7cdx39r. Also see his TEDx talk: <https://youtu.be/SEDvD1IICfE>

For more information on the British Psychological Society's Annual Conference, see www.bps.org.uk/ac2018