CHARISMA AND LEADERSHIP IN THE WORKS OF NORBERT ELIAS

Aleksejs Šņitņikovs
Riga Technical University, Latvia

Abstract. *Norbert Elias has used the concept of charisma to explain the phenomena of rule, leadership and group domination. In developing his interpretation of charisma, he critically analyzed Max Weber's texts and applied it within his developmental, processual and figurational approach. He derived from the works of Weber the concept of group charisma and interpreted it as a universal social phenomenon. Elias considered charismatic leadership as a social situation, in which a leader's individual charisma is fused with group charisma. Individual and group charisma are explained partly as social and psychological phenomena of individual and collective identities and partly by historically determined belief systems. Linking charisma to identity brings Elias close to Durkheim's conception of religion. In Elias's interpretation, the phenomenon of charisma is related to idealized individual and collective self-images. Manifestations of charismatic claims on the group level, on the one hand, are attributions to one's group the qualities of special grace and self-praise, and on the other hand, the prejudiced attitudes to other, excluded groups. The phenomena of group charisma and group disgrace are observable in the established-outsiders power relationships. Elias's interpretation of charisma complements the existing conceptualizations in social psychology and sociology.*
Keywords: *charisma; collective self-image; established-outsiders relationships; group charisma; leadership; self-ideal.*

Introduction

Norbert Elias's views on charisma have not yet been examined and related to the research on charisma which has been produced since Max Weber introduced this concept in social sciences. The literature on charisma at present is extensive. It may be grouped into studies which apply the concept of charisma on a macro level to institutions and large-scale collectivities and research which focuses primarily on charismatic leadership. In 1960's and 1970's there appeared macro-sociological theories which used the concept of charisma. Important contribution was made by the sociologist Edward Shils who put forward the theory of the center of society and charismatic qualities of social institutions (Shils, 1982). In Shils's interpretation, the

essential feature of charisma is its quality of "extraordinariness"; the source of this extraordinariness is the presumed connection of persons, actions, roles and institutions with the "ultimate", "fundamental", "vital", order-determining powers (Shils, 1982, p. 110). Shmuel Eisenstadt followed Shils with respect to interpretation of charisma and its significance for the development of society's institutional order (Eisenstadt, 1968, 2003). Since early 1980's the interest in the concept of charisma in sociology waned, even though it periodically reemerged (Turner, 2003; Adair-Totteff, 2005) and has been applied in research on political leadership and nationalism (Pfaff, 2002; Breuilly, 2011).

From 1980s the notion of charisma was taken up by organizational theorists. There were introduced the concepts of transformational and charismatic leadership. Leadership began to be understood as a nuanced psychological process whereby the leader arouses motivation and changes the perception of work and self-concepts (identities) of the employees. There was established distinction between managers and leaders. The manager fulfilled administrative functions of achieving short-term, operational objectives and maintaining of standard job behavior on the part of the employees, but the leader challenged the status-quo, created a future vision for the organization and promoted changes in the followers' values and attitudes (Conger & Kanungo, 1998, p. 8). Shamir and colleagues put forward a theory that charismatic leaders produce transformational effects on the followers' motivation by influencing their self-concepts. Charismatic leaders tie the followers' self-concepts, their identities, to the organizational goals and collective experiences, so that the organization's mission becomes part of their self-concepts (Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993).

Elias's use of the concept of charisma was not limited to leadership. Like Weber, Shils and Eisenstadt he applied it also on macro-social level, to institutions and societies. But unlike these authors' approach, Elias's perspective was free from neo-Kantian underpinnings. It was more similar to social-psychological approach employed by organization scholars. He considered that charismatic phenomena can be understood as mobilization of social energies through idealization of individual and collective self-images and goals. In accordance with his figurational and processual approach, he investigated particular historical conditions which are conducive to the rise of charismatic leadership and group charisma; and he discovered that phenomena of group charisma and group disgrace accompanied particular established-outsiders power relationships between social groups. This combination of sociological, historical and psychological categories, which is a mark of Elias's work in general, produces a distinct perspective on charisma capable of providing new insights to the existing research. Selective literature review has been performed for this paper in order to identify major developments in the field of the

research on charisma and charismatic leadership and to locate Elias's contribution and limitation of his approach.

