Charisma, Conductors and the Affective Communication Test

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The following study analyzed results of ensemble conductors of the Big-10, Big-12, and Pac-10 athletic conferences (N = 96) taking the Affective Communication Test (ACT) of nonverbal expressivity or charisma. Results indicate that conductors fall into two ‘clusters’ of charisma – those that appear to be lower than the general population norm and those that score significantly (p < .01) higher than the norm. Further analyses revealed a trend for men to score higher on the ACT than women but no differences in charisma scores between conductors of choirs, orchestras, and wind bands. There also appears to be a weak, yet significant, trend (r = .28, p < .01) for conductors with higher charisma to believe more strongly in the importance of a conductor’s charisma.
The art of conducting has seemingly always been linked to a conductor’s charisma. Leonard Bernstein, whose larger-than-life personality created a lasting image of the modern conductor, was widely praised for his charismatic podium antics. Harold Schonberg (as cited in Bowen, 2003, p. 253) wrote “The conductor … above all must have … the mysterious thing known as projection; the ability to beam his physical and musical personality forward into the orchestra and directly backward into the lap of every listener of the audience. All great conductors have a remarkable power of projection.” Carl Flesch (1958) added that “When all is said and done, conducting is the only musical activity in which a dash of charlatanism is not only harmless but absolutely necessary (p. 23).” However, there is scant evidence of any existing link between conductors and personal charisma other than in the subjective eyes of performers being conducted and the audience in attendance. The present study seeks to find quantifiable evidence of whether conductors of college musical ensembles share a common charisma that is significantly different than the general population. It furthermore examines whether there are differences in charisma based upon sex of the respondent, the type of ensemble they principally conduct (band, choir, or orchestra), or how important they perceive charisma to be.

Charisma is commonly considered an individual’s ability and need to motivate, lead, or educe the dedication of others. The study of charisma has long had quantifiable difficulties, principally stemming from two factors: conceptual ambiguity (what charisma actually is) and the lack of a standard and well-suited measuring tool. To this end, Friedman, Prince, Riggio, & DiMatteo (1980) designed the Affective Communication Test (ACT) to measure “individual differences in expressiveness” (p. 333). The researchers hypothesized that expressiveness is the essential trait of those people with exemplary charisma; those people able to motivate, move,
enthuse others. The ACT takes the form of a pencil-and-paper, self-report evaluation consisting of 13 questions. Subjects indicate the degree to which each statement is accurate. For example, one item asks “At small parties, I am the center of attention” while another asks “I dislike being watched by a large group of people” (Friedman et al, 1980, p. 335). Based upon a sample of undergraduate volunteers \( N = 289 \), the ACT was found to have an internal consistency of .77 and a test-retest reliability (over a two-month time span) of .90 \( (p < .001) \). This consistency and reliability led Friedman et al. to the conclusion that the ACT was a valuable tool for determining the expressivity of an individual or a group. Having established baselines for mean scores \( M = 71.3 \) and standard deviations \( SD = 15.2 \) for individual expressivity, Friedman et al. began examining various subsets of society. They found expressivity related significantly to the success of lecturers, perceived political charisma, acting (both training and experience), the choice of future occupation, and success of those employed in sales. They further concluded that the core notion of ‘charisma’ can be identified through the concept of expressiveness.

Friedman and Riggio followed up their original ACT study (1980) with an exploration of how individual variation in nonverbal expressivity produces change in emotion in others through social communication (Friedman & Riggio, 1981). Volunteers \( N = 81 \) filled out a series of ‘mood scales’ to determine their pretest disposition. Following a treatment in which three volunteers (one scoring high on the ACT and two scoring low) were left alone for a period of two minutes wherein they were instructed to sit, face each other, but not speak, a second series of mood scales was administered. Freidman and Riggio found that the scores of the unexpressive people changed significantly more \( (p < .05) \) than the scores of the expressive people. Also, the researchers found that the mood of the unexpressive people significantly changed \( (p < .05) \) to imitate the mood of the expressive people. Sullins (1991) replicated the Friedman and Riggio
study (1981) and confirmed their results. These studies suggest that the nonverbal expressivity of a more charismatic person is an important factor affecting the spread of influence of emotion.

