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Dying for charisma: Leaders' inspirational appeal increases post-mortem

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ABSTRACT

In the present research, we shed light on the nature and origins of charisma by examining changes in a person's perceived charisma that follow their death. We propose that death is an event that will strengthen the connection between the leader and the group they belong to, which in turn will increase perceptions of leaders' charisma. In Study 1, results from an experimental study show that a scientist who is believed to be dead is regarded as more charismatic than the same scientist believed to be alive. Moreover, this effect was accounted for by people's perceptions that the dead scientist's fate is more strongly connected with the fate of the groups that they represent. In Study 2, a large-scale archival analysis of Heads of States who died in office in the 21st century shows that the proportion of published news items about Heads of State that include references to charisma increases significantly after their death. These results suggest that charisma is, at least in part, a social inference that increases after death. Moreover, they suggest that social influence and inspiration can be understood as products of people's capacity to embody valued social groups.

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Introduction

A great deal of research and theory suggests that individuals who are perceived to be charismatic are especially influential when it comes to shaping other people's thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and the organizations they are part of (Aral & Walker, 2012; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Bryman, 1992; Burns, 1978; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; House, 1977; Waldman, Ramirez, House, & Puranam, 2001). Indeed, meta-analytic evidence indicates that a person's charisma is central to their capacity for leadership (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011). In line with this, empirical and historical analyses are replete with examples of leaders of nations whose charisma is seen as having allowed them to mobilize citizens to perform exceptional behaviors, both moral and immoral (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991; Rees, 2012).

However, we know little about the social factors that underpin charisma. Yet building such an understanding is important in light of evidence that charismatic leadership is a pathway to outstanding leadership (Ligon, Hunter, & Mumford, 2008; Mumford, 2006; Mumford, Hunter, Friedrich, & Caughron, 2009; O'Connor, Mumford, Clifton, Gessner, & Connelly, 1995; Simonton, 2009) and consequently to the societal achievements that can accompany this leadership. In the present research, we seek to advance our understanding of the nature and origins of charisma. We do this by examining the impact of a person's death on observers' inclination to see them as charismatic. We argue that following a person's death, people will perceive a stronger connection between an individual and the social groups that they belong to, and that this can increase their charismatic appeal (Steffens,

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Haslam, & Reicher, 2014). To the extent that this holds true, it speaks to claims that charisma is a *social inference* that, at least in part, is informed by a person's capacity to embody important social groups.

The present research makes at least three important contributions to the literatures on leadership, charisma, and identity. First, it extends our understanding of the nature of charisma. Previous research has tended to treat charisma as a more or less stable individual difference variable and, consequently has taken individual differences as a starting point for understanding the consequences of charisma (for a recent comprehensive review, see Antonakis, Bastardoz, Jacquart, & Shamir, 2016). In the present research, in contrast, we elaborate on work that sees charisma as a malleable, context-sensitive, and conferred characteristic by examining the factors that underpin people's perceptions of leader charisma. Second, we advance previous work on the social construction of charisma (Meindl, 1995; Shamir, 1992) by showing that charisma is conferred on leaders not only on the basis of their own achievements and those of their group but also as a consequence of their death. Third, we extend the literature on identity and leadership which has argued that leadership is necessarily a group process (Thomas, Martin, & Riggio, 2013; Platow, Haslam, Reicher, & Steffens, 2015). Specifically, in the present research, we elaborate on the importance of group-based concerns by explaining why a person's charisma continues to grow following death. More specifically, we do this by exploring how a dead leader's fusion with the collective identity that he or she represented can account for post-mortem increase in their charisma.

Charisma and its underpinnings

A leader's charisma is seen as lying at the heart of his or her capacity to enact transformational leadership (Bass, 1985). In light of the evidence that charismatic and transformational leaders are more effective than their non-charismatic and non-transformational counterparts (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe et al., 1996; Wang et al., 2011), there is a great deal of interest in understanding what leaders can do to increase their charisma. There are two important broad classes of answers to this question. The first emphasizes the importance of having (or being perceived as having) the right qualities as an individual (e.g., Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997), while the second emphasizes the importance of social factors in people's inferences of charisma (e.g., Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985).

Evidence for the former position comes from research suggesting that a person's charisma arises from his or her qualities as an individual or his or her skills, character, or personality (Antonakis, Fenley, & Liechti, 2011; Bass & Riggio, 2006; House & Howell, 1992; Keller, 2006; Waldman et al., 2001). For instance, it has been suggested that leaders are more charismatic to the extent that they are, among other things, able to challenge the status quo and communicate an inspiring vision for the future (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). There are also suggestions that leaders' rhetorical style can influence perceptions of charisma (Berson, Shamir, Avolio, & Popper, 2001; Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997; Emrich, Brower, Feldman, & Garland, 2001; Shamir, Arthur, & House, 1994). For instance, evidence indicates that compared to their less charismatic counterparts, charismatic leaders more often make use of metaphors in their rhetoric (Mio, Riggio, Levin, & Reese, 2005), and use more vivid imagery (Seyranian & Bligh, 2008).

Support for the latter analysis comes from evidence that perceivers infer charisma on the basis of a person's perceived achievements (Meindl et al., 1985; Schyns, Felfe, & Blank, 2007; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013; Weber, 1992). In particular, research suggests that a person's charismatic appeal is associated with their exertion of effort on behalf of a group (Howell & Shamir, 2005) and that it derives from their relationship with, and perceived embodiment of, the social group to which they belong (Haslam, 2001). For instance, Platow, van Knippenberg, Haslam, Knippenberg, and Spears (2006; see also Steffens et al., 2014; van Knippenberg & van Knippenberg, 2005) found that leaders who were more prototypical of an ingroup were perceived to be more charismatic than leaders who were less prototypical. Moreover, in a recent analysis of Steve Job's rhetoric, Heracleous and Klaering (2014) argued that his charismatic qualities appeared to reside as much in his capacity to shape his rhetoric in response to the immediate social context as in his use of particular metaphors.

Death and charisma

The death of leaders and its social consequences has attracted very little research attention in the social sciences. However, there are two notable exceptions to this. The first is economic analysis by Jones and Olken (2005) that used the death of national political leaders as an exogenous variable in an analysis of the impact of leaders on economic growth (finding that leaders impact economic growth, and more so in autocratic than democratic regimes). The second is a recent analysis by Yammarino, Mumford, Serban, and Shirreffs (2013; see also Simonton, 1991) that examined the association between leadership style and assassinations in a political context. Focusing on U.S. Presidents, the researchers found that presidents who were coded as charismatic were particularly likely to be targeted in assassination attempts or actually assassinated. While Yammarino and colleagues approach these analyses from the perspective that a charismatic leadership style may play a causal role in the likelihood of a subsequent assassination, the reverse causal direction is also possible. That is, it is possible that the death of a leader while in office boosts subsequent perceptions of that leader's charisma.

There is additional indirect evidence that is consistent with the possibility that death may elevate inferences of charisma. This arises from literature on mortality salience which has shown that priming cognitions around death leads to the elevated endorsement of cognitions and behaviors that are consistent with valued group memberships (e.g., Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010; Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992). In other words, death is associated with group-based cognition and behavior. To the extent that charisma is a social group-based inference (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011; Platow et al., 2006;

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