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System Rizz: Exploring the Role of Charismatic Authority in Systemic Design

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Abstract

The sociological concept of charisma is often traditionally attributed to Max Weber, who defined it as a distinct quality held by individuals imbued with the aura of divine authority "by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities." Despite traditionally being seen as requiring a human host or conduit, some have made the case that charisma can also be manifest in non-human and non-tangible proxies such as totems, titles or offices, or technology. In today's world, for example, machine learning technologies like ChatGPT and other large language models (LLMs) exhibit characteristics—e.g., the attribution of almost otherworldly powers, cultivating a belief in its abilities and potential that has grasped the popular imagination and inspired an intense followership—very similar to those that have typically been ascribed to charismatic leaders. Charisma's reciprocal relationship to collective belief and its tendency to influence system dynamics position it firmly as a potent force within systems in the form of "charismatic authority", which sits in contrast with both rational/legal authority encoded into laws and traditional authority gained through long-standing belief in adherence to norms. Charismatic authority's emphasis on followership as a central, even essential, attribute—in other words, one cannot be charismatic in isolation—also centres its essence as a distinctly relational force, with some going so far to say that charisma is perhaps less characterized by a leader's actual being or personality than in their followers' collective perceptions and belief in their divinity. These relational and persuasive qualities also suggest that certain functions

within systems might be themselves be described as charismatic, and may therefore reflected in familiar constructs used to conceptualize systems and systems change such as Donella Meadows' leverage points and the iceberg model. Given the roles charisma and charismatic authority are currently playing within and across international geo-political activities and discourse, this exploration is not just theoretically interesting, but timely, suggesting that gaining further understanding how charismatic authority manifests within systems and how its relational qualities impact on judgment, decision-making, and behaviour position it as a system force are highly relevant directions of inquiry for systemic design.

KEYWORDS: charisma, charismatic authority, systemic design, leverage points.

RSD TOPIC(S): Sociotechnical Systems

Introduction

The sociological concept of charisma, attributed to Max Weber, is defined as "…a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber, 1968:48), with charismatic agents being variously described as having magical, mystical, divine, supernatural, ultimate, or vital qualities that result in otherworldly extraordinariness. While casual conceptions of charisma often centre on the charismatic person or agent, Weber further differentiated charisma—which he also saw primarily as an attribute of an individual—from "charismatic authority," or the persuasive force constituted by the relationship between the charismatic individual and their followers (Weber, 1968). This positions charismatic authority not only in contrast with both formalized or bureaucratic rational/legal authority that is typically encoded into laws and traditional authority gained through long-standing adherence to norms, but also as a distinctly relational concept.

Contemporary discussions of charismatic authority have further emphasised the importance of followership, recognising relationality and the communal identity of the collective less as artifacts of charismatic authority than as essential conditions: one

cannot be charismatic in isolation. As such, while charismatic authority is characterized by its ability to "pull" power rather than pushing it through top-down, rational and formal system mechanisms such as bureaucratic rules, hierarchies, or mandates, it may be rooted less in a leader's actual being than by their followers' perceptions and belief in their divine qualities (Willner, 1984). This differentiates charisma from other kinds of relational properties such as reputation, with its more pragmatic, logical incentives for engagement and association (Jordan, 2023). It also centres charisma's essence in the intense force that operates organically and informally between leaders and followers, where the relationship itself is what matters to such an extent that some have suggested charisma's relational and collective nature is not only a required characteristic but its very essence and originating source, without which it cannot exist in the first place (Bellah, 1970; Csordas, 1997; Conger, 1993). As such, instances of charismatic authority may be as much as a signal of its followers' leadership-seeking predispositions and postures as the charismatic person or object's actual leadership qualities, and in some cases the charismatic agent may almost be an opportunistic or convenient conduit for their followers' desire for something to believe in.

Charisma's informal authority over system activities and its distinctive relational qualities also position it as an intriguing but largely underexplored subject in the context of systemic design. This paper takes a closer look at charismatic authority as a component and force within systems: its attributes and manifestations, what additional characteristics render it worthy of taking a systemic view, and how it aligns with common models for describing and activating system behaviours, such as leverage points. It then considers how to take this inquiry forward, pulling from current disciplinary approaches and concepts that promise to help shed additional light on how and when charisma authority functions within systems as well as suggesting potential new directions for theory development and experimentation.