Hensley (1986) utilized a modified version of the ACT, the ACT-10, to explore possible differences between genders in ability to decode (judge) and encode (express) nonverbal cues. ACT-10 data collected from college students ($N = 130$) were analyzed for three variables: interpersonal display effect, public display, and small group display. The results of the analysis upheld two important hypotheses: (1) a person’s anxiety when communicating verbally inhibits that person’s ability to communicate nonverbally and (2) because females are superior to males at decoding nonverbal codes, they score higher than males on the ACT self-reports. Hensley also found a lack of nonverbal encoding ability to be a significant correlate of communication anxiety for males and females.

Since its original development and application, the ACT has been employed in a variety of other psychological and interdisciplinary studies. Through application in a number of resultant experiments, the ACT has led to a more sophisticated perceptive of the notion of expressiveness. Riggio and Friedman (1983) used the ACT in an examination of naïve observers’ ability to detect nonverbal behavioral cues displayed when deceiving and telling the truth. DiMatteo, Shugars and Hays (1993) studied dentists’ reported occupational, personal, and mental stress. Joshi and de Grace (1985) explored the effects of long-term unemployment on a person’s affective communicative ability. Keith and Gresso (1997) used the ACT in their study of leadership behaviors in training leaders at 57 Fortune 500 companies. Riggio and Woll (1984) employed the ACT in their explorations of factors dictating likability and attractiveness in video dating. The ACT has been an important facet in other research involving a Social Skills Inventory (Schleicher, Day, Mayes, & Riggio, 2002), subjective athletic performances
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(Totterdell, 2000), handshaking and first impressions (Chaplin, Phillips, Brown, Clanton, & Stein, 2000), and emotional intelligence (Davies, Stankov, & Roberts, 1998; Law, Wong, & Song, 2004). The reliability and flexibility of the ACT lends itself to a variety of research avenues and within the context of the present study, in an appropriate tool for data collection.

Woodbury (1955) was one of the first researchers to formally explore personal and leadership characteristics of professional conductors. He sent a survey to orchestral performers ($n = 103$) and professional conductors ($n = 12$) regarding the importance of 19 specific traits. While charisma and expressiveness are not directly included in Woodbury’s list, terms such as “self-confidence,” “sincerity,” and “human understanding” are all represented in the top five responses for necessary traits. Vallo (1999) developed a different survey to determine traits perceived as valuable in instrumental music teachers. The survey was delivered to instrumental music teachers and students ($N = 200$) who were asked to rate 27 traits organized into three categories: personal, musical, and pedagogical. Again, while charisma is not attended to directly, “assertiveness,” “commanding presence,” “communication ability,” “self-confidence,” and “self-discipline” were all considered to be important qualities for conductors. Lawrence (1989) examined personal, musical, and teaching characteristics of choral teachers and found personal qualities such as “unlimited energy,” “enthusiasm,” “acting skill,” “self-confidence,” and “interpersonal skills” to be directly related to successful teaching. Kemp’s study (1996) on the psychological personalities of different musicians found conductors’ internal interpretation of musical scores to be a hallmark of a true introvert. However, Kemp also found music students studying conducting in higher education outgoing, adventurous, and group-oriented. Kemp suggests that conductors need to display characteristics of both introversion and extroversion.
Tendency towards either will result in a very different approach to leadership qualities in rehearsal.

An area which may be related to teacher charisma that has been explored repeatedly, particularly in conductor-based research, is teacher intensity. Madsen and Geringer (1989) defined this intensity as "a global attribute that is used to describe sustained control of the student-teacher interaction evidenced by efficient, accurate presentation and correction of the subject matter with enthusiastic affect and effective pacing” (p. 90). Yarbrough (1975) first employed intensity (which was used interchangeably with magnitude) as a variable in her study of the effects of conductor behavior on musical ensembles. The use of intensity as a variable in conducting and music teaching has continued through the research of Byo (1990), Cassidy (1990, 1993), Colwell (1995), and Duke & Madsen (1991). More recently, Yarbrough and Madsen (1998) examined effects of teacher intensity on teacher evaluation in choral rehearsals and found intensity to correlate strongly with “enthusiasm,” “effectiveness,” “performance quality,” and “overall effectiveness.”

