Facial appearance and leadership: An overview and challenges for new research

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ABSTRACT

There is plenty of evidence showing that facial features predict success in politics, business and the military. Some of the papers providing this evidence are related to selection into leadership positions, others into how facial features predict performance in such a position. The purpose of this introduction is to provide an overview of *The Leadership Quarterly* special issue on *Facial Appearance and Leadership*, as well as to discuss the use of good looks as a heuristic, and difficulties related to establishing causal relationships in this area of research.

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Introduction

The selection of leaders plays a major role in the success of societies and various organizations within societies. At the level of societies, hereditary leadership and leadership acquired based on physical force have given way to a democratic process, in which large groups of voters select the leader for a limited time period. Leadership can also be conferred based on expert choice (like the board of directors choosing a CEO), or by higher-ranked leaders based on a job opening or various promotion criteria within an organization. Yet, the evolutionary mechanisms that have affected leadership choices in the distant past still affect decision-making processes.

When making choices, people rely on various heuristics. In the area of leadership selection, physiological cues like facial appearance, height and body shape still affect decision-making processes in modern societies. Candidates who look more attractive or are perceived to look more competent have been shown to have an electoral advantage in Australia (King & Leigh, 2009), Brazil and Mexico (Lawson, Lenz, Baker, & Myers, 2010), Finland (Berggren, Jordahl, & Poutvaara, 2010; Poutvaara, Jordahl, & Berggren, 2009), France (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009), Germany (Rosar, Klein, & Beckers, 2008), Ireland (Buckley, Collins, & Reidy, 2007), Japan (Rule et al., 2010), Switzerland (Lutz, 2010), the United Kingdom (Banducci, Karp, Thrasher, & Rallings, 2008) and the United States (Ballew & Todorov, 2007; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005). Rule and Ambady (2008) and Wong, Ormiston, and Haselhuhn (2011) conclude that CEOs' facial features predict their firms' financial performance. Graham, Harvey, and Puri (2010) find that facial appearance of CEOs predicts their compensation, but does not predict their company's performance (Graham et al., 2010). Furthermore, facial dominance predicts success in the military (Mazur, Mazur, & Keating, 1984).

The aim of this special issue is to take stock of the current state of research on the effects of facial appearance on leadership in various organizational contexts, most notably business and politics.

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Good looks as a heuristics

The use of thin slices of information, like looks, is an information shortcut that simplifies decision-making. Right or wrong, people use heuristics in both unimportant and important decisions. Downs (1957) proposed that many voters are rather uninformed about the details of politics, which may, in turn, result in candidate-centered politics (Wattenberg, 1991). Actually, the use of various information shortcuts is individually rational from the voters' perspective, even though it runs against the ideal of an informed citizen who spends a considerable amount of time to weigh the pros and cons of alternative politics and political candidates. In a large election, the probability that a single voter would be decisive is very close to zero. Therefore, from a purely instrumental calculus of voting (Downs, 1957), it does not pay much to invest in acquiring detailed information on competing candidates. While an employer may interview several job applicants, only a small minority of voters talks with even one presidential candidate or party leader during an electoral campaign.

The same argument extends to the whole act of voting: if the likelihood of being decisive is very small and there are positive costs of voting, the expected benefits (the difference in utility resulting from the preferred candidate being elected multiplied by the probability of being decisive) are dwarfed by the costs. One potential explanation for this paradox of voting is that there are also expressive benefits to voting (Brennan & Lomasky, 1993; Hillman, 2010). Some people may get psychological satisfaction from voting for the candidate they feel good about supporting, whether because of policy issues or good looks. Lenz and Lawson (2011) find that television plays a major role in creating an advantage for better-looking politicians in U.S. politics. Candidates who look more competent win more votes especially among voters who are politically uninformed and watch a lot of television.

The benefits of good looks are not restricted to politics. Hamermesh and Biddle (1994) show that there is a considerable beauty premium in the labor market. Anderson, John, Keltner, and Kring (2001) conclude that good-looking people reach a higher social status. In their review, Langlois et al. (2000) find ample evidence on the benefits of good looks in different areas of life. Sometimes, stereotypes are vindicated: Case and Paxson (2008) show that height is positively related to cognitive ability, which explains a large fraction of the height premium.

In addition to being valued in itself, good looks could have a halo effect. Verhulst, Lodge, and Lavine (2010) conclude that beauty can be seen as a fundamental variable with halo effects on character-based inferences such as perceived competence. Berggren et al. (2010) find that the estimated effect of perceived competence on electoral success is reduced significantly and becomes statistically insignificant if beauty is included as another explanatory variable at the same time. Instead, adding perceived competence has only a minor effect on the estimated effect of beauty. On the other hand, Todorov et al. (2005) found that when including perceived competence and attractiveness judgments at the same time, only perceived competence played a significant role. Clearly, more research on the relative importance of attractiveness, perceived competence and other traits are warranted.

Why do good looks matter? Recent research has explored evolutionary forces behind leadership and followership. Van Vugt, Hogan, and Kaiser (2008) argue that being a leader or follower are strategies that evolved to solve social coordination problems in the distant past. An important tension between leaders and followers arises as leaders can exploit followers. Nonetheless, hierarchical structures have given groups that adapted those fitness advantages, meaning that they have become evolutionary hard-wired.

An evolutionary perspective provides a theoretical framework for understanding the links between different facial features and promotion into leadership positions and performance in such positions. For example, symmetric and youthful faces are perceived as beautiful. Symmetry and youthfulness, in turn, are indications of good health. This makes good-looking people more valuable partners or allies, and helps to explain why they are treated better in social interaction. Such an advantage, in turn, may motivate a group to select a good-looking leader, even in the absence of any expressive motivations, or group members enjoying watching a good-looking leader.

Challenges in establishing causality

A major challenge in the analysis of the effects of facial appearance and the use of stereotyping is establishing the direction of causality. A positive correlation between a certain trait of a leader and organizational performance need not imply that such a trait has a causal effect on organizational performance. Instead, it could be that if a certain trait is valued, say because of stereotyping, more successful organizations would be more likely to attract leaders with such a trait. Furthermore, it could be that different traits are correlated with a decision to enter into competition on leadership positions. For example, if a certain facial feature is associated with negative stereotypes, then it could be that leaders with such features would be especially good as they would have had to compensate for any disadvantage arising from discrimination.

As another example, take the link between perceived competence or attractiveness and electoral success. A challenge in the United States and in any other country using one-member districts is that there can be reverse causality from party strength to electoral success. Political parties are more likely to attract high-quality candidates in districts in which they have a better chance of winning. As a result, an estimated premium on perceived competence or attractiveness is a joint effect of an electoral advantage arising from better looks, and a reverse causality effect of political parties being able to attract better candidates in districts in which they have an advantage. One way around this problem is to use data from experimental elections. Little, Burriss, Jones, and Roberts (2007) carried out computer transformations of photographs of faces. They found that masculine faces performed better when respondents were asked to choose a war-time leader than when respondents were asked to choose a peace-time leader. Another alternative, followed by Berggren et al. (2010), is to analyze within-party competition in a proportional electoral system with a personal vote. A corresponding analysis could be done using primary election candidates in American politics.