Elias's critique of Weber's approach

Elias was critical of Weber's methodological individualism and considered that it was rooted in his personal individualist convictions. He considered that Weber's concept of charisma was partly influenced by his individualism and belief in the role of great men. Weber's concept of charisma, especially in its earlier versions, according to Elias, contained magical-mythical elements and was in this sense somewhat ambiguous and pre-scientific. For, in some writings Weber defined charisma as an extraordinary quality of a person regardless of whether it is real or supposed or imagined. From this definition it was not clear, whether Weber in fact believed that charisma is indeed an extraordinary and unexplainable quality or it was a belief of the individuals that they had been graced with exceptional faculties. In later formulations Weber defined charisma in a more interactionist and constructionist manner as a quality which is *evaluated* by people as something out of the ordinary and on account of which a person is assessed as having super-natural, super-human or at any rate extraordinary powers. In this way Weber distanced himself from his personal attachment to individualist values but they remained implicit in his notions of group charisma. In his writings on religion of India Weber put forward an idea, found also in his other works, that *Gentilcharisma* (which is often translated as "clan charisma": Weber, 1968, p. 194) originated in the process of routinization of personal charisma of war leaders, based on their "purely personal magical qualifications". Elias considered that Weber's reflections on relationships between personal and group charisma are potentially fruitful and not fully explored. In his own works, however, Elias, following his figurational approach, was avoiding individualist tendencies of Weber's thinking. Rather, he conceptualized charismatic leadership as a certain *figuration*, in which some individuals in particular social circumstances take up characteristic leadership roles. He made an outline of the notion of charismatic leadership in his book *"The Court Society"*, discussed it in a short article *"The charismatic ruler"* and further elaborated on some aspects of relationships between individual and group charisma in his study on the Germans.

Charismatic leadership

In *"The Court Society"* Elias compared charismatic leadership to a conservative ruler, such as a king of the age of absolutism. Charismatic ruler rises to power in a situation of social upheaval, when there is imbalance in society, disturbance of normal life. The individual who assumes the role of the leader is confronted with extraordinary tasks and by performing them proves his 'charisma'. His supporters are fighting their way up together with the leader and tend to become extraordinary themselves (Elias, 2006, p. 132). This central group of followers becomes a charismatic group. It has to be a cohesive group of supporters capable of directing their action outwards to society in one direction, with the aim to conquer it. The charismatic ruler has to unite the interests and goals of the central group of supporters, suppressing the conflicts and rivalries. The ability to accomplish this task distinguished the charismatic ruler (Elias, 2006, p. 133).

The charismatic leader and his group operate in the social field which is shattered from balance. Calculated behavior is far less possible than in the state of stability. The charismatic leader and his followers venture to what is unpredictable, they have to take risks. They often put forward new ideas comparing to those prevalent in their social field. They try to break through the established attitudes and habits. Elias considers that this situation produces uncertainty and stress in the charismatic group which their members conceal by the faith in the special grace of their leader, his 'charisma' (Elias, 2006, p. 133). The faith of the followers that the leader is led by an invisible hand is a feature of all types of charismatic rulers. Because the charismatic group distances itself from the prevailing power relationships, rules and forms of behavior, authority is exercised by the charismatic leader in personal manner. Decisions on recruitment or advancement are based on evaluation of personal qualities. The charismatic group also develops a particular defence mechanism toward the outside world. This includes devaluation of the ties with social groups to which the followers where previously attached and strengthening of identification with the charismatic leader, the central group and the mission. The charismatic leader, in contrast to a leader in a more stable setting, does not control his followers primarily through administrative apparatus. The leader exploits the need of the followers to rise together with the leader, to reach the set goal, but the way to control them is through personal dedication to the goal and the faith in the leader. The leader has the conviction of his ability to carry through the set goal and bring the group of the followers to success; and the leader is able to pass this conviction to his followers: "This ability and this conviction are the real substance of the belief in his charisma" (Elias, 2006, p. 136). In his article *"The charismatic ruler"* Elias states that charismatic leaders indeed possess the gift of

