INTRODUCTION

The social activism field presents multiple challenges including the choice of tactics to utilize when advocating for social justice. Fairholm surveyed a number of studies to determine which tactics are employed to influence individuals, identifying a total of twenty-two key tactics that practitioners use, including the showing of charisma as a tactic [Fairholm 2009].

Charisma is often regarded as a sort of weapon with regard to how it can influence people, pointing out our discomfort with being influenced, which can be disturbingly similar to being controlled. It has been viewed as having a darker side as well, insofar as it has been used as a tactic to influence others in a manipulative manner. Various researchers have examined how charisma aided destructive individuals in taking on leadership positions, such as Jim Jones, Charles Manson and Adolf Hitler [Choi, 2006]. Nevertheless, Bonnie Burstow chose the tactic of charisma in social activism, particularly in advocating against unnecessary psychiatry.

In social activism, whether the focus is racism, women’s rights, First Nations issues, climate change, equality and equity in the workplace, antipsychiatry, access to life-saving medication for people with AIDS, or discrimination based on disabilities, religion, sexual orientation, the issue that often surfaces when activists speak up is: how convincing is their argument? How influential are the points that they are making?

Through the use of displaying charisma while advocating for social justice, Dr. Burstow became a renowned activist in the antipsychiatry movement, which is currently experiencing a resurgence. Dr. Burstow has a remarkable capacity for displaying humility and pushing down her ego, and she’s also very empathetic towards other people [McGinn & Longo, 2007], while being less concerned about her own circumstances. This selflessness is part of what attracts people to Dr. Burstow and makes them want to follow her leadership. Excellent communication skills helped her effect change in a tactful way, as most people are greatly affected by her influential powers [McGinn & Longo, 2007]. Additionally, Dr. Burstow has shown her relational power by offering support, guidance, knowledge and real assets [McGinn & Longo, 2007].

Dr. Burstow’s research has concentrated on those who have experienced psychiatry and survived, including: the imprisoned, undocumented individuals, homeless individuals, sex workers, and people who abuse non-prescription drugs. Notably, Dr. Burstow’s interests also include qualitative research (especially methodologies that are informed by progressive politics), theories of anarchism, popular education, feminism, social movements, transgenerational trauma, Holocaust studies, education against racism, fascism and anti-fascism. However, Dr. Burstow is best known globally as a critic of psychiatry and its institutions.

In this case study, the emphasis is on the exploration of how Dr. Burstow used the power of charisma as a means of interpersonal influence, in order to move her activism
forward. This paper will analyze how Dr. Burstow’s use of charisma, as a tactic of influence, has positively impacted social justice activism.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

This case study’s purpose is to offer an examination of how the renowned activist, Dr. Burstow, chose the tactic of displaying charisma, as well as key communication skills, to effectively unleash the anti-psychiatry movement and also to support other social justice causes. This study will seek to demonstrate that, while charisma can undoubtedly be misused for personal gain or some dastardly purpose, many desirable outcomes can be achieved through its appropriate application.

This case study also reinforces the need to educate activists and encourage them to conduct research on the issues that they are speaking about, to better allow them to articulate their ideas in a charismatic manner that is powerful and supported with scientific data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a significant body of literature on the strategies of influence and charisma. It has been recognized in the literature that activists with significant charisma tend to arrive during times of intense change when the main values concerning citizenship and the responsibilities of members of society are questioned. Leadership is key in activist circles, whenever groups are making efforts to become organized. If a leader is suitably charismatic, that is optimal, as a charismatic leader is more likely to act with enthusiasm and socialize with their followers in a manner that supports the enthusiastic coming together of an activist community [Gerth & Mills, 1964]. It is important to note that leadership is largely concerned with influencing people, where everyone has a valid purpose insofar as they share the main goal of creating meaningful change in society [Daft, 2008]. According to Daft [2008], there are six main aspects to any activity that occurs in the context of leadership, and they are: personal responsibility and integrity, intention, influence, change, a shared purpose, and people to be the followers. Influential leaders who successfully coax their followers into certain actions are commonly viewed as leaders of the transformational type [Cialdini, 2001]. While three factors are regarded as determining behaviors in the context of transformational leadership—charisma, intellectual stimulation, and the consideration of individuals—the majority of transformation theorists agree that charisma is the essential factor that supports the process of transformation [Barbuto, 1997; Bass, 1985].
Leaders can use a variety of tactics to influence and persuade their followers. According to [Fairholm, 2009], they include: form coalitions, ritualism, display charisma, allocate resources, develop others, proactivity, use symbols, legitimate, train and orient, co-op opposition, use ambiguity, control agenda, control criteria, favorable image, use outside experts, rationalization, use surrogates, quid pro quo, incur obligations, placement, dispense rewards, brinksmanship [Fairholm, 2009].

These tactics offer a clear indication of how today's leaders and followers behave in relation to influence. One of the key tactics that Fairholm [2009] discussed is charisma, a principal instrument to influence. As pointed out, the preferred tactics will depend on the particular situation and the target that is meant to be influenced [Fairholm, 2009].

