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Core self-evaluations mediate the association between leaders' facial appearance and their professional success: Adults' and children's perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Although the link between facial appearance and success is well established, the mechanisms responsible for this association have remained elusive. Evolutionary theory suggests that perceived leadership characteristics should be important for men's self-concept. Drawing on implicit leadership theory and evolutionary perspectives, we therefore examined the associations between first impressions based on facial appearance, core self-evaluations (CSEs), leadership role occupancy, and career success among a sample of working men. In Study 1, we found that CSEs mediated the relationship between individuals' facial appearance and measures of their success as leaders. In Study 2, we replicated these results using children's ratings of facial appearance, thus suggesting that basic properties of the targets' faces communicated their leadership ability more than the perceivers' life experience or acquired knowledge. These results suggest that people may use facial appearance as a diagnostic tool to determine the leadership ability of others.

Parents commonly admonish their children not to judge others based on their appearance but, rather, to look “inside” a person to his or her personality, intelligence, and values. In many cases, this may be sound advice. Yet, in other instances, outside appearance may honestly convey some of what lies underneath. For example, people's basic personality traits (Penton-Voak, Pound, Little, & Perrett, 2006), political opinions (Samochowiec, Wänke, & Fiedler, 2010), intelligence (Zebrowitz, Hall, Murphy, & Rhodes, 2002), and leadership success (Rule & Ambady, 2008) all correlate, albeit weakly, with subjective assessments derived from their facial appearance (cf. Antonakis & Eubanks, 2017). In addition, facial appearance can influence one's career and leadership success in various domains (e.g., Antonakis, 2011; Hosoda, Stone-Romero, & Coats, 2003). The mechanisms responsible for these associations have remained elusive, however.

Here, we sought to more directly map out how leadership relates to facial appearance by testing the link between one's outer appearance and inner self-concept, hypothesizing that individuals' self-concepts would mediate the association between their appearance and leadership success. In two studies, we investigated how self-concept mediates the positive association between both children's and adults' subjective assessments of appearance with working men's professional success, as measured by their leadership role occupancy and occupational status. Doing so produced three key contributions.

First, we answered Baruch and Bozionelos' (2011) recent call for research on the mechanisms linking job-irrelevant human capital and success outcomes by examining core self-evaluations (CSEs; the “fundamental assessments that people make about their worthiness, competence, and capabilities;” Judge, Bono, Erez, & Locke, 2005, p. 257) as a mediator of the positive association between facial appearance and leader's professional success. This allowed us to extend prior work showing that CSEs link individuals' attractiveness to their income by examining how facial appearance relates to leadership attainment via CSEs (Judge, Hurst, & Simon, 2009).

Second, by sampling judgments of leadership from both adults (Study 1) and children (Study 2), we tested and extended theories suggesting that individuals without prior experience can reliably intuit others' leadership ability with the face serving as a diagnostic tool (Spisak, Dekker, Kruger, & Van Vugt, 2012). Concordant results from adults and children would suggest that first impressions based on facial appearance may not completely arise from socialized experience within the work environment but may also stem from a possibly innate sensitivity to detect hierarchical cues. Moreover, if leadership appearance relates to individuals' CSEs, selecting these leaders might suggest a “kernel of truth” in leadership judgments by reflecting internal traits associated with effective leadership and work behaviors (Berry, 1990; Chang, Ferris, Johnson, Rosen, & Tan, 2012; Hu, Wang, Liden, & Sun,

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2012; Penton-Voak et al., 2006). In addition, by examining how both adults' and children's leadership judgments relate to leadership attainment, we attempted to conceptually replicate previous work on political leaders (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009), thereby providing a much needed replication of an intriguing finding in another context (i.e., the world of work; see Antonakis, 2017).

Third, although evidence suggests that facial appearance predicts success among political, military, and business leaders, this research has focused almost exclusively on elite leaders (see Re & Rule, 2015, for review). Thus, because empirical studies examining the association between facial appearance and leadership success in the world of work are scarce (limiting the generalizability of prior studies), we tested how facial appearance and leadership outcomes relate among nonelite leaders across a broad variety of jobs and industries, thereby allowing for generalization beyond a specific company or profession. In addition, our study heeds the call that organizational and management research should also focus on “lower-echelon employees” (Bamberger & Pratt, 2010), who represent the majority of people working in organizations.

Facial appearance and leadership

Several recent studies have shown that people can reliably infer leaders' success from mere photos of their faces. Judgments of personality traits (e.g., competence) predict the outcomes of elections in countries on almost every continent (Lawson, Lenz, Baker, & Myers, 2010; Little, Burriss, Jones, & Roberts, 2007; Martin, 1978; Rule et al., 2010; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005) and correlate with the amounts of profits that chief executive officers (CEOs) earn for their companies (Harms, Han, & Chen, 2012; Rule & Tskhay, 2014). Despite the importance of leadership evaluations (such as deciding for whom to vote), quick and unreflective judgments predict these outcomes better than more thoughtful assessments do (Ballew & Todorov, 2007). More astonishing, even children's subjective judgments of political candidates predict electoral outcomes just as effectively as adults' evaluations do (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009).