Charisma as a non-human characteristic

Despite traditionally being seen as requiring a human host and manifesting as "qualities, words, actions and products of individual personalities," (Shils, 1965) some have made the case that charisma and the relational dynamic at the core of charismatic

authority can also involve non-human and non-tangible artifacts or proxies in the form of actions, roles, institutions, symbols, material objects, and even social relations (Csordas, 1997; Gell, 1998). Perhaps most obviously, religious images, artifacts and icons are often perceived to embody the same kinds of divine characteristics attributed to charismatic individuals, in which material objects are imbued with power that converts them into totems with charismatic authority. Some institutions and organizations—such as Harvard University, the technology company Apple, or the design firm IDEO—also reflect a kind of charismatic authority, which accrues less due to their specific human leaders or formal mechanisms than through a kind of preternatural aura or perception of eminence. Taken a step further, this sensibility can even be present in disciplines; consider, for example, how the notion of 'design thinking' transcended its original application as a methodological problem-solving approach to enchant the popular imagination with a kind of 'cool' factor rarely associated with more analytical functions like accounting. Under the right conditions, this sense of magnetism can even manifest in nontraditional objects, such as possessions once owned by celebrities or uniforms and equipment used by athletes; taken to the extreme, it can occur in perverse forms such as Cheetos if a collective disposition and belief in their specialness becomes sufficiently widespread (Smithsonian, 2025).

Ames (2019) has persuasively argued that technology can be charismatic, using the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) initiative spearheaded by MIT leaders in the early 2000's to illustrate how the laptop's charismatic authority channelled the alluring (if largely unfulfilled) promise that students from developing countries could unleash their latent coding abilities and imaginations (Ames, 2015; Ames, 2019). Today, machine learning technologies like ChatGPT and other large language models (LLMs) exhibit similar charismatic features in their almost otherworldly power to seamlessly and confidently (if often inaccurately) deliver answers and their ability to inspire a devoted followership. The science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke famously declared that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic"; indeed, the hold that LLMs currently exhibit on some individuals may rest far less in their logical appreciation of the technology than in the perception that they are conversing with an otherworldly intelligence, whose ability to quickly pose convincing responses to their queries demonstrates almost uncanny acts of magic.

This not only reflects Ames's position that that charismatic authority is not uniquely a human trait, but also that charismatic authority may exist less because of the object itself than its underlying promise: "the material form of a charismatic technology is less important than how it invokes the imagination" (Ames, 2015:2). However, dissociating charisma's material form from its effect and centring those effects in imagination over logic suggests that the sustained power of charismatic authority may partly rely on cognitive dissonance, in which true believers suppress or dismiss evidence that might be contrary to the imagined promise represented by the charismatic object. This is further reinforced by the behavioural finding that people often act emotionally, rationalizing their actions after the fact (Loewenstein et al., 2001); in the case of LLMs, for example, our delight in their ability to deliver fully formed answers with seemingly effortless efficiency and creativity—magic!—can too easily allow users to view their hallucinations, shockingly high energy consumption, and problematic issues regarding legal ownership of IP as reasonable trade-offs.

Magical health cures have also long been an arena for heightened or illogical—yet frequently rabid and widespread—beliefs characteristic of charismatic authority. The promise of laetrile as a cure for cancer in the 1980s and Ivermectin as a miracle drug for Covid and other present-day ailments, for example, both gained impassioned followers despite claims for curative properties more founded in conviction than evidence-based data (Lerner, 1981; Reis et al., 2022). Whereas previously hucksters could sell willing customers hope in a bottle to supplement what science could not yet address, the DIY nature of today's charismatic health care cures is at once anti-establishment but also deeply conservative in its disbelief of elites. Indeed, advocates for charismatic alternatives often lay claim to credibility that explicitly and deliberately lies outside the mainstream, and where followership is steeped in "one of us" in-group membership (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). As such, a lack of traditional evidence is not seen as a flaw to true believers; rather, rebellion against the establishment takes a form of group identity in which commitment to an unproven, anecdotal therapy and irrational trust in unorthodox treatments against the advice of experts is, arguably, a selling point.