PROBLEM STATEMENT

How does one choose appropriate tactics from the variety of tactics of influence available to practitioners? What is the most suitable tactic in social activism? Is it right for a social justice advocate to use charisma in order to persuade/manipulate people when it does not seem like a very socially just action in itself?

HOW THE DISPLAY OF CHARISMA WAS SUCCESSFUL IN UNLEASHING THE ADVOCACY MOVEMENT REGARDING UNNECESSARY PSYCHIATRY

Among the 22 tactics of influence listed by [Fairholm, 2009], many of them seem to be suitable for social justice advocacy. These include: allocating resources, which happens when resources, such as knowledge, are used to increase one’s position in relation to other people [Popejoy 2004]; building a favorable image, which involves being perceived as somehow special, and which can help influence how people behave so that one can achieve their goals (think of a person’s image as their power that helps them to be introduced to peers); and forming coalitions, which involves becoming allied with additional collectives of people in an effort to become increasingly influential [Mc Murry, 2000]. Another tactic that seems suitable to social activism is co-opting opposition members, which involves altering how significant actors are positioned so that they favour your interests.

Despite the fact that the above-mentioned tactics of influence appear to be suitable for social activism, to unleash the anti-psychiatry movement Dr. Bonnie Burstow chose to utilize the method of displaying charisma as her most powerful tool of influence. When asked why she choose the tactic of displaying charisma in advocating for the anti-psychiatry cause, Dr. Burstow responded that, in addition to the application of political pressure, another useful method available to activists is persuasion. The idea is that if effective points are forcefully made in an argument, supported by evidence personally directed at the person listening, while ensuring that they are emotionally involved in the debate, it is in this instance that the person who is
hearing the argument will be truly persuaded to agree to a particular opinion or participate in a certain activity [Burstow, 2015]. When people are persuaded, there is an excellent chance that change will occur. Although this perspective may have its limitations, persuasion is evidently important to creating change, and humans naturally want to engage in influencing others to change through persuading them [Burstow, 2015].

Dr. Bonnie Burstow approached the City of Toronto to obtain permission to use the City Hall facility to conduct research by collecting testimonies during the two-day drug hearings and the two-day electroshock hearings held at Toronto City Hall in April 2005. [Report of the Psychiatric Drugs Panel. Toronto: Inquiry into Psychiatry 2005]. Considering the nature of the advocacy, in this case, speaking against unnecessary psychiatry was quite contrary to the position of many decision makers who promote and support psychiatry as a legitimate and medically approved process in addressing mental health crises. Obtaining this permission to use their facility for the purpose of conducting research that would contradict the status quo was a highly impressive example of influence using tactics of displaying charisma as part of an effort to have other individuals (City of Toronto leadership) comply with her wishes, make commitments, and internalize what she is saying in a meaningful manner.

What makes charisma effective is that it attracts other people to you in terms of your personality, principles, or ideas [Sankara, 2003]. Individuals with charisma tend to bring the best out in people, as they make followers confident that they will be able to achieve their goals in any situation where they are given a job to do. For instance, Dr. Bonnie Burstow initiated a conversation with the senior leadership of the University of Toronto to advocate for the creation of a scholarship in the field of anti-psychiatry. She displayed charisma as a tactic of influence. [Fairholm, 2009]. Through her personal traits of character, special presence, idiosyncratic approaches, and methods of dealing with senior academic personnel, Dr. Bonnie Burstow forged her relationship with the senior leadership at the University of Toronto. As a result of these efforts, in 2016, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto, announced the creation of a radically new scholarship — the Bonnie Burstow Scholarship in Antipsychiatry. This scholarship is for students conducting theses in the area of antipsychiatry, with Dr. Burstow matching up to $50,000 of donations by others. The University of Toronto created this scholarship in her honour after being convinced about the necessity of funding students whose theses have an antipsychiatry theme of inquiry. This is very significant, as scholars have been critical of psychiatry and conducting research to support their claims for over 50 years, but this is the first award of its kind to be offered -- in fact, it is the world’s first scholarship in antipsychiatry.

When western civilization learned about the notion of charisma from Max Weber [Weber 1978/1922], he explained that people with charisma have a strange gift insofar as their graciousness makes them attractive to followers, who devote themselves to and obey the charismatic person who empowers them. Currently, Dr. Burstow’s thesis support group at the University of Toronto is the largest gathering of antipsychiatry academics in North America. The
scholarship points to how various factors, both local and global, are working together to help in the development of important research and activism that will support a new beginning for the antipsychiatry movement.