convincingly presenting themselves as bearers of new truths and revelations and persuading others of the verity of their teaching. He takes the risk of acting in unpredictable circumstances and tries new ways of doing things. The ability of mastering uncertainty and unpredictability also constitutes his charisma. If they succeed, they are attributed with exceptional qualities by contemporaries and historians. The authority of charismatic leaders is precarious and contains certain psychological dangers for the leaders and their followers. After first success their conviction may become combined with the feeling of their omnipotence (Elias, 2008, p. 166). The charismatic leader may partially lose the sense of reality. In negative cases, such as Hitler, charismatic leadership relates to a certain form of psychosocial pathology, an overestimation of one's potential, a delusion of grandeur. The visions of such a leader are instigated by the delusive sense of one's omnipotence and inflated ego. But this delusion of grandeur is also shared by the followers, the leader's audience. Shamir considered that charismatic leaders consciously boost their followers' sense of 'self-efficacy'. Elias refers to properties of crowd behavior, when people acquire the feeling of heightened power, which can be intensified to the sense of omnipotence. This feeling is reinforced by the belief in infallibility of the leader: everything that he undertakes must succeed (Elias, 2008, p. 169). Elias on the example of Nazi movement points to the dangers of charismatic rule. Under the influence of charismatic rule and the collective mood of extraordinariness the traditional forms of conscience may crumble, people may lose their normal sense of self-control and perpetrate crimes which they would not commit in usual circumstances (Elias, 2008, p. 168).

In his book *"The Germans"* Elias provides an in-depth historical-sociological analysis in order to understand, how the German people became susceptible to such form of rule. The answer is to be sought, according to Elias, not just in a short-term constellation of political and economic factors of 1920s and 1930s but in a long-term process of state formation of Germany. Elias notes that this process is marked by discontinuities and long period of fragmentation, as well as by military defeats and territorial losses. Relatively soon after unification in 1871 Germany suffered defeat in the First World War. Discrepancy between continuing identification of Germans as one people and relative weakness of the state contributed to a "dream-like character of the German self-image" (Elias, 1996, p. 320). On the one hand, the experience of fragmentation and disunity produced among Germans a longing for a strong leader (Elias, 1996, 318). On the other hand, the Germans by then had not developed democratic political culture; on the contrary, they had a long authoritarian-state tradition which influenced the formation of the we-ideal of the Germans (Elias, 1996, p. 341). Centuries-long tradition of authoritarian rule contributed to the rigidity of German national beliefs and ideals (Elias, 1996, p. 325). There was a wide gap

between the national ideals and the reality. As a result, the Germans developed a more strongly exaggerated we-ideal than other nations, for example, the British (Elias, 1996, p. 327). The Germans, as a consequence, developed in their national character a tendency, a yearning for the spectacular, the experience of the extraordinary (Elias, 1996, 326). These factors can explain their desire for an ideal, true community, the dream *Reich* (Elias, 1996, p. 327)*,* which National Socialism promised to bring to reality. The rigidity and exclusiveness of their exaggerated ideals and beliefs made a large part of German society during the Third Reich impervious to reasoned arguments (Elias, 1996, p. 330). Elias called this 'black idealism', as its constructive elements were massively overwhelmed by destructive and barbaric aspects (Ibid).

Following his figurational approach, Elias was cautious not to overstate the role of the single individual, the leader in the history of Nazism. As he pointed out, leaders are not simply the "farther figures" of social movements: "In order to be accepted, they have to correspond more or less to a leader-image which belongs to the tradition, the culture of those whom they which to lead" (Elias, 1996, p. 343). Leaders of social and political movements rather give the expression and form to the common beliefs, doctrines and goals of the group (Elias, 1996, p. 343). But leaders in situations of social crises can increase the trend towards radicalizing people's beliefs and convictions, and reinforce the demands on people's consciences. The leader can push forward the dynamics of escalation of collective fantasies and hubris and to induce enmity to out-groups.