Charismatic authority's ability to hold outsize influence over a population's perception and response to choice through questionable claims or perceptions of value can also be

seen in the energy sector. It is increasingly recognised, for example, that indoor use of gas stoves has negative effects on the environment and poses increased potential health risks to inhabitants (Kashtan et al., 2023; Gould et al., 2023). Despite widespread and compelling data that has fed municipal policies preventing the installation of gas ranges in new builds, however, the persistence of charismatic attributes—evoked by the metaphorical second life of the advertising slogan "now we're cooking with gas"—has allowed gas ranges to maintain a hold even on homebuyers who barely cook, causing them to extol gas as classy and gourmet while distaining electric ranges as both less effective and less sophisticated (Lane et al., 2024). Where some cultures have a pragmatic, logical preference for gas ranges—such as cooks in the Cantonese tradition, who see the high heat and char only possible through gas as a necessary factor in achieving wok hei ("breath of the wok" (Wong, 2020)) in Western cooking cultures this perceived supremacy of gas ranges remains more emotionally charged than evidence-based. As a result, even homeowners well aware of the environmental and health dangers of gas often display an illogical attachment to their gas ranges that ticks all the boxes of charismatic authority: magical abilities, followership, and irrational belief. However, the energy sector also provides an intriguing case of what might be considered anti-charisma: nuclear power. Despite nuclear energy's potential as a relatively safe, renewable, cost-effective, and efficient source of energy (Ritchie & Rosado, 2020), the data that might support a rational argument in its favour tend to be no match for peoples' visceral reactions and emotional associations with the fraught legacies of Hiroshima, Chernobyl, and Three Mile Island. In an inversion of charismatic authority's ability to draw support through narratively compelling, if light-on-evidence positions, the illogical but strongly held perceptions against nuclear power consistently win out, ultimately making its storyline as an energy villain nearly impossible to shake.

Finally, charismatic authority can also manifest in more whimsical, but no less potent, forms. During the faddish crazes of Tickle-Me-Elmo in the mid-1990's and Cabbage Patch dolls in the early 1980's, hordes of customers queued, shoved, and sprinted their way to acquiring children's toys that were culturally inflated to a point of charismatic authority and whose hold on consumers' imaginations far outweighed their actual value (Turner, 2005; O'cass & McEwan, 2004). As with the previous examples, this pursuit was grounded less in the merchandise itself than an infectious belief this this particular

material good signified status and represented a paragon of parental love and caregiving. At its peak, this craze reached a level of communal near-psychosis that seems absurd in retrospect; the fact that these dynamics just as quickly dissipated demonstrates both the irrationality and temporality of charisma's authority and power.

Charisma in systems: Navigating complexity and framing functions

Any instance of charismatic authority, whether channelled through technology, healthcare, energy, or children's toys, is not an isolated event; rather, each takes place within a system of exchange and beliefs, in which qualities of followership, relationality, and emergence occur in a context of system dynamics and relationships. This suggests that further unpacking charisma's characteristics—its future-facing persuasive qualities, how it emerges and dissipates, and its tendency to simplify complexity—through a systemic lens can help us both understand the phenomenon and develop better approaches with which to diagnose and analyse those conditions.

Charismatic authority is an active, future-facing, persuasive force

Charismatic authority is typically positioned as an activating force that is both persuasive and future-facing, which emerges and coalesces around a charismatic vision or agent that is then bolstered and maintained by followers. This places it in contrast with traditional leadership, which typically takes the form of top-down or codified structures and follows a predictable path through events. Instead, charismatic authority tends to gain its momentum more from implicit agreement and emergent, bottom-up activities that pull more from collective identity and a desire to disrupt the status quo than logical deliberation or adherence to rules. In other words, charisma relies on the potential for change—the possibility or promise of action—to motivate, rather than leaning on explicit mandates or directives (Ames, 2015). Charisma's power within systems is therefore often intangible, gained experientially and symbolically and bolstered through the mindsets and social norms shared by other followers. As a result, charismatic authority can both establish how meaning is constructed and how purpose is instantiated within systems, which draws energy from a communal commitment to that shared language and mindset once it is established (e.g., the use of "MAGA" as a

centre of gravity for its followers). In other words, charisma is not merely an expression of the magnetic relationship between leaders and followers; when that shared vision gains strength, it can become a mechanism to reshape their very perception of reality.