“Impulse of will” may represent another factor related to a conductor’s charisma. Elizabeth Green (1997) used impulse of will to describe the more intangible characteristics of conductors; explaining that “When the impulse of will is strong and the technique is secure, then the ensemble truly has a leader who can unify the musicianship of all into one secure interpretation” (p. 13). Based upon Green’s description, Yontz included “impulse of will” as a dependant variable in his 2001 study of the effects of Laban training on novice conductors. Yontz defined this variable as “the conductor’s ‘personality’ being displayed in his conducting” (p. 45).
The purpose of this study was to examine conductor charisma on a self-reported survey (the ACT). The specific research questions included the following: (1) Is there a difference between conductor charisma and the charisma of the general population as a whole? (2) Do differences exist in charisma among conductors based upon sex and principal ensemble conducted? (3) What is the view of conductors regarding of the overall importance of charisma?

**METHOD**

Data were collected with a mailed survey. This survey included 17 items divided into two sections. The first section included the original 13 items taken directly from the Friedman et al. Affective Communication Test (1980). The second section featured four questions designed to elicit relevant professional information including: (a) the responder’s sex, (b) the type of ensemble the responder principally conducts, (c) whether the responder had performed at any national music conferences, and (d) the responder’s belief in the importance of a conductor’s charisma. Of the 215 surveys that were mailed to every ensemble conductor in the Big-10, Pac-10, and Big-12 athletic conferences. These schools were selected because of their different geographical locations, variations in size of their music departments, and presence of several well-established schools of music. Ninety-six responses were received (45% response rate). Data were collected from April 1, 2008 through May 1, 2008.

All survey items were represented either by Likert-type scales or through simple categorical items. All Likert-type scales were scored on a range from -4 to +4 based upon how accurately the responder felt each item described their personalities. All scores had five points added resulting in a final range of 1-9. An example of one Likert-type scale is presented below:
When I hear good dance music, I can hardly keep still.

Not true of me  -4  -3  -2  -1  0  1  2  3  4  Very true of me

The additional survey item “I believe that charisma is an important quality in a conductor” was presented in the same Likert-type format. Each survey was accompanied by an explanation of the study, a consent letter, and an anonymous self-addressed envelope for return to the researcher. It was estimated that the survey would take less than five minutes to complete. Data was analyzed using SPSS statistical software.

RESULTS

Overall ACT scores

The initial descriptive statistics for the collected ACT scores indicate results ($N = 96$, $M = 79.5$, $SD = 14.1$) similar to the general population as described by Friedman et al. (1980) ($N = 311$, $M = 71.3$, $SD = 15.2$). An independent samples t-test reveals no significant differences between the two groups. However, an examination of a bar graph generated from the collected data (see figure 1) displays that there are actually two populations represented; one scoring lower than the norm and one scoring considerably higher. In order to better represent both populations, a K-Means Cluster Analysis was applied specifying two clusters. This procedure revealed a high cluster ($n = 46$, $M = 92.0$, $SD = 7.6$) and a low cluster ($n = 50$, $M = 68.0$, $SD = 7.0$).
independent samples t-test was conducted to explore charismatic differences between the two clusters. There was a statistically significant difference between the two groups \( t (96)=16.16, p<.01 \). The effect size, calculated using eta squared was .74, a very large difference between groups based upon Cohen’s (1988) measure of effect sizes; small = .01, medium = .05, and large = .12. The total population of conductor’s can indeed be divided into two groups of people – those with lower charismas and those with higher charismas. According to Friedman et al. (1980), the ACT has excellent reliability (.90). In the current study the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .71.

Scores of each cluster were compared to the Friedman et al. (1980) published mean scores for total general population. An independent samples t-test of the high charisma cluster and general population revealed a significant difference between the groups \( t(355) = 9.70, p < .001 \). The magnitude of the differences in the means was large (eta squared = .19). An independent samples t-test of the low charisma cluster and general population revealed no significant differences \( t(359) = 1.52, p = .13 \).

**Differences in ACT by sex and ensemble conducted**

Differences in ACT scores by sex represented another facet to the present study. While male conductors \( n = 78, M = 80.8, SD = 14.3 \) scored higher on the ACT than females \( n = 18, M = 73.8, SD = 14.1 \), an independent samples t-test comparing charisma scores by gender revealed a trend for male conductors being more charismatic than female conductors \( t (96) = 1.37, p = .17 \). While not statistically significant, this is particularly interesting in light of the
findings of Friedman et al. (1980) that females tend to score higher than males on the ACT ($M = 72.6$ vs. $69.1$ respectfully).

