



Original Article

Charismatic leadership and the evolution of cooperation[☆]Allen Grabo^{*}, Mark van Vugt

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ABSTRACT

A fundamental challenge to understanding our evolved psychology is to explain how cooperative or prosocial behaviors are maintained despite the immediate temptation to free-ride. We propose that charismatic leadership and followership can be best understood as a product of this recurrent, fitness-relevant selection pressure for adaptations that effectively promoted and sustained prosocial behaviors within groups. We describe charismatic leadership and followership as a dynamic process in which leaders signal their ability to benefit the group by increasing the perceived likelihood that cooperation will succeed. A charismatic leader is one who is able to attract the attention of other group members and serve as a focal point for aligning and synchronizing prosocial orientations in followers, suppressing sensitivity to cooperative risks, and enhancing the salience of perceived cooperative rewards. We hypothesize that exposure to such individuals will activate heuristics causing participants to behave more prosocially. The results of three economic experiments (N = 500) provide behavioral evidence for the “charismatic prosociality” hypothesis through the use of the Trust, Dictator, and Stag Hunt Games.

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1. Introduction

One of the defining features of human psychology is our remarkable willingness to behave prosocially toward others, to cooperate and coordinate in response to the many challenges which confront us as a species. The adoption of flexible strategies for leadership and followership is a key adaptation which enables this rapid and efficient coordination to persist — even as populations continue to grow larger and less kin-based than those of our hunter–gatherer ancestors.

Charismatic leadership has played a major role in the history of Western culture and thought for millennia, and yet it remains uniquely difficult to define. At first glance, the differences between any two charismatic leaders appear far too numerous to be reduced to some common element. To St Paul, who coined the term over 2000 years ago, charisma was an inexplicable gift from the divine. For Max Weber, the sociologist who brought the term back into vogue at the turn of the last century, charismatic leaders were treated as though possessing “supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers” (Weber, 1947).

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that the extraordinarily powerful psychological effects of charismatic leadership can be explained without recourse to divine intervention. Instead, we propose that an explanation of the origins and functions of charismatic leadership can be grounded in an understanding of our evolved psychology, and can provide additional insight into the nature of the many

mechanisms that sustain the large-scale cooperation necessary for human societies to flourish.

Ever since Darwin there has been an enormous amount of interest in the origins of human cooperation. The question has been approached through the lens of disciplines such as evolutionary biology (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Nowak, 2013), social psychology (Van Lange, Balliet, Parks, & Van Vugt, 2014), political science (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991) and religious studies (Bulbulia & Frean, 2010; Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008). Such efforts have resulted in a proliferation of tools and models which can help to explain how our psychology, language, and institutions have contributed to the development and stabilization of cooperative behaviors and in human societies. Our theory proposes that charismatic leadership and followership are an important part of this larger story — a uniquely effective, dynamic process which allows groups to adapt to the specific challenges confronting them. The present article will argue that a fuller understanding of the evolution of cooperation must include not only the history of the evolved biological and physical mechanisms that have allowed cooperation to flourish, but also the crucial role that leadership has played in embodying and giving agency to them.

We begin with a brief overview of how charismatic leadership can add to existing theory about the origins of human prosociality and cooperation. Next, we zoom in on the defining characteristics of charismatic leadership and embed the concept of charisma within an evolutionary framework. We suggest that charismatic leadership signals an opportunity for cooperation and review the existing literature. Finally, we present our hypothesis about how charisma can promote prosociality among strangers, and the results of three studies which tested this hypothesis through the use of charismatic stimuli and experimental economic games.

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1.1. Evolutionary origins of leadership

Leadership has been around for a long time, and can be seen in a wide range of non-human species, suggesting that it is a biological adaptation that predates our own species' evolution (King, Johnson, & Van Vugt, 2009). While human leadership today is predominantly hierarchical, the available evidence suggests this was not the norm in the environment in which humans evolved. Our hominin ancestors existed in small bands of egalitarian hunter-gatherers for millions of years prior to the invention of agriculture (Boehm, 2001), and evidence from modern hunter-gatherer tribes indicates that this egalitarianism was maintained over generations by the development of leveling mechanisms which mitigated the risks of exploitation by individual members (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003; Henrich et al., 2001). The evolution of theory of mind and complex language is often suggested as the key adaptation that enabled this surprising success, allowing for the development of reputation, gossip and collective punishment (Dunbar, 2003). Their role as leveling mechanisms contributed to the creation of a social environment unlike that of most other primates, one in which the reputational consequences and potential for punishment made selfish behaviors more likely to damage genetic fitness than to enhance it (Nowak, 2013). Our ancestors appear to have successfully balanced the complicated cost-benefit analysis of selfishness versus cooperation through the use of collectively enforced leveling mechanisms, without the need for the kinds of formalized institutions we see in modern societies.

While these leveling mechanisms would have applied to all members of the group, they would have been particularly directed toward individuals who drew the most attention, attempted to influence others, and took risks in proposing solutions to challenges facing the group. Any would-be leader of a group would have faced the most scrutiny from followers with a strong interest in avoiding exploitation by dominant leaders (Price & Van Vugt, 2014). This strong resistance to granting status or prestige to individuals who attempt to exert power through dominance alone has been referred to as the “reverse dominance hierarchy” (Boehm et al., 1993; Henrich et al., 2001).

