


Charismatic Leaders: Manipulators, Madmen, or Myth?

A Review of

Charisma

Charles Lindholm

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Reviewed by

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The topics that form the foundation of our field are often shadowed by mysterious "occult doubles" that lurk at psychology's outermost edges. On the flip side of careful analyses of the sensory systems lies the question of extrasensory perception: Can we perceive other's thoughts? Paralleling our efforts to assess personality is the astrologist's horoscope and the palmist's diagnosis of character by appraisal of the lines of the hand. The study of sleep can raise the question of dreams and their utility as forecasts of the future ([Leahey & Leahey, 1983](#)).

Groups that undertake extreme actions under the exhortation of exotic, charismatic leaders (e.g., cults, mobs, crowds, etc.) are social psychological mysteries that fascinate both layperson and researcher alike. Although groups and leaders are so commonplace that they usually go unnoticed and unscrutinized, atypical leaders and their groups (e.g., Jim Jones and the People's Temple, Charles Manson and his "family," Reverend Moon and his Moonies) invite speculation about such questions as, What unseen forces draw people into cults and other extraordinary groups? When does a crowd turn into a violent mob? What mesmerizing powers do charismatic leaders possess that enable them to control their followers? Why do human beings lose their rationality when they are immersed in mobs?

Lindholm's *Charisma* offers answers to these fascinating questions. Lindholm maintains that the awesome influence of great leaders springs from charisma, a term that he uses in variety of contexts, with a plethora of characterizations. Leaders are charismatic when they can capture the hearts and minds of their followers; groups are charismatic when members become bound to them by a "compulsive, inexplicable emotional tie" (p. 6); lovers experience a powerful attraction for one another that is charismatic. Charisma is a relationship that involves the intermingling of the self of the

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follower and the self of the leader, and it is therefore an emergent property of social interaction. Thus, for Lindholm, charisma is a "compulsive, inexplicable emotional tie linking a group of followers together in adulation of their leader" (p. 6).

Lindholm's goal is a challenging one: the extraction of a model of the emotions that can both provide us with a rudimentary paradigm for hierarchizing basic human needs, and allow us to conceptualize the complex historical, social and psychological aspects of the extraordinary experience of selflessness and transcendence that we mean when we say 'charisma.' (p. 8)

After first providing a brief sketch of the topic, Lindholm spends several chapters reviewing the thoughts of previous philosophers, social scientists, and social critics for insights into charisma. The writings of the greater thinkers of the recent past (Hume, Kant, Bentham, Mill, and Nietzsche) are mined for insights into charisma, and the largest nuggets are extracted from Mill's analyses of the exaggerated abilities of the genius and Nietzsche's superman. The superman is, to a large degree, the prototypical charismatic leader: one whose interpersonal genius enables him or her to use others to meet selfish, boundless emotional appetites. Lindholm also considers Weber, Durkheim, Mesmer, Le Bon, and Freud as sources of insight into charisma before presenting detailed case studies of four prototypical charismatic leaders: Adolf Hitler, Charles Manson, Jim Jones, and the shaman of the !Kung.

Charisma follows in the tradition of such classics as Le Bon's Psychologies des Foules (1895/1960) and Freud's Group Psychology and the Analysis of Ego (1922). Eschewing a cold, dispassionate analysis of charisma, he attacks the subject with a vigor that teeters at the edge of the boundary that separates a scientific analysis of social forces from sensationalistic accounts of human perplexities. His prose is both compelling and vivid: "The concepts of cult, charisma, and diabolical evil seem inextricably intertwined" (p. 3); "The soul-destroying world of technical-rational bureaucracy erodes individuality" (p. 33); "Freud and his disciples discovered within the paraphrenic a mental universe of the unconscious that has much in common with the non-rational beliefs and intense desire for self-loss and fusion" (p. 59); "Hitler's charisma claimed permanence and total power for its paranoid avatar" (p. 116); "Charisma and romance are structurally opposed but subjectively equivalent expressions of a deep desire for an ecstatic transcendence of the self in merger with the beloved other" (p. 187). Scholarly yet intriguing, *Charisma* harkens back to an earlier time when social scientists wrote elegant treatises about the most interesting and dramatic aspects of the human condition.