Group charisma in established-outsiders relationships

Elias introduced the concept of group charisma in the book *"The Established and the Outsiders"*, which he wrote together with John Scotson (Elias & Scotson, 1994). This book represents a community study of a suburb of Leicester. In this study the authors attempted to answer the question, why delinquent behavior occurred predominantly in a particular part of this suburb. In course of this study they found out the whole suburb was divided in three parts. Zone 1 was populated by well-to-do middle class, Zone 2 was populated by industrial working class, which inhabited this area for several generations; and the Zone 3 was populated by the working class families who moved into the area relatively recently. Delinquent behavior was more frequently observed among people living in Zone 3. Researchers point out that there was no significant difference between the inhabitants of Zone 2 and Zone 3 in terms of class, occupation, ethnicity or income. But families living in Zone 2 were more cohesive and organized, they had formed friendships, kinship relations and common norms of behavior. When new families from other parts of England moved to this

suburb, the inhabitants of the Zone 2 excluded them from their circle of informal communication and sociality. They felt that these newcomers did not follow the informal norms of conduct and did not try to fit into the established social life of the community. By using the channels of informal communication and personal connections they ensured that all community positions in local authorities and associations would be secured to the inhabitants of Zone 1 and Zone 2 to the exclusion of the people from Zone 3. Thus the established – outsiders figuration was formed in this suburb. This figuration was continuously reproduced by what Elias called "praise gossip" and "blame gossip". Through the praise gossip the inhabitants of Zone 2 created and maintained the positive collective self-image of themselves. By using blame gossip they maintained the negative image of the inhabitants of Zone 3. The positive self-image was created by stressing the qualities of the minority of the best among the families in Zone 2. The negative image of the outsiders was formed by emphasizing in the informal communication the negative qualities of the minority of the worse of people from Zone 3. The practices of creating positive collective self-image and self-praising are what Elias referred to as group charisma. Collective idealizations, putting forward idealized we-images serve the function of strengthening of dominant group cohesion vis-à-vis the outsiders. Through the praise gossip the group created the belief in one's own charisma, superiority, as a leading, established group. It is gratifying for the individuals to have consciousness of belonging to a group with the higher value.

In blame gossip the negative image of the outsiders' group was vastly exaggerated and untrue (Elias & Scotson, 1994, p. 101). Because of its stronger power position, the group of inhabitants of Zone 2 was able to establish their opinion and discourse as dominant and the people living in Zone 3 were unable to change it of effectively to hit back.

Generalizing analytically the data of their research Elias put forward the ideas that powerful groups usually form of themselves heightened positive collective self-images and represent themselves as "better" people than those who are powerless. The established groups in their collective fantasies want to represent themselves as possessing a kind of special grace. They usually praise themselves as having better mores, better human qualities, as observing higher standards of behavior, and blame the excluded groups as being normless, disorderly and "bad". It also follows that the outsiders should not be accepted as equal social partners and should not be dealt with except when it is unavoidable. Stigmatization of the group of outsiders creates an emotional barrier against closer contact with them (Elias, 1994, xxii). The effects of creating and maintaining the negative images of other groups Elias called "group disgrace". The malignant consequence of these practices is that the excluded groups, the outsiders, may indeed incorporate in their self-image parts of the negative

representations of them by the established groups. Such incorporation of the negative traits into their self-image may have anomic effects on the members of outsider group. Furthermore, excluded from access to important social resources, these groups may indeed fail to raise their children to socially acceptable standards of behavior and education.

Elias contended that established-outsiders figuration can be observed in various social contexts, on different levels, historical epochs and geographical areas. For example, aristocratic groups of different civilizations, as noted by Weber, claimed that they possessed *Gentilcharisma*, a hereditary group charisma that legitimized their dominance (Weber, 1968, p. 194). Similar phenomena, according to Elias, can be seen in racial, ethnic, class relationships, as well as in the relationships between the states and blocs of states. Because he saw the phenomenon of group charisma and group disgrace as a function of power relationships, he considered that this situation can be effectively changed with the shift of power balance. When groups' power ratios are very uneven, the practices of the established group toward the outsiders are particularly harsh and unrelenting. But when inequality diminishes, the capacity of the established group to hit the outsiders decreases and their blame practices lose their sharpness.