Other studies have suggested that these superficial judgments may probe individuals' actual dispositions. For example, Mueller and Mazur (1996) found that perceptions of West Point cadets' facial dominance predicted their military ranks at the ends of their careers. Similarly, perceptions of corporate lawyers' personality traits in college predicted their accomplishments as leaders of their firms as much as 50 years later (Rule & Ambady, 2011).

Implicit leadership theory (ILT; Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984) may help to explain why facial appearance relates to leadership success outcomes. The theory explains how leaders emerge, why someone is accepted as a leader, and why a leader can exert influence upon others. Individuals' ILTs refer to representations nonconsciously held by followers that help discriminate “leaders” from “non-leaders” and facilitate instant assessments of the leadership qualities of another person (Shondrick & Lord, 2010). Observers use these prototypes to automatically determine whether a leader matches their prototypical expectations. Individuals who match the leader prototype are considered more favorably and can emerge more easily as leaders (Lord et al., 1984). Consistent with these arguments, research has shown that first impressions of leadership from faces were higher when facial appearance and expressions matched the observers' prototypes (Trichas & Schyns, 2012). Furthermore, ILTs guide judgments of leadership from nonverbal cues, which relate to measures of leaders' success (Tskhay, Xu, & Rule, 2014).

People with good ideas frequently struggle to implement them because they cannot inspire others to follow them or adopt their ideas. Leadership may thus require the ability to entrain other people towards compliance, commitment, and positive affect (Pfeffer, 1981). Yet, despite these important functions, individuals' height, sex, or facial appearance may influence whether others view them as leaders (e.g., Elgar, 2016; Re et al., 2013). Thus, prototypical images of a leader,

rather than substantive evaluations of their skills, may shape followers' perceptions of whether someone is worth following. Followers' and observers' perceptions of faces and their attributions of leadership qualities are influenced by ILTs as well (e.g., Antonakis, 2011; Trichas & Schyns, 2012). Therefore, favorable leader perceptions based on one's face may relate to an individual's leadership success. Taken together, perceptions of leadership ability from the face (whether through direct assessments of how effective a leader looks, or indirectly through judgments of traits like competence and dominance) correlate with elite leaders' success. In an attempt to replicate prior work, we therefore expected:

Hypothesis 1. Perceptions of leadership from the face positively relate to leadership role occupancy and career success for people working at various levels of leadership within an organization.

Facial appearance, core self-evaluations, and success

Job-irrelevant human capital denotes individual characteristics that logically should not relate to job performance but that nonetheless seem to influence career success (Baruch & Bozionelos, 2011). Facial appearance is a typical example of job-irrelevant human capital that nevertheless relates to career success and leadership emergence (Antonakis & Eubanks, 2017; Hosoda et al., 2003). Hence, understanding the mechanisms that mediate the association between facial appearance and workplace outcomes can expand models seeking to predict organizational efficiency and productivity.

The mechanisms responsible for these associations have remained elusive, however. We contend that favorable perceptions of a face may not only relate to an individual's leadership success, but may also influence that person's self-concept. For instance, an attractive appearance can elicit positive expectations and stereotypes (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972), and these positive impressions can turn into self-fulfilling prophecies whereby one gradually adopts the traits and behaviors that others expect, allowing the person to develop a favorable self-concept (e.g., higher self-esteem, self-efficacy; Antonakis, 2011; Langlois et al., 2000; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). Indeed, Judge, Hurst, & Simon (2009) found that CSEs mediated the association between individuals' attractiveness and their income. In this vein, we investigated whether CSEs might similarly mediate the relationship between perceptions of leadership from facial appearance and two measures of leadership success: leadership role occupancy and occupational status.

Though often considered a stable trait, experiences can also influence CSEs (Nübold, Muck, & Maier, 2013; Wu & Griffin, 2012). Extending and building on prior work on facial appearance and self-concept, we thus propose that perceptions of leadership from the face (e.g., competence, trustworthiness) should positively influence individuals' global self-concept in three ways. First, observers (e.g., coworkers, clients, supervisors, mentors) might treat individuals as if leader-like facial features reliably indicate their true underlying skills and, consequently, trust them more (Rezlescu, Duchaine, Olivola, & Chater, 2012). This positive treatment is likely to have a strong influence on global self-worth (Harter, 2006). Second, individuals who look leader-like might be treated and accepted as leaders more often, positively affecting their CSEs and providing them more opportunities to develop their (leadership) skills—in other words, a self-fulfilling prophecy (e.g., Antonakis, 2011; Friedman & Zebrowitz, 1992; Rule & Ambady, 2011). Consistent with these ideas, individuals with the right look may be more confident in their abilities and more likely to be considered leaders (DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Judge, Hurst, & Simon, 2009; Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006). Third, having a facial appearance that garners impressions of high status and leadership should correlate with a positive global self-concept, especially among men. Indeed, evolutionary models of mate selection suggest that men must advertise their status and resources to succeed in mating because women seek

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