



# The many (distinctive) faces of leadership: Inferring leadership domain from facial appearance<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that people form impressions of potential leaders from their faces and that certain facial features predict success in reaching prestigious leadership positions. However, much less is known about the accuracy or meta-accuracy of face-based leadership inferences. Here we examine a simple, but important, question: Can leadership domain be inferred from faces? We find that human judges can identify business, military, and sports leaders (but not political leaders) from their faces with above-chance accuracy. However, people are surprisingly bad at evaluating their own performance on this judgment task: We find no relationship between how well judges think they performed and their actual accuracy levels. In a follow-up study, we identify several basic dimensions of evaluation that correlate with face-based judgments of leadership domain, as well as those that predict actual leadership domain. We discuss the implications of our results for leadership perception and selection.

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## Introduction

Understanding the factors that predict leader selection is clearly important: A leader influences the achievements of his/her organization and, by extension, the well-being of its members and all those who benefit (or suffer) from the organization's output. Therefore, organizations and their members should have strong incentives to identify and select effective leaders within their domain, namely by relying on objective indicators of leadership quality. Yet, the human mind often relies on superficial cues to form judgments or make decisions, and the choice of which leader to select is no exception: A large and growing literature shows that facial appearances predict success in reaching prestigious leadership positions (Antonakis & Jacquart, 2013; Olivola & Todorov, 2010a). In the domain of politics, numerous studies have found that more competent-looking political candidates garner larger vote shares (e.g., Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009; Ballew & Todorov, 2007; Poutvaara, Jordahl, & Berggren, 2009; for a review of this literature, see Olivola & Todorov, 2010a). Voters also seem to favor more attractive candidates (Berggren, Jordahl, & Poutvaara, 2010; Efran & Patterson, 1974) and those who look stereotypically like members of their preferred political party (Olivola, Sussman, Tsetsos, Kang, & Todorov, 2012). Similarly, in the domain of business, studies have found that CEOs who possess certain facial features command higher salaries and are hired by more successful companies (Graham, Harvey, & Puri, 2014; Harms, Han, & Chen, 2012; Livingston & Pearce, 2009; Pfann, Biddle, Hamermesh, & Bosman, 2000; Rule & Ambady, 2008; Wong, Ormiston, & Haselhuhn,

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2011). And in the military domain, facial dominance was found to predict military rank (Mazur, Mazur, & Keating, 1984; Mueller & Mazur, 1996, 1997; although see Loehr & O'Hara, 2013, for evidence that facial morphological correlates of dominance and aggression negatively predict military rank). In sum, there is ample research demonstrating associations, within several leadership domains (politics, business, military, etc.), between certain facial characteristics and success.<sup>3</sup> Leaders in a particular domain (e.g., politics) who possess the “right” facial features (e.g., a competent-looking face) tend to be more successful within that domain (e.g., receive more votes) than other (potential) leaders in the same domain who do not possess those features, *ceteris paribus*.

While the relationship between facial appearance and *success within* leadership domains is now well established, much less is known about the relationship between facial appearance and *selection into* particular leadership domains. That is, are certain (visible) facial features associated with being a leader in one domain rather than another? Or, to put it differently, can people discriminate between leaders in one domain (e.g., military leaders) and those in another (e.g., business leaders), just by looking at their faces? This question is important: If leaders in a particular domain share facial features that distinguish them from leaders in other domains, this suggests that domain-specific facial stereotypes may also influence the leadership selection process, above-and-beyond facial cues that are broadly associated with leadership success across several domains (e.g., attractiveness and facial competence). Identifying such domain-specific facial stereotypes would therefore add a new “layer” to the role of face-based inferences in leadership selection.

This paper contributes to this important question in four ways. First, we determine whether people can accurately judge leadership domain from facial cues. To do so, we presented judges with the faces of leaders drawn from four different domains (business, military, politics, and sports) and asked them to infer which domain these leaders belong to. While there is an extensive literature on the (in)accuracy of appearance-based first impressions (e.g., Hassin & Trope, 2000; Olivola & Todorov, 2010b; Zebrowitz & Collins, 1997; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2008), only a small fraction of these studies have specifically looked at judgments about leaders. Moreover, these studies have either examined the ability of judges to infer specific characteristics about leaders within a particular domain, such as their political orientation (e.g., Carpinella & Johnson, 2013; Jahoda, 1954; Olivola et al., 2012; Olivola & Todorov, 2010b; Wänke et al., 2012), or their ability to determine whether or not someone is a leader (Cherulnik, Turns, & Wilderman, 1990).<sup>4</sup> We know of no studies that have asked participants to infer *which* domain a leader belongs to, solely from facial cues.