In stressing factors of collective life and group situations in his conception of charisma Elias is closer to Durkheim than to Weber. In contrast to Weber, Durkheim considered that the primary source of human capacity to idealize is collective life. Collective ideals tend to become individualized and then personal ideals may become an autonomous source of action (Durkheim, 2001, p. 318). According to Durkheim's theory, the feelings of veneration, awe and sanctity observed in religious rites of "primitive" peoples are called forth by the impression of individual's belonging to the collectivity (Durkheim, 2001, p. 241). In order to recreate themselves, to renew their "we"-feeling, simple societies periodically gather together for collective rites and ceremonies. Durkheim considered that these collective rites and ceremonies, by involving the members of the group in a common action arouse among the people the feelings of increased vitality, effervescence and the sense of extraordinary, the sacred. Collective celebrations through mutual psychological stimulation of individuals produce "exaltation of moral life", creation of idealized images of society, that is, idealized collective self-images. According to Durkheim, it brings forth aspirations towards the good, the beautiful, the ideal (Durkheim, 2001, p. 315-316). Formation of an ideal is a natural product of social life (Durkheim, 2001, p. 317). Collective representations are different from the reality – they are imaginative and often "delirious" (Durkheim, 2001, p. 172). Durkheim's ideas on ritual and collective effervescence have been applied in the study of social-psychological effects of group charisma on individuals (Cariton-Ford, 1992). Durkheim's ideas

relating to creation of representations from concentrated collective life can be seen as complementary to Elias's study of collective we-images and group charisma. But unlike Durkheim, Elias studied group charisma in industrialized, secular and stratified state-societies.

In pre-industrial era devotion to *a priori* creeds, collective idealizations were found in many religious movements. From the beginning of the 19ᵗʰ century such collective idealization and devotion to collective creeds becomes especially characteristic of national movements and nation-states. National symbols possess "emotional radiance and strength", endow collectivities with "numinous qualities" and in some situations arouse feelings of sanctity and awe (Elias, 1996, p. 147). Nations-states profess and promote beliefs in their charisma, their special endowments, their peculiar merits. Every individual's "I", according to Elias, is tied to a wider group's "we", which in modern world predominantly is represented by the nation-state, national identity: "Every individual member of a nation can participate in this group charisma" (Elias, 1987, p. 103). In the situation of danger nation-centered beliefs and ideal ensure individuals' exclusive emotional identification with their own side (Elias, 1987, p. 98). Elias saw the danger in such high emotionality of thinking, affective involvement on the level of nation-states in the modern world. This makes one perceive the world entirely in terms of the hopes, wishes and fortunes of one's group. Exposure to dangers which the states or blocs of states continuously represent to each other can set in motion the circular movement of high affectivity of thought. The states can lock themselves in a situation of the *double-bind*, when one side's suspicion and fears provoke other side's responses and threats, which further escalate mutual fears and eventually can lead to war. Societies repeatedly find themselves trapped is such situations and the problem is that there does not exit such power in the world which can control the struggles between powerful states and prevent the escalation of double-bind dynamics (Elias, 1987, p. 98). Elias considered that humanity had not yet learned to control such processes, but, generally, he saw the way out from the double-bind situations in achieving higher levels of emotional detachment and diminishing the affectivity of thinking.

Conclusion

Elias's conceptualization of charismatic leadership has certain similarities with research in social psychology and organization studies. As in Elias's works, contemporary social psychological theories emphasize the leader's influence on the followers' self-concepts, collective identities and linking these to collective goals, missions and visions. More generally, Elias shared with this research interactionist approach, which followed from his relational perspective, and interpreting charisma

largely as a phenomenon of attribution by the followers. Elias's treatment of charisma as collective phenomenon has common points with Durkheim's theory of religion. The group of the leader's supporters tends to become "charismatic". But Elias has also included elements of Weber's theory of "routinized" charisma, as he links charisma with the group's position of power. From this part of Weber's writings Elias derived the concept of group charisma and applied it to various social contexts.