And yet, even the smallest and most egalitarian of groups must have relied on the special abilities of specific group members to overcome recurrent fitness-relevant challenges such as the need for migration during times of fluctuating resource availability, or the need to coordinate to wage war or defend against rival groups (Van Vugt & Ahuja, 2010). In any human society there are also inevitable and recurrent challenges to intragroup stability, such as conflicts between individual members, or disagreements about the proper response to a challenge such as the distribution of scarce resources. Over the course of our evolutionary history, individuals who were willing and able to facilitate coordination in response to such problems would likely have accrued fitness benefits both to themselves and their groups through mechanisms such as cooperative niche construction (Bulbulia, 2012; Spisak, O'Brien, Nicholson, & van Vugt, 2015). While such individuals may not have accrued direct benefits in the manner of a dominant leader (i.e. gaining access to resources through physical or social dominance), they most likely would have increased their fitness indirectly via the accumulation of *prestige* (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; cf. service-for-prestige; Price & Van Vugt, 2014).

It is precisely this form of leadership, and the types of abilities it necessitates, which we identify as the key components of charismatic leadership. We suggest that the abilities necessary to acquire influence and gain consent among followers, in the pursuit of cooperative goals and in the absence of coercive measures or institutions, represent the key components of charismatic leadership. This is an interpretation of charisma which provides both the proximate and ultimate explanations which are largely absent from the kinds of theories which have been presented by organizational theorists (see Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013, Yukl, 1999). In the next section we will outline some of the assumptions and supporting evidence that form the basis of an evolutionary hypothesis of charismatic leadership.

1.2. Leadership and followership heuristics

While charismatic leadership represents a novel area of investigation for evolutionary psychology, there is reason to believe that like other leadership and followership behaviors, it is an evolved strategy for coordination that operates via the activation of evolved, context-specific heuristics resulting from recurrent fitness-relevant selection pressures facing ancestral humans (King et al., 2009; Price & Van Vugt, 2014; Van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008). This evidence suggests that humans have an evolved capacity to coordinate their activities with others, and follow particular influential individuals in response to specific challenges (Dyer, Johansson, Helbing, Couzin, & Krause, 2009).

Previous research on leadership emergence has shown that followers are strongly influenced by a range of physical cues, such as the relative height (Blaker et al., 2013) or physical attractiveness of leader candidates (Goktepe & Schneier, 1989; Little, Burriss, Jones, & Roberts, 2007). Followers prefer more masculine leaders in times of war, but more feminine leaders during peacetime (Spisak, Homan, Grabo, & Van Vugt, 2012), and older leaders are preferred in times of stability compared to younger leaders in times of change (Spisak, Grabo, Arvey, & Van Vugt, 2014). Finally, verbal cues such as voice pitch (Tigue, Borak, O'Connor, Schandl, & Feinberg, 2012) also predict leadership emergence in groups. Taken as a whole, this literature suggests that leadership and followership in general rely on the detection of relatively static biological cues to facilitate coordination in group activities. In the following section, we make the claim that charismatic leaders are uniquely effective at increasing prosocial behaviors within a group because they employ verbal and nonverbal tactics which actively *signal* their ability – and willingness – to resolve group challenges.

1.3. Leadership and cooperation

So far we have argued that leadership is a key adaptation that allows human groups to mobilize and respond to the wide variety of challenges that confront them, and that this response often involves rapid and large-scale coordination. In this section we will argue that the contexts in which charismatic individuals are best suited to lead are situations which require group members to behave prosocially, either through altruism toward individuals, or cooperation in the context of group coordination games.

While there is a wealth of evidence suggesting that any form of communication between participants before playing an economic game can have dramatic effects on subsequent behavior (Balliet, 2010; Dawes, McTavish, & Shaklee, 1977), recent work has also demonstrated that there are unique ways in which leadership in general can contribute to cooperation. For example, groups in which leaders act as solitary punishers of free-riders are able to achieve similar levels of cooperation as those in which punishment is done by all individuals, and in fact show greater profits (O'Gorman, Henrich, & Van Vugt, 2009). Leaders can also increase cooperation when given the chance to act as “first movers” in economic games (Cartwright, Gillet, & Van Vugt, 2013).

A brief survey of the evidence from the management literature further suggests that many of the core aspects of charismatic leadership are uniquely effective at promoting prosocial behaviors (though referred to in this literature as “transformational leadership,” see Section 1.4 for further discussion). Transformational leadership has been shown to increase organizational citizenship behaviors – voluntary actions which individuals perform to contribute to overall organizational effectiveness (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990). A recent meta-analysis has also shown that transformational leadership increases team performance more strongly than individual performance, indicating a direct link between transformational leadership and increased interpersonal cooperation (Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011). Indeed, there are a number of psychological mechanisms which have been implicated in the transformational leadership process over the past few decades. *Individualized consideration* on the part of a

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