Another variable examined in the study was differences of ACT scores based upon the type of ensemble conducted by an individual. Scores were found to be consistent among band conductors ($n = 38, M = 78.4, SD = 16.7$), choir teachers ($n = 38, M = 78.6, SD = 13.2$), and orchestra teachers ($n = 20, M = 83.2, SD = 14.1$). A one-way ANOVA comparing charisma scores with the principal ensemble lead by each conductor revealed no significant differences among the three groups [$F (2,94) = .85, p = .43$]. There appear to be no differences in the charismatic qualities of choral, orchestral, or wind band conductors.

**Relationship between ACT scores and Importance of Charisma**

The relationship between perceived importance of charisma and conductors’ actual charisma was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity. There was a small but significant correlation between the two variables [$r = .28, n = 96, p < .01$] with higher perceived importance of charisma associated with higher levels of personal charisma. It is important to note that both clusters’ reported significantly high mean scores for their belief in the importance of a conductor’s charisma. The mean score of members in the high cluster was $8.30 [t(46) = 56.99, p < .01]$ while the mean score of the low cluster was $7.79 [t(48) = 60.46, p < .01]$. An independent samples t-test comparing the importance of charisma between members of the high cluster and the low cluster revealed that the high cluster
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demonstrated a significantly higher belief in the importance of a conductor’s charisma \( t(96) = 2.65, p = .01 \). The magnitude of the differences in the means was moderate (eta squared = .06).

### Discussion

The results indicate that ACT scores of ensemble conductors divide the total population into two clusters. One cluster represents conductors that are significantly more charismatic than the norm, the other represents conductors that are below (but not significantly below) the norm. In the present study, the lower cluster represented 52% of the total participants while the higher cluster represented 48% of participants. It appears that charisma is not a common feature to all conductors represented by this survey. This casts an interesting light upon Kemp’s findings (1996) that conductors’ must possess characteristics of both introversion and extroversion.

Further examination of the ACT results found no significant differences between the sexes of the participants. While there appears to be a trend for male conductors to be more charismatic than female conductors, the relatively low number of female participants \((n = 18)\) compared to males \((n = 78)\) may not be an accurate representation of the total population of female conductors. When comparing conductor’s ACT scores by ensembles, no significant differences were found among band, orchestra, or choral conductors.

The perceived importance of a conductor’s charisma was an important factor in the present study. All participants found a conductor’s charisma to be an important factor in the success of a conductor \( t (95) = 80.40, p < .01 \). This offers convincing evidence of a perceived important relationship between a conductor and charisma. A small but significant positive relationship exists between a conductor’s personal charisma and their belief in the importance of
a conductor’s charisma. It appears that more charismatic conductors feel that at least part of their conducting abilities can be attributed to their personal charisma.

Because the present study contains a strong element of exploration, it generates more questions than it answers. These questions could form the basis of several related research studies, for example, comparing behavior of high-cluster conductors with low-cluster conductors might tease out some very important differences between the two groups. Such a study could provide insight into how different conductors approach their craft. A different study comparing the two groups of conductors’ rehearsal strategies (both in preparation and in action) may be of particular value. As was stated earlier, two variables that have been used in previous conductor-based experiments were ‘teacher intensity’ (Byo, 1990; Madsen & Geringer, 1989; Yarbrough, 1975) and ‘impulse of will’ (Green, 1997; Yontz, 2001). A study comparing conductors ACT scores with an individual’s ‘teaching intensity’ or ‘impulse of will’ may help define these terms and find correlations or trends between these variables.

How other people view conductors of varying charisma may be valuable to the musical community. Understanding whether ensemble members and audiences respond differently to conductors with higher charisma than lower charisma could help determine why some conductors are perceived to be better than others. Coupling audio-visual material with only audio material of high- and low-cluster conductors could help accept or dismiss the popular notion of the importance of conductor charisma.

Finally, it seems clear that more charismatic conductors believe more strongly in the importance of a conductor’s charisma. A study examining why conductors with more charisma feel this way is important and the degree to which their charisma actually contributes to their
professional success, could be valuable. Related studies are also needed to determine whether charisma represents any predictability of conductor success.

What makes a conductor ‘great’ remains a mystery. Certainly several variables such as musicianship, conducting technique, personality, and numerous others factors combine to create a master conductor – the “Maestro”. However, if developing musicians are to be trained to maximize their potential as ensemble conductors, much more information is needed regarding the traits that ‘great’ conductors share.

References


Yarbrough, C. (1975). The effect of magnitude of conductor behavior on performance,
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Figure 1.

*Charisma Scores by Responses*