Second, we examine whether some leadership categories (military leaders, business leaders, etc.) are more easily identified (from facial cues) than others. In particular, we compared the accuracy of face-based leadership inferences across different leadership domains. Studies comparing face-based inferences across domains (e.g., Hassin & Trope, 2000; Olivola & Todorov, 2010b) have found that these judgments vary considerably in their accuracy levels. We might therefore expect that some leadership category inferences will be more accurate than others. In particular, it would be interesting to see whether leaders who are elected by the general population (e.g., U.S. state Governors) have more or less distinct faces than those who are selected by a smaller group of expert members within their domain (e.g., U.S. Army Generals). On the one hand, we might predict that experts, being more knowledgeable (about their respective domains), would be less influenced by superficial appearance cues than most voters (Lenz & Lawson, 2011). On the other hand, since elite members of the same organization tend to be more like-minded than the general voting population, they may be more likely to share common (but possibly erroneous) stereotypes about what good leaders in their domain look like, and therefore to select leaders who possess certain, distinctive facial features. We return to this question, below, after we present the four leadership categories in our study.

Third, we assess the *meta*-accuracy of face-based leadership judgments – how well people can evaluate their own ability to draw (correct) inferences from facial stimuli. Specifically, we asked our participant–judges to report their confidence in each judgment and to estimate their overall accuracy. We then compared these estimates with their actual likelihoods of correctly inferring leadership category. Research on the validity of face-based inferences has focused, almost exclusively, on the narrow question of accuracy (see Olivola & Todorov, 2010b for a critical discussion of this issue). In contrast, much less attention has been paid to the correspondence (if any) between the confidence that people hold in their face-based judgments (subjective accuracy) and their actual likelihood of being correct (objective accuracy). Yet meta-accuracy is an essential component of judgment validity since it determines whether (and when) one relies on appearances to form impressions: Regardless of their actual (i.e., objective) accuracy-levels, individuals who doubt their ability to draw useful inferences from faces are unlikely to deliberately rely on these judgments (and they risk ignoring a potentially useful social cue), whereas those who trust their first impressions are more likely to do so (and they risk giving these inferences too much weight).<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the relative weight that individuals place on their first impressions of leaders can impact organizational dynamics, including a leader's ability to exert influence (we return to this point in Section 10). Therefore, an important goal for researchers should be to understand, not just whether human judges can (on average) draw accurate inferences from facial cues, but also the extent to which people recognize whether (as a general rule) and when (depending on the situation) they should rely on these inferences or refrain from doing so. Those few studies that did compare the accuracy and confidence associated with first impressions tended to find that judges were poorly calibrated in their self-evaluations (Ames, Kammrath, Suppes, & Bolger, 2010; Hassin & Trope, 2000). We might therefore predict low levels of meta-accuracy in leadership category inferences. On the other hand, given the sizeable stakes involved in selecting or interacting with leaders – in particular, the high costs of relying on invalid

<sup>3</sup> Here, we use the words “success”, “successful”, and “leadership success” to refer to the likelihood that a person is selected to a prestigious leadership position. To clarify, we are not referring to that person's leadership abilities and qualifications, nor to any successes he/she brings to their organization. The traits that make someone a popular candidate for a leadership position may well be different from those that make him/her a competent leader, once in that position. Our use of “success” (and its extensions) refers to the former (popularity), not the latter (competence).

<sup>4</sup> There is also evidence that people can accurately infer a target's relative organizational status (Barnes & Sternberg, 1989; Schmid Mast & Hall, 2004) and behavioral indicators of dominance (Kalma, 1991), from facial photos.

<sup>5</sup> Face-based judgments may also be partly spontaneous and perhaps difficult to control (Olivola & Todorov, 2010a; Stewart et al., 2012; Todorov, 2012). Therefore, even individuals who would rather avoid being influenced by appearances may be inadvertently affected, to some extent, by facial cues.

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