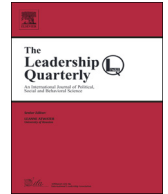




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Facial appearance and leader choice in different contexts: Evidence for task contingent selection based on implicit and learned face-behaviour/face-ability associations

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ABSTRACT

Facial appearance plays a role in leader selection and some facial traits are more valued in certain contexts. Here, I examined associations between facial appearance and perceptions of leadership. In Study 1, male faces were rated for several traits and leadership ability under general, war-time, and peace-time scenarios. Masculinity was found to be favoured in war-time over peace-time, however, this association was diminished when controlling for dominance. In Study 2, cues to physical ability or cooperative personality were associated with different face traits. When subsequently asked to select the best leader for a physically competitive task, participants chose faces with the trait associated with physical ability. For a cooperative task, participants chose faces with the trait associated with cooperation. These data suggest that leaders may be chosen based on their visual characteristics because certain characteristics suggest that they possess abilities that make them well suited to lead in particular situations.

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Introduction

Leaders are ubiquitous in human populations, enjoy high status within a group, and are generally chosen or elected as leaders. Previous research on status has distinguished between two forms of status: 1. prestige, which results in freely conferred status and 2. dominance, by which status is acquired forcefully (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). In examining leadership selection behaviour and voting, the focus is explicitly on ideas of freely conferred status. One interesting facet of leadership choice that has emerged in recent years is the role that a prospective leader's visual appearance has on our choice of leaders. For example, physical appearance, as seen in video-taped mock election speeches, has been found to influence ratings of leadership ability (Cherulnik, 1995) and in US presidential elections post-1900 the taller candidate has won 81% of the time (e.g., Little & Roberts, 2012). Visual characteristics, including facial appearance, are thought to play an important role in a variety of judgments and decisions that have real occupational outcomes in many settings, including choice of our elected leaders (for review, see Little & Roberts, 2012). In the current paper, I test the notion that associations between face appearance and behaviour/physical ability underpin leadership perception using natural associations (Study 1) and experimentally created associations (Study 2) by examining variation across different voting contexts.

Focusing on faces and leadership choice, several recent studies have revealed the power that faces hold over our voting decisions. It has been demonstrated that ratings of competence in a large sample of head shot images of politicians are related to the outcome of actual US congressional elections (Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005) and that such correlations are found based on only minimal exposure to faces (Ballew & Todorov, 2007). A similar finding based on 11 pairs of photographs from

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newspapers in Australia has also been reported (Martin, 1978). A further study has presented evidence that elections can be predicted by individuals voting based on facial shape alone using presidential and prime ministerial elections from several nations (Little, Burriss, Jones, & Roberts, 2007). Recent work has also shown that judgments from both American and Japanese raters predict real votes for American politicians, suggesting cross-cultural agreement on the power of faces in election (Rule et al., 2011). Further, it also appears that cues to election success based on facial appearance apply at a young age, even children prefer election winners over losers to be “captain of their boat” (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009).

Taken together, there is increasing evidence that facial appearance is related to a candidate's success in real election to leadership roles. These findings then raise the question of why appearance might affect selection as a leader. People generally believe that facial appearance provides important guides to character (Hassin & Trope, 2000) and several researchers have highlighted expected behavioural and personality traits based on facial appearance as likely to underpin the link between facial appearance and leader choice (Little et al., 2007; Todorov et al., 2005). For example, perceived “competence” from facial photographs was found to be most closely associated with winning election in the study of US senators (Todorov et al., 2005). In terms of desiring particular traits in our leaders, competence is likely high on the list of essential characteristics as incompetent leaders will have detrimental effects on the group they lead. It can be expected that competence will be a trait valued in all leaders. In this way, possessing facial cues associated with perceived competence can lead individuals to be selected as leaders because observers infer competence based on those facial cues. A more recent study has suggested that other traits, specifically beauty, can have a greater impact on electoral outcomes than perceived competence (Berggren, Jordahl, & Poutvaara, 2010) and it is this trait I examine next.

Alongside competence, there are other traits that might be expected to be generally valued in our leaders. There are several reasons why individuals may desire their leaders to be facially attractive. Facial attractiveness has been linked with longevity (Henderson & Anglin, 2003), strong immune responses (Mingroni, 2007), and with heterozygosity in immune function genes that are associated with healthier immune systems (Roberts et al., 2005). Additionally, attractiveness is associated with a variety of positive personality attributions (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991), and the assumption of positive personality traits may lead individuals to value attractive leaders if such traits in leaders are perceived as being beneficial to the group. Attractiveness is then a trait that is likely to be valued in potential leaders because such leaders may be (1) fit and healthy and (2) seen to possess personality traits that would be beneficial to the group that they lead. In line with this suggestion, it has been demonstrated that voters favour attractive over less attractive candidates (Efran & Patterson, 1974); attractive candidates have greater electoral success than less attractive candidates (Berggren et al., 2010), attractive political candidates are evaluated more positively than unattractive individuals (Budenheim & Depaola, 1994), there are positive relationships between rated physical attractiveness and perception of leadership competence (Surawski & Ossoff, 2006), and, in hypothetical voting situations, individuals are more likely to select an attractive over a less attractive candidate (Little, Roberts, Jones, & DeBruine, 2012).

There are also several reasons to desire a leader to be trustworthy. Trustworthiness is an interesting variable as it subsumes trust in the ability and competence of an individual but also their integrity and benevolence. Followers are likely to generally desire their leaders to act in the best interest of the group and not to pursue their own selfish goals while acting in a leadership capacity. Followers are also likely to expect that their leaders can be trusted to perform their job adequately and hence possibly have the skills/intelligence for the task in hand. Trust then could be critical in judging candidate leaders. Being perceived as trustworthy is beneficial to leaders. An important aspect of a leader's effectiveness is related to the degree to which subordinates and co-workers trust them (Burke, Sims, Lazzara, & Salas, 2007) and indeed a leader's ability to retain leadership is linked to having trust from their followers (Gomibuchi, 2004). Leadership perception is also tied to traits that may be related to trustworthiness. One study, examining many previous studies of leadership, highlights the role of positive personality traits in leader choice, finding that leadership correlated with initiative taking, intelligence, specific task competencies, and indicators of generosity (Van Vugt, 2006). These factors seem directly related to being able to trust that leaders can perform their function and that they will put group interests over selfish interests. Other studies of leadership also highlight integrity; for example, if leaders are seen as unbiased then their judgements are considered more fair and generate more positive feelings than if leaders are thought to be biased (De Cremer, 2004). In an experimental task comparing hypothetical votes for trustworthy versus untrustworthy appearing faces, individuals were more likely to select the trustworthy face to lead their country (Little et al., 2012). Similar results are seen in rating studies where perceived trustworthiness is positively related to likelihood of voting for candidates (Little et al., 2012).

Task contingent selection and fit-to-task

Alongside competence, attractiveness, and trustworthiness, dominance may also relate