It is often temporary; after arising, it dissipates or becomes codified

Despite the strong, often fervent, belief held by charismatic authority 's followers, charisma can also be strangely transient; some have noted both charisma's tendency to arise as a response to acute crises, and its propensity to dissipate either after the crisis has passed or when promises made during those crises fail to materialize (Milosevic & Bass, 2014; Bligh, et al., 2004). However, the actual nature of any given crisis or perception thereof may be almost secondary to the emotional sensation that it generates. While in retrospect the Tickle-Me-Elmo fad may have seemed over the top, for example, at the time the importance of acquiring this red Muppet undoubtedly felt genuinely and urgently motivated by a deep-seated, if highly irrational, perception that a failure to procure one would be evidence of one's inadequacies as a parent. While we might, with the benefit of logical 20/20 hindsight, be hard-pressed to legitimize getting one's hands on Elmo as an actual crisis, this retroactive view may not fully recognise how conspicuous consumerism and status-based consumption influenced parents' judgement and behaviours at the time, nor how these heightened emotions felt appropriate in the moment (Turner, 2005; O'cass & McEwan, 2004). This reinforces charismatic authority's position as a force that is not only relational, but highly situated and time-dependent (Weber, 1968; Milosevic & Bass, 2014); it also only further underscores the importance of contextualizing instances of charismatic authority to understand the specific qualities that characterized their attraction.

Finally, it has been noted that, in some cases, a release from charismatic authority may occur less due to a change in followers' beliefs than because the charismatic ideologies that initially seemed new and disruptive eventually became normalized and subsumed into standard operating procedures and structures. For example, a mere year after LLM's splashy entrance in November 2023, conversation had already shifted to a more pragmatic focus on how to integrate and manage its use in classrooms and professional settings. As such, while LLMs and their kind continue to maintain a charismatic hold

(and commensurate pushback), this shift provides another indication of how charismatic authority can be simultaneously rebellious and conservative (Ames, 2015).

It often reflects an urge to simplify the complex

Unlike the more predictable and rational forms of authority gained through traditional convention or an assigned office, charismatic authority's extreme hold on its followers tends to be emotionally rather than logically or hierarchically driven. Where Weber suggested that this dynamic reflects a persistent, ongoing tension between society's rational and irrational forces, others have also posited that this urge may be particularly heightened in situations of overwhelming complexity that resist logical analysis or are otherwise difficult to navigate (Weber, 1968; Milosevic & Bass, 2014). It does not seem a stretch, therefore, to suggest that part of charismatic authority's appeal may result from our human tendency to gravitate towards elegantly simple explanations (a la 'the divine') over the hard work of grappling with complexity, and further that that one powerful aspect of charisma lies in its ability to "provide direction and conviction, smoothing away uncertainties and helping us handle contradictions and adversities" (Ames, 2015:3) in a way that feels comforting in its preordination. Just as the 'great and powerful' Wizard of Oz's authority collapsed as soon as all the work required to maintain his image behind the curtain was revealed, charisma's power may thus be partly predicated on hiding or denying the work required to maintain the perception of wonder. Charismatic authority's keen ability to substitute clarity for nuance may therefore be its strongest selling point, one which is particularly appealing under conditions of uncertainty or during crises characterized by the potential for great change. In these cases, an appeal to charismatic authority that offers a retreat to the known in a world that is changing too quickly can represent a very attractive counterpoint to feelings of confusion or desperation.

Charisma's relation to system design models and frameworks

Charisma's temporal and relational qualities and its relationship to navigating complexity collectively reinforce its relevance to systemic design, and further that exploring charisma through systems frameworks, such as leverage points, might shed

useful light on how system conditions support or inhibit the emergence, maintenance, and dissipation of charismatic authority.

Originally conceived and defined by Donella Meadows, the notion of leverage points—places in a system that hold outsize influence over system operations, where small adjustments can yield disproportionate change (Meadows, 2008)—expanded upon Jay Forrester's recognition that effectively changing how a system works requires intervening at the right point, and further that some points tend to be more effective than others in initiating meaningful change (Forrester, 1971). These are commonly expressed in ascending order or potency, from the lowest-leverage functions that deal primarily with adjusting parameters, to those focused on feedback and system structures, to the highest ones that are concerned with the very paradigms that define the system's conceptualization, goals, and functions (Table 1).