Elias's contribution may be seen as twofold. First, he pointed to the relational character of charismatic attributions of the group. The established group attributes to itself good and exceptional qualities, and ascribes to itself possession of the gift of special grace. At the same time the group often engages in creating and promoting the negative image of the outsider's group. Group charisma and group disgrace were seen by Elias as complementary. Elias has demonstrated that this as a general sociological and psychological phenomenon. Second, in his study on the Germans Elias attempted to determine the historical conditions which facilitated the emergence of a type of charismatic rule of Nazi regime. Elias was aware of the innovative character of this kind of historical-sociological explanation and admitted its partly hypothetical character. But it can be taken as a ground for further research of charisma which has to employ historical-comparative method of research.

In his writings on charismatic leadership, group and national charisma Elias pointed to the "shadow" aspects of these phenomena. Collective illusions of charisma, in his opinion, are an example of emotionality of people's thinking due to their involvement in social processes, where they are exposed to uncertainties and dangers stemming from humans themselves. Realistic orientation and paying attention to power struggles between social groups was part of his sociological theory. Crafting his concepts in this way he tried furnish social analysis with the instruments for making accurate diagnoses of different social situations and problems. Like Freud's psychoanalysis, these are also capable of producing sobering effect.

But the limitation of Elias's approach to charisma can be seen in his neglect of considering the personality traits of charismatic leaders as an important factor. Elias avoided sustained discussion of personal qualities of a charismatic leader. More recent research seeks to explain charismatic leadership as a combination of personality traits of the leader and characteristics of the situation (for example: Oreg, Bernson, 2015). This research is based on the general assumption that human behavior has to be explained by interaction of persons and situations. Paradoxically, this approach revives, in a modified way, an earlier treatment of charismatic leadership in Weber's writings.

References

Adair-Totteff, C. (2005). Max Weber's Charisma. *Journal of Classical Sociology*, *5*(2), 189–204.

Breuilly, J. (2011). Max Weber, charisma and nationalist leadership. *Nations and Nationalism*, *17*(3), 477-499.

Cariton-Ford, S.L. (1992). Charisma, Ritual, Collective Effervescence, and Self-Esteem. *The Sociological Quarterly*, *33*(2), 365-387.

Conger, J.A., & Kanungo, R.N. (1998). *Charismatic Leadership in Organizations*. London: Sage Publications.

Durkheim, E. (2001). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eisenstadt, S.N. (1968). Introduction. Charisma and Institution Building: Max Weber and Modern Sociology (ix-lvi). In: *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building*. Selected papers, edited and with an introduction by S.N. Eisenstadt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Eisenstadt, S.N. (2003). *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities*. Parts I and II. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Elias, N. (1987). *Involvement and Detachment.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Elias, N. (1994). Introduction: A Theoretical Essay on Established and Outsider Relations (xi-lii). In: N. Elias & J. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders.* London: Sage Publications.

Elias, N. (1996). *The Germans.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Elias, N. (2006). *The Court Society.* Dublin: Dublin University Press.

Elias, N. (2008). The charismatic ruler. In: *Essays II: On Civilising Processes, State Formation and National Identity*. Collected Works, vol. 15 (164-169). Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Elias, N. (2009). Group charisma and group disgrace. In: *Essays III: On Sociology and the Humanities*. Collected Works, vol. 16 (73-81). Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Elias, N., & Scotson J. (1994). *The Established and the Outsiders.* London: Sage Publications.

Oreg, S., & Berson, Y. (2015). Personality and Charismatic Leadership in Context: The Moderating Role of Situational Stress. *Personnel Psychology*, *68*(1), 49–77.

Pfaff, S. (2002). Nationalism, Charisma, and Plebiscitary Leadership: The Problem of Democratization in Max Weber's Political Sociology. *Sociological Inquiry*, *72*(1), 81–107.

Shamir, B., House, R., & Arthur, M.B. (1993). The Motivational Effects of Charismatic Leadership: A Self-Concept Based Theory. *Organization Science*, *4* (4), 577-594.

Shils, E. (1982). *The Constitution of Society.* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Turner, S. (2003). Charisma Reconsidered. *Journal of Classical Sociology, 3*(1), 5–26.

Weber, M. (1968). Max Weber on charisma and institution building. Selected papers, edited and with an introduction by S.N. Eisenstadt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.