



More than one way to articulate a vision: A configurations approach to leader charismatic rhetoric and influence



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ABSTRACT

Charismatic rhetoric represents an important tool for leaders to articulate their respective visions. However, much of the research to date on this construct has yet to consider how the eight separate dimensions of charismatic rhetoric may be used in conjunction with one another to form distinctive profiles of charismatic leadership influence. Thus, the present investigation explored the interplay of the individual dimensions using content analysis of the 1960–2012 United States presidential debates. Cluster analysis revealed the emergence of four distinctive rhetorical strategies, one of which was more strongly related to the prediction of influence success as measured by presidential election outcomes. Results suggest that conceptualizing charismatic rhetoric as a multidimensional profile construct represents a valuable area for subsequent research on charismatic rhetoric, and several possible directions are suggested.

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More than three decades ago, Pondy (1978, p. 87) described leadership as a “language game,” a sentiment that has been echoed by more recent calls for the incorporation of communication into the study of modern leadership (e.g., Bennis, 2007). Scholars have explored this important issue by examining charismatic rhetoric as a salient perspective in the study of leadership and the organizational sciences. Indeed, as top-level leaders (e.g., executives and senior managers, as well as political leaders) are frequently unable to meet with their followers in face-to-face situations, rhetoric has been recognized as a vital method of demonstrating leadership in some contexts (Bligh & Robinson, 2010; Pfeffer, 1981; Pondy, 1978; Shamir, Arthur, & House, 1994; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Further, rhetoric is a critical method for charismatic leaders to influence followers to adopt their vision (Emrich, Brower, Feldman, & Garland, 2001; House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991).

Shamir and colleagues (1994) conceived of charismatic rhetoric as a multidimensional construct, and offered propositions regarding charismatic leaders' use of rhetoric to articulate their vision and generate follower support, which several subsequent studies have explored (e.g., Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004a; Davis & Gardner, 2012; Seyranian & Bligh, 2008). In some of these studies, the individual dimensions of charismatic rhetoric have been examined separately (e.g., Seyranian & Bligh, 2008). In other studies, the effects of an

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aggregate charismatic rhetoric construct have been tested, such that the dimensions are summed together for a combined level of charisma that is then examined in relation to important outcomes (e.g., Study 3 of Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004b).

Choices regarding the treatment of multidimensional constructs in empirical research have implications regarding the results generated from their use (Johnson, Rosen, & Chang, 2011; Johnson, Rosen, Chang, Djurdjevic, & Taing, 2012). For example, the use of an aggregate measure suggests that each dimension has an equal and consistent impact on the overall construct, and inherently assumes that more of each dimension of the rhetoric is preferable to an increased usage of a selective set of potential dimensions (Law, Wong, & Mobley, 1998). Although understanding how the charismatic rhetoric construct as a whole relates to key leadership outcomes is valuable, a simple summation of the dimensions precludes a more extensive understanding of how the individual dimensions relate to one another and to the key outcomes.

Examination of the use of individual dimensions allows for more fine-grained analyses of the dimensional relationships to the outcomes. However, this approach still precludes a more informed understanding of how the dimensions may operate in conjunction with one another to predict important leadership outcomes. Thus, researchers have advocated for the adoption of a configurational approach to many organizational phenomena in order to build upon the base of research examining the separate dimensions of constructs (e.g., Bolino & Turnley, 2003; Kipnis, Schmidt, Swaffin-Smith, & Wilkinson, 1984; Law et al., 1998; MacDougall, Baur, Novicevic, & Buckley, 2014; Short, Payne, & Ketchen, 2008; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). With a configurational approach, constructs are conceptualized as profile variables, and each dimension is explored in relation to the others, such that patterns of the dimensions can be detected. Such an approach provides the ability to make contributions to theory development by expanding or refining the construct and clarifying its characteristics (Bolino & Turnley, 2003).

A review of the charismatic rhetoric dimension intercorrelations from previous research reveals strong relationships between some dimensions and little to no relationship between others (e.g., Bligh et al., 2004a, 2004b). This suggests the possible existence of rhetorical profiles, where leaders employ different levels of the charismatic rhetoric dimensions. Further, scholars have suggested that some dimensions may be more impactful in different contexts (Lim, 2002, 2008; Schroedel, Bligh, Merolla, & Gonzalez, 2013). Similar to earlier examinations of influence configurations (e.g., Bolino & Turnley, 2003; Kipnis et al., 1984), combining various dimensions into common configurations positions the use of charismatic rhetoric as employing different and unique strategies of rhetorical influence.

Recently, scholars (i.e., Davis & Gardner, 2012) have examined charismatic rhetoric of a single leader using a configurational approach and found support for differing patterns of use over time. In the present investigation, we seek to extend this line of research, and provide a more informed understanding of the patterns of usage of the dimensions of charismatic rhetoric across leaders. Specifically, we search for the existence of profiles of charismatic rhetoric among a sample of leaders, as well as the relative efficacy of rhetorical profiles in the prediction of influence success.

Because rhetoric represents a primary avenue through which leaders communicate and generate support for their visions, evidence of distinct profiles of charismatic rhetoric contributes to research on leader charismatic rhetoric by identifying a number of viable directions. For example, research on rhetoric could begin to examine how different combinations of the charismatic rhetoric dimensions are more or less effective for different leadership contexts. Further, because rhetoric is something that can be intentionally constructed and delivered, understanding how profiles relate to important outcomes provides insight leaders can use to structure their communication in order to generate support for their vision. We begin with a brief overview of charismatic rhetoric as a multidimensional construct, and use this information to frame our research with two overarching research questions.

Conceptualizing charismatic rhetoric

A powerful vision is a description of an ideal future state (Carton, Murphy, & Clark, 2014) that becomes a symbol of future possibilities, which creates shared meaning and a common identity, as well as energizes and provides a challenge while linking the present with the future (Nanus, 1992). Indeed, in their review of visionary leadership, van Knippenberg and Stam (2014, p. 241) noted that the “communication of an inspiring vision is seen to lie at the core of the exceptional leadership that mobilizes the masses.”

Charismatic leaders are individuals who are able to communicate their vision to followers, and encourage them to forsake their individual goals in order to accept the leader's vision as their own (House & Shamir, 1993). Shamir and colleagues (1993, 1994) posited that charismatic leaders are able to use their vision for the organization to link the interests and self-concepts of the subordinates to the goals and needs of the organization. By doing so, followers will experience greater intrinsic motivation, engage in self-sacrifice, and internalize the leaders' vision as their own (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Through their vision, then, charismatic leaders are able to exercise influence over the values, behaviors, and performance of others (House et al., 1991).

One way in which leaders can communicate their vision is through their use of rhetoric (Conger, 1991; Emrich et al., 2001; Shamir et al., 1994). Bligh and her colleagues (2004a, 2004b) noted that perceptions and attributions of leadership are increasingly formed through the use of rhetoric. In fact, rhetoric is thought to be the main way in which leadership is performed in some contexts (Hart, 1987). For example, leaders of large organizations and nation states are unable to maintain direct relationships with all of their followers and, as such, must lead by inspiring and motivating through the use of rhetoric to communicate a vision (House et al., 1991). Without rhetorical skills, leaders are less likely to be able to convey their vision effectively, and convince followers to rally in support. In turn, they are less likely to encourage increased subordinate performance, commitment, and satisfaction (Conger & Kanungo, 1987; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; House, 1977; House & Shamir, 1993).

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