12 Constants, parameters, numbers (e.g., subsidies, taxes, standards)
11. Size of buffers and other stabilizing stocks relative to their flows
10. Structure of material stocks and flows
9. Lengths of delays relative to the rate of system change
8. Strength of negative feedback loops relative to what they are trying to correct
7. Gain regarding driving positive feedback loops
6. Structure of information flows (who does and does not have access to what kinds of information)
5. Rules of the system (e.g., incentives, punishments, constraints)
4. Power to add, change, evolve, or self-organise system structure
3. Goals of the system
2. Mindset or paradigm out of which the system—its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters—arises
1. Power to transcend paradigms

Table 1. Summary of Donella Meadows' twelve leverage points, in increasing order of effectiveness (Meadows, 2008)

It is perhaps not surprising that higher-level instances of leverage points, which are naturally more concerned with relational dynamics and intangible sources of power such as mindsets than accumulated assets, might align with charismatic qualities. For example, charismatic authority is tightly tied to—and, as discussed above, in some ways explicitly characterized by—the emergent self-organisation of followers (4), in which the source of its power arises from populist alignment rather than as a top-down mandate. Similarly, we can see how a paradigmatic mindset that frames and shapes the system's goals (2) might be reflected in a charismatic leader-follower dynamic and belief system, with its tendency to promote activities that resonate on an emotional, identity-driven frequency rather than a more 'rational' and logical sensibility associated with adherence to existing rules or structures. Finally, the ability to achieve paradigmatic transcendence as a means to reset or reorient a system's purpose (1) aligns with charismatic authority's disruptive qualities, which often arise with the explicit intent to jar systems out of the status quo and the norms under which they have traditionally operated.

The alignment of charismatic authority and foundational system conditions can also be seen in other system frameworks and constructs such as the 'iceberg model' popularized by Senge or Kania et al's Six Conditions of Systems Change (Senge, 1990; Kania et al., 2018). In the former case, where visible components (e.g., branding, products, language) outwardly represent key aspects of organizational culture, the more hidden, "underwater" functions represent deeper but more implicit influences on organizations that are more reflective of charismatic authority's core attributes. For example, while the elements of structure and strategy sit below the surface, imposing influence in more implicit ways, the characteristics most aligned with charismatic authority—identify, beliefs, and values—occupy the most deeply seated tier of system forces. The Six Conditions of Systems Change, by contrast, focuses less on external properties of organizations and more on hard and soft infrastructural characteristics. While more traditional forms of authority tend to be rooted in explicit and pragmatic

system structures such as policies, practices, and resource flows, charismatic authority is clearly more aligned with the model's mid-tier relational qualities, such as relationships and connections or power dynamics, and the transformative but often highly implicit domain of mental models, beliefs, and unspoken ways of operating.

The observation that charismatic authority tends to germinate at these deeper and more implicit levels suggests that the value of studying charismatic authority within a systemic context might extend beyond analysing evidence of charismatic instances once they have already blossomed to studying what infrastructures and conditions allow it to originate in the first place. It also reinforces that charismatic authority's implicit, identity-driven nature is not just relational but ideological in its ability to shape how value is conceived, as well as how meaning is constructed and maintained within system contexts at an infrastructural level. This notion that power and privilege are often embedded into infrastructures that can subsequently shape judgement, decision-making, and behaviour has been recognised by systems theorists, and feminist and antiracist critics (Constanza-Chock, 2020; Dombrowski et al., 2016). This is no less true in the case of charismatic authority, which represents a 'soft' form of infrastructure that manifests as informal and socially oriented forces, and yet which may actually yield more forceful influence on followers' values and behaviours than traditional or visible 'hard' infrastructures common to more top-down, traditional forms of power. As a result, the relational nature of charismatic authority and its basis in a sense of shared identity essentially both creates the social infrastructure and feeds the sense of communal in-group/out-group dynamics that holds it in place (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

