Leadership to defeat COVID-19

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Abstract

Defeating COVID-19 will not happen only via efforts of scientists working on vaccines or new treatments and interventions. Key to winning this battle is to convince citizens to take the needed precautions and to follow scientific advice to stop the spread of the virus and to protect those who are vulnerable to it. Thus, leaders, especially political leaders, play a critical role in coordinating the efforts of individuals who often have private interests to act as they wish, but who expect to benefit from the efforts of others who contribute to the public good. To deal with this unprecedented challenge, I discuss the importance of leadership—particularly charismatic leadership—which is well suited to solving problems in situations of ambiguity and crisis. I also exhort researchers to pay more attention to studying leadership using robust and causally identified-designs that can inform policy.

Keywords: COVID-19; leadership; charisma; science; endogeneity

In the beginning of 2020, it felt like the planet was put in a big dark box, then pummeled by an invisible, invincible enemy. Nobody has escaped the consequences of COVID-19, which has had a dramatic impact on the world economy, our social functioning, and our health. We see a substantial portion of the world's population reigned by confusion, fear, and despair; yet, many of our world's co-citizens display an inexplicable and unabashed—even cavalier—attitude toward the virus and its consequences.

Beyond the importance of medicine, epidemiology, and economics, insights from psychology including leadership are key to solving this grave threat (Kniffin et al., 2020). Still, some suggest that leaders are a socio-romantic construction and do not matter; psychoanalytical aficionados believe that leaders are merely a projection of infantile "transference." Such positions are not worthy of commentary given that in these times one conclusion is crystal clear to laypeople and scientists alike: Leaders in charge of resources and potent policy levers make strategic choices that have real and lasting consequences on the functioning of social systems (see also Abrams, Lalot, & Hogg, 2021, for further discussion on intra- and intergroup dimensions of COVID-19). Who the citizens have sent to wield power at the highest echelons and how much discretion these leaders have largely determines country level outcomes; the causal evidence is indubitable whether at the country (Jones & Olken, 2005) or firm level (Bertrand & Schoar, 2003). Yet, are the world's leaders facing up to their responsibilities?

The fatality rate of COVID-19 is close to 1%, making it about ten times as deadly as seasonal influenza (Beck & Aksentijevich, 2020); it has, as well, lingering consequences on survivors (e.g., Puntmann et al., 2020). Also, despite good evidence that physical distancing[1] (Tsai, Harling, Reynolds, Gilbert, & Siedner, 2020) and mask wearing (Peeples, 2020) reduces the

[1] I use the term "physical distancing," which is more accurate than the misnomer "social distancing" (individuals may still be socially close and have frequent interaction even from a physical distance).

spread of the disease, why do so many individuals not follow the sound advice of scientists (Thorp, 2020)? How can leadership help to get us out of this economic, social, and epidemiological quagmire?

The public good is under attack

Leaders, can, though their signaling and choices, align and coordinate disparate actions of individuals and help solve public good problems (Antonakis, Bastardoz, Jacquart, & Shamir, 2016; Antonakis, d'Adda, Weber, & Zehnder, 2020; Bastardoz & Van Vugt, 2019). Leadership of this sort is urgently needed especially in light of the challenges we face today. Consider for instance these three observations:

1. physical distancing guidelines are not uniformly followed, whether as a function of socioeconomic status (Weill, Stigler, Deschenes, & Springborn, 2020) or geographic location (Zang, West, Kim, & Pao, 2020). See also Kashima, Dennis, Perfors, and Laham (2021) for further discussion of cultural differences in the handling of COVID-19.
2. individuals, unprompted to reflect, are likely to share false information about COVID-19 on social media at an almost equal rate as they would true information (Pennycook, McPhetres, Zhang, Lu, & Rand, 2020)
3. only about 50% individuals in the U.S. intend to get vaccinated against COVID-19 (Tyson, Johnson, & Funk, 2020); skepticism rates in some European countries are also high with only 60% of French citizens indicating they would be willing to get vaccinated, versus about 80% in the U.K. or Denmark (Neumann-Böhme et al., 2020). See also Rutjens, Van der Linden and Van der Lee (2021) for further discussion on science skepticism during COVID-19.

The current situation is very troubling given the growth of COVID-19 infections all over the world. Why are citizens not acting rationally and contribute to the public good? Why such

distrust in science (Thorp, 2020) and growing skepticism (e.g., in Australia, on receiving COVID vaccines: Rhodes, Hoq, Measey, & Danchin, 2020)? Although scientists are being admonished to join in the battle against misinformation (Fleming, 2020; Thorp, 2020), I believe that efforts to thwart the disease will not be fruitful unless political leaders exert their influence, promote what science has to say, clearly communicate evidence-based policies, and then role model desired actions. Scientists have a role too by being more vocal, particularly in social media (Tur, Harstad, & Antonakis, 2020). But, all efforts will come to naught if leadership is not exercised by the gatekeepers of information and power.

Leadership: The spearhead

Leadership can work from close and far. Leadership has a large impact whether via social media, which is an important outreach in the current milieu (Tur, et al., 2020), or from close up (Antonakis, et al., 2020). One aspect of leadership that I have been studying intensely over the last decade with my coauthors is charisma. We have conceptualized charisma as signaling in a value-based, symbolic, and emotional manner (Antonakis, et al., 2016); this approach makes it amenable to unbiased measurement in situ, as well as manipulation (Antonakis, Fenley, & Liechti, 2011; Jacquart & Antonakis, 2015; Tur, et al., 2020). We have evidence too that individuals can learn to be more charismatic (Antonakis, et al., 2011). This approach to social influence is theorized to work via several channels; by making the message vivid and easy to remember, making the mission and raison d'être salient, increasing identification with the leader, and inducing individuals to act in ways that benefit the collective (Antonakis, et al., 2016).