The book also offers a view of charisma that complements a social psychological view of leadership in large collectives. This view, which has roots in both Weber (1921/1946) and Le Bon (1895/1960) maintains that atypical collectives—whether they be sit-ins, mass movements, cults, mobs, or panicked audiences—can be understood in terms of concepts and methods used to understand any type of group. Weber, for example, coined the word *charisma* because he realized that some leaders tend to be virtually worshipped by their followers, but he did not feel that charismatic

authorities actually have unique, wondrous powers; rather, they are viewed by their followers as having unique, wondrous powers. Weber then went on to describe when charisma is attributed to a leader and pinpoint a number of interesting preconditions, for example, displays of vivid emotion and the capacity to infect others with this emotion are crucial, as well as other important qualities. Similarly, Le Bon did not believe that the leaders of most crowds are particularly gifted. Rather, he argued that the social setting of a crowd is an ideal one for a single person to control. With remarkable insight, Le Bon argued that all a mob's leader must do is make clear statements that are easily understood, repeat these statements frequently, and model actions that others can imitate.

The ideas of Weber (1921/1946) and Le Bon (1895/1960) form the foundation of a contemporary social psychological analysis of collective action that contrasts with the view presented by Lindholm. The former school of thought, rather than assume that atypical groups and their leaders require special theories that include novel or even mysterious processes, argues that the madding crowd and its charismatic leader are more myth than reality. Collective behavior is not bizarre but is instead a rational attempt by a number of individuals to seek change through united action. Actual field observations of such movements indicate that members are rarely violent, leaders provide direction through verbal and reasonable interventions, and the groups do not act in a capricious, unpredictable fashion. These groups form, change, and disband following the same patterns that govern development in other groups, and the internal structures and processes of a mob and a group are more similar than different. Leaders of collective groups, if successful, are able to meet the task and socioemotional needs of the groups, and in some cases, they can inspire members by heightening their motivation and commitment to the movement's cause. They achieve these goals not by mind control, hypnosis, or inducing mass hysteria but by persuading, setting examples, clarifying goals, and communicating information clearly.

Clark [McPhail \(1991\)](#) elaborates this viewpoint in his book *The Myth of the Madding Crowd*. McPhail maintains that the classic theorists examined by Lindholm were too biased by their preconceived beliefs that crowds are crazed. He thus bases his conclusions on field studies of actual collective movements that have been carried out in the past few years. His conclusions are threefold: First, individuals are not driven mad by crowds; they do not lose cognitive control! Second, individuals are not compelled to participate by some madness-in-common, or any other sovereign psychological attribute, cognitive style, or predisposition that distinguishes them from non participants. Third, the majority of behaviors in which members of these crowds engaged are neither mutually inclusive nor extraordinary, let alone mad. (p. xxii)

Moreover, although his attention was focused on the crowd rather than its leader, McPhail's rejection of the madding crowd myth can be extended to the notion of a charismatic leader: If crowds and mobs can be understood by taking into account group processes, then their leaders' actions can be understood by taking into account leadership processes. Some leaders, like Charles Manson, may have unique qualities,

but then again virtually all leaders (and all individuals, for that matter) have some unique features that require additional consideration once the basic factors identified by extant theories of leadership have been considered. The leader of a mob is, however, at core just a leader.

Lindholm's *Charisma* thus offers a counterpoint to the dominant theorizing regarding collective behavior. Like Le Bon (1895/1960), and [Freud \(1922\)](#), Lindholm offers numerous insights into the nature of groups and their leaders gleaned from philosophy, turn-of-the-century psychology, and historical case studies of charismatic leaders. Lindholm's analysis reminds us that modern social psychology's roots are in philosophy, sociology, and crowd psychology, and his frank speculations, suppositions, and reflections offer insight into the Napoleons, Hitlers, Joan of Arcs, and their followers. He also asks a larger question: Are some social events, such as charismatic leadership, so unique that to explain them we must step outside the boundary of traditional theories and methods? The answer he offers in *Charisma*, however, is only one answer of many. Whereas Lindholm maintains that existing theories of leadership cannot explain a Charles Manson or a Napoleon Bonaparte, other scholars argue that charisma mystifies, rather than clarifies, the impact of powerful leaders on their followers.

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