Charismatic authority's ideological nature also allows it to frame how system goals and the relationships between components are perceived and how they are valued (Vedeler, 2018). This not only influences how individuals behave; it also contributes to establishing and reinforcing their mindsets about what actions might be seen as desirable, or even viable, within that system. The use of language and metaphor to frame reality can provide insight into how ideology plays a role in establishing and maintaining this delicate agreement. It is well known that metaphors are more than mere semantic descriptors that reflect a specific perspective; rather, they are frequently used to suggest or implant mental models and mindsets that generate a lens through

which individuals and communities perceive, or even conceive of, reality (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008; Schon & Rein, 1995)[1]. For example, employing a factory metaphor to describe an organisation—eliciting notions of manufacturing efficiency, mechanistic processes, and workers as fungible components prone to breaking down that can be easily replaced—presents a very different conceptual frame for relationships and relational dynamics compared to the use of a garden metaphor, with its implicit emphasis on cultivation, organic growth, and cyclical change. As such, it imposes an entirely different context within which people view themselves, their relationship to others, and possibilities for how they collectively operate. This suggests that examining the operational metaphors inside organizations or systems that dictate how individuals and systems within them function—essentially, analysing which mental models and language hold current belief systems in place, and how alternatives resulting from emergent charismatic forces might counter those assumptions—can also potentially give insight into the nature of systemic charismatic authority and inform hypotheses about where and how charisma exists or is likely to emerge.

Proposals for future inquiry into charismatic authority in systemic design

Designing with charisma in mind to address system challenges may require finding new mechanisms for understanding how charisma and the effects of charismatic authority affect system components, relationships, and networks. It also indicates the value of new approaches and methods that can help systemic designers more confidently determine how system structures might enable charismatic authority's emergence and what conditions allow it to flourish, fade away, or be absorbed into system structures (Milosevic & Bass, 2014).

The development of more systematic ways to diagnose and analyse charismatic authority may be especially useful given suggestions that charisma has a heightened tendency to emerge or be exacerbated during times of crisis. Just as the ability to gauge

[1] Indeed, Meadows' use of the terms "leverage *points*" and "*places* to intervene" are metaphorical in their use of spatial language that elides the temporal nature of leverage, and which can overlook the importance of temporality and emergence with respect to systems interventions.

atmospheric conditions can give advance notice of incipient severe weather before it is upon us, the ability to sense early warning signals indicating that conditions are ripe for charismatic authority to surface or wane can provide a heightened capacity to predict, prepare for, or navigate it when it occurs. Building on insights and methods from other disciplines can therefore help boost our understanding of how charisma operates within systems and determine if or when the need to intervene might be warranted.

Given the implicit and identity-driven nature of charismatic authority, qualitative data collection methods—such as ethnographic interviews and observations—can play a key and clear role in this effort due to their ability to capture dynamics both amongst individuals and over time (Milosevic & Bass, 2014). For example, narratives such as case studies or histories that reflect a temporal arc from multiple perspectives promise to provide a multi-dimensional and insightful view on the origins and natural arc of charismatic authority. Ames' descriptive narrative of the history of One Laptop Per Child's development and the implications arising from its implementation provide one such compelling example of how a historical narrative and case study can complement one another (Ames, 2019).

Alternatively, understanding how charismatic authority waxes and wanes may also benefit from new mechanisms and methodological inquiries into system dynamics. Recent efforts to develop a more systematic approach to leverage point analysis, for example, have focused on methods for analysing the relational nature of systems and mechanisms for system change by identifying phenomena such as bottlenecks, signals, and goal phenomena that can be then used to characterize connections between system components and inform interventions (Murphy, 2022; Murphy & Jones, 2020). By applying insights from graph theory to analyse systemic connections and feedback loops, these approaches promise to contribute both rigor and conceptual language that can support further exploration of charismatic authority. Additionally, when employed in combination with the more qualitative approaches described above, these diagrammatic and structured analysis tools also promise to help suggest potential new ways for exploring the more informal mechanisms through which charismatic forces can take hold within organizations (Murphy & Jones, 2020). This approach jives with other forms of network analysis designed to identify empirically demonstrated patterns

where secondary or tertiary influences may hold more sway, such as in social and friend networks (Newman, 2003; Fowler & Christakis, 2007).