Carefully controlled experiments, even where participants are exposed to charismatic speeches via video, show that leaders can get individuals to exert costly efforts to a level that is equivalent to economic incentives both in the lab (Meslec, Curseu, Fodor, & Kenda, 2020) and in the field (Antonakis, et al., 2020). Charisma and other means of leader communication can also

mitigate the free rider problem (Antonakis, et al., 2020; Boulu-Reshef, Holt, Rodgers, & Thomas-Hunt, 2020). This problem refers to the social dilemma in public good situations, where it is in the interest of everyone to voluntarily cooperate and contribute selflessly to protecting the public good. Acting selfishly by not contributing to the public good, though benefiting from it, creates what is called a "free rider" problem.

Especially now, individuals have a private incentive to flout rules and restrictions; yet they wish to benefit from the actions of others who do follow the rules. The same goes for vaccination; selfish individuals do not vaccinate themselves or their children but benefit from the actions of others who do vaccinate. However, if everyone acted selfishly the public good would break down. Because leaders can affect individuals' beliefs about the morality of costly actions (Bénabou, Falk, & Tirole, 2018), the need for leadership, especially the kind that can coordinate actions of citizens via non-legal means is critical. If leaders have tools to create situations where individuals will shed their selfishness and contribute to greater good then is it not their moral duty to use them? It is now that leaders must show their mettle, and to show the way out of this bleak situation; François Holland, for instance, who was not deemed to be particular charismatic, did show his worth after France was plagued by terrorist attacks (Bastardoz, Monney, Tur, & Antonakis, 2018).

Although evidence is accumulating in the lab—in conditions that use very strong counterfactuals—the million dollar question is this: Is there evidence for an effect of leadership, or indeed charisma, in the current pandemic? We are writing up data now wherein we find that U.S. governors who are charismatic can help mitigate the effect of COVID-19 (Jensen et al., 2020). In this study, we modeled governors' speeches over time—and hence we could account for between governor differences in charisma (i.e., the fixed-effect)—and automatically coded the speeches by computer for the governors' use of verbal charismatic signaling tactics (Garner,

Bornet, Loupi, Antonakis, & Rohner, 2019). The outcome variable was the proportion of individuals that stayed at home following the speech, as measured by the actual location of individuals based on mobile phone data. Governor charisma mattered, regardless of the regression specification we used to identify the effects. Such results mimic what we have found previously with respect to charismatic leadership, whether exercised by formal or informal leaders, having very strong effects on outcomes (Tur, et al., 2020). These effects are especially pronounced in times of attributional ambiguity (i.e., when performance signals associated with the leader at country or firm level are not clear, see Jacquart & Antonakis, 2015) and crisis (Bastardoz, et al., 2018). It is in these situations where followers turn to leaders to look for hope, reassurance, and cues for where to invest their efforts.

Research in the COVID and post-COVID era

In these shambolic times, we see why leadership is so relevant. However, what is even more important is to first understand and correctly model the causal forces on which the phenomenon operates; it is only via properly identified causal designs that policy can be informed. Here, however, leadership and psychology research in a general sense have a lot to do in two aspects:

1. Observational studies, whether cross-sectional snapshots or longitudinal, are riddled with endogeneity bias (i.e., confounded because of omitted causes); alarmingly, in multiple surveys of the literature we have found that most reported results are false (Antonakis, Bastardoz, & Rönkkö, 2019; Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2010; Fischer, Dietz, & Antonakis, 2017). Researchers using field data need to up their game and use designs that are robust and allow for causal claims to be made (Sieweke & Santoni, 2020).
2. Experimental studies are often not consequential, overusing vignette (hypothetical) designs or placing participants in information conditions having no first or second order costs; as such, much of the experimental research is potentially driven by demand effects

and has little policy implications (Lonati, Quiroga, Zehnder, & Antonakis, 2018; Sajons, 2020). Moreover, our field has not done enough to experimental test leadership effects in the field (Eden, 2020).

Scientists in our field must take these issues seriously, because the quality of our lives and the survival of the planet are at stake. They must conduct science that is robust, consequential, and ideally relevant to practice (of course basic research is important too but it takes more time to work its way into practice). Thus, we as scientists and educators have a role to play in this endeavor by ensuring that graduates are properly trained. Journal editors and reviewers also have to hold research to a higher standard akin to that in the medical sciences. We do not have much of a choice here because given growing populations and population densities, as well as increased global travel and connectivity means that viral pandemics will become more frequent (Bedford et al., 2019; of note is that this article was published a couple of months before COVID-19 was on the world radar). There is a clear urgency to better understand the causal effects of leadership.

Conclusion

Leaders make a difference, whether in terms of affecting preferences or beliefs of followers (Antonakis, et al., 2020) or role-modeling desirable actions (Eisenkopf, 2020). They also shape social values. If leader values are not desirable in the long run (e.g., xenophobia, science denial), as is the case with populist leaders (Bursztyn, Egorov, & Fiorin, 2020), then we will be in for a very difficult ride. All the more why citizens, institutions, and selectors should take the duties seriously and propel to office leaders who are not only competent, but also skilled communicators, charismatic, and evidence driven.

As the Corona fog clears, I trust too that scientists will see why they need to study leadership with the same urgency and energy they study molecules, vaccines, and interventions;

simply put, leadership is an effective weapon that must be added to our arsenal to fight viral pandemics.

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