Displaying charisma makes Dr. Burstow appear highly authentic as an individual, inspiring in her followers a feeling of friendly intimacy with her; her vulnerability—despite her academic rank—makes others come to trust her [McGinn & Longo, 2007]. This relational power that Dr. Burstow has with others is further increased because she has a special ability to see the unique qualities in each individual [Bass, 1985]. With regard to psychiatry, for example, she was genuinely concerned about psychiatry being used unnecessarily, and she regarded every individual that she met through this work as being their own unique person [McGinn & Longo, 2007]. Not only did this result in some long-enduring relationships, but she also empowered various students through her connection with them, helping them in their efforts to point out how psychiatry can be non-essential. Throughout her work, Dr. Burstow’s primary tactic of influence has been her incredible charisma. Another outcome emanating from Dr. Bonnie Burstow’s activism through the use of charisma was the increased awareness of the “psychiatric treatment” procedure known as electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and the negative impacts on patients who undergo such a procedure. Dr. Burstow was the principal investigator for the Electroshock and Women Research which involves extensive analysis of public hearings’ testimonies on electroshock in Ontario, Canada and in Australia since 1983. This research into the nature and effects of electroshock rang the alarm on the physical damage (i.e., brain damage, memory loss, deaths, etc.), and was submitted to the Toronto Board of Health and the ECT. Review Committee [Ontario Coalition to Stop Electroshock, 1984, pp. 89-102].

Dr. Burstow, a prominent critic of medical model psychiatry and ECT for years, employed the classic narrative strategy which is a form of displaying charisma through written persuasion. She wrote a novel “The Other Mrs. Smith” [Burstow, 2017b], a compelling novel that invites the reader to join victims of ECT, to recover from the harm done to them and to reclaim their life, family and memories that had been effectively burnt out by the bolts of electricity shot through their brains during this treatment. Considered to be a very powerful novel, it asks readers in a convincing manner to think about the ethics surrounding ECT.

There are several examples from the novel supporting highly effective and persuasive tactics of influence to convince the reader to consider their position on ECT. One such example was when Dr. Burstow said: “the average reader might be forgiven if he/she thought an anti-ECT polemic told from the perspective of someone whose memory has been hollowed out by the controversial procedure would not work as fiction.” “Such a reader would be wrong,” said Dr. Burstow. The novel elaborates very well on the tactic of displaying charisma through the use of threat-promise mixed with persuasion and built on the impact of the damage caused by ECT as being multi-generational and the cause of devastating harm.
Charisma is also commonly seen as a form of manipulation, a type of power that is often calculated in a premeditated way and in which the person is quite detached. The tactic of hiding intent by controlling the information sources available to the target is used by many in the position of influence [Fairholm, 2009]. In the conclusion part of the “The Other Mrs. Smith,” there is a poignantly powerful statement where Dr. Bonnie Burstow said “Read it and weep. I did. And then speak out in protest” [Burstow, 2017b]. The book critic Connie Neil, reviewed “The Other Mrs. Smith” and stated, outstandingly, that, “To be honest, I am pretty amazed at how an accomplished academic professional such as Bonnie Burstow can shift gears into such a rich and poetic prose that draws the reader into a collection of complex, original characters that unfold through a mysterious evolving plot that has all kinds of twists and turns” [Burstow, 2017b]. That’s the power of charisma.

As a result of her advocacy and strong stance against ECT, highly important lawsuits have been filed and the legislatures of various countries globally have been challenged. One example concerns a major class action suit that took place in California against a shock machine maker. DK Law Group filed the motion. Major manufacturers of shock machines, MECTA Corporation and Somatics, were the defendants. Lawyers in Canada were also thinking about opening a class action suit specifically for Canadians who were electroshocked only in the previous two years [Burstow, 2017a]. Several other examples of professional and academic accomplishments through the use of charisma are listed in the appendix titled “Dr. Bonnie Burstow’s accomplishments,” which is included in the teaching note of this case study.

CONCLUSION

This case study is based on the bibliographical work of Dr. Bonnie Burstow in the social activism field. The research for this case study also included multiple interactions with Dr. Burstow at the University of Toronto. The merit of the case study lies in specific examples from Dr. Burstow’s actions that demonstrate charisma as a tool that can be used to obtain unimaginable outcomes, specifically in the field of social activism.

In order to determine which tactic would be the best for successfully influencing the targeted person, it is important to consider various factors, including the situation at hand [Fairholm, 2009]. There is a variety of reasons that likely convinced Dr. Burstow to use charisma as her main tactic of influence to advocate for antipsychiatry. For instance, she might have decided to utilize charisma as the primary tactic of influence because she was familiar with individuals who have had negative experiences with institutional psychiatry, or she might have wanted to remove obstacles faced by those engaged in this type of advocacy, and/or she might have wanted to prevent future generations from having to face the effects of psychiatry altogether. Of course, Dr. Burstow’s own personal experiences would have also informed her decision to become an activist in this regard.
The rightfulness or wrongfulness of the antipsychiatry movement is beyond the scope of this study to judge. Readers of this case study should not conclude that the writer is supporting the anti-psychiatry movement. The tactic of using charisma does not just encompass a single discipline, and, as such, the principles are applicable in any field of choice. Through this case study, it is evidenced that the tactic of charisma can be used to successfully achieve a variety of outcomes when it is used with a suitable level of skill [Fairholm, 2009]. Charisma can be used positively or negatively. However, if it is used in an intelligent manner, then it can help facilitate actions that become movements and can grow into revolutions [Choi, 2006].

REFERENCES