Leaning into charisma's psychological aspects and its characteristic abilities of persuasion and influence over individuals' judgement, decision-making, and behaviour also suggests that the study of charismatic authority within systems might also benefit from the lens of behavioural science. While behavioural science has traditionally focused primarily on achieving individual behavioural change through relatively direct and well-defined interventions (often known as the design of "choice architecture" (Thaler et al., 2013)), more recently there has been a surge of interest in bringing a systemic design into the fold, particularly in the context of organizations or complex systems challenges such as humanitarian and global development (Diaz Del Valle et al., 2024). Combining methods and insights from strategic design, behavioural science, and systemic design, this emergent set of approaches promises to offer new forms of insight into how behavioural design can analyse and shape system conditions via designing "choice infrastructure"—or the system 'plumbing' that allows systems to function—in the form of standards, infrastructures, and culturally appropriate processes that indirectly support emergent communal and system behaviours to augment individual behavioural change (Schmidt, 2024).

Advocates for building new capabilities that incorporate a behavioural systems view have also begun to specify quantitative and computational approaches for analysing inter-entity relationships, interactions, and exchanges in addition to the entities themselves, with the goal of overcoming disciplinary tendencies to focus on individual actors and parts of the system as sole units of problem-solving and solutioning (Diaz Del Valle et al., 2024). While no single approach has yet to become the disciplinary standard, their consistent use and combination of qualitative data (e.g., community and expert interviews), traditional systems methods (e.g., causal loop diagrams), and computational approaches such as agent-based modelling and the use of AI may suggest still newer ways to both analyse and diagnose instances of charismatic authority and how to use these insights to generate more effective interventions and solutions.

Conclusion

Taking forms as diverse as religious icons, technology, healthcare, politics, and consumer goods, the notion of "charismatic authority"—which transcends individual magnetism and instead takes shape as a potent, relational dynamic between the charismatic agent and their followers—has the potential to wield a powerful force within systems through its emergent, galvanizing, and persuasive nature. Further still, its relational and ideological characteristics are well-aligned with work already of interest to systemic design, echoing aspects of familiar system frameworks such as Meadows' leverage points and the iceberg model. This suggests that closer investigation and explanation of what conditions are ripe for charismatic emergence and how charismatic authority, once established, can be alternately maintained or navigated therefore is worthy of further attention and analysis in the context of systemic design.

This effort can also benefit from identifying what strategies might be best situated to address certain key questions: What conditions are more likely to provide a fertile ground that encourages charismatic authority to germinate and flourish? Is the primary purpose of identifying conditions ripe for the emergence of charismatic authority based on the ability to see how crises give rise to charismatic authority or to defuse those crises? Given the organic nature of charisma, when is it even appropriate to intervene in those conditions, or further still to actively uproot or implant them?

Finally, it should be noted that charismatic authority is, at its heart, agnostic; just as there is no shortage of examples of individuals who have employed charisma both for positive ends (e.g., Gandhi, Joan of Arc) and nefarious ones (e.g., Charles Manson, Jim Jones), systemic charisma and charismatic authority can just as well support elegant, beneficial system operations as ones that wreak havoc or cause dysfunction. In its capacity to be both disruptive and conservative, it also can play a somewhat unique role in balancing common tendencies to keep unhealthy systems stable for fear of being replaced by something worse with the urge to instigate reinvention at scale. Recognising that categorizing any outcome as "good" is relative, this suggests the importance of recognising the difference between charismatic authority that works for the good of the charismatic agent and their followers versus that with the potential to benefit the overall system and its participants more broadly.

We currently live in a time when we can see charismatic authority working at the highest levels of power and political activity in countries around the world, in which mental models and mindsets are shaped by identity-driven and relational dynamics and where disruption to the status quo is seen as a desirable end, even if it upends stability (indeed, for some its appeal lies in its ability to do so). We also live in a world where technology, progress, and efficiency are increasingly imbued with the glow of charismatic authority, even while research demonstrates that, without care, they may threaten to reinforce and amplify known biases, reduce our ability to engage in critical thinking, and increase inequity by concentrating power in unsustainable ways (Ledford, 2019; Neumann et al., 2023; Eubanks, 2018). The value of studying charisma within systems contexts is therefore more than just theoretically interesting or an overlooked opportunity to develop models and frameworks to further the maturity of systemic design, but arguably renders this inquiry compelling and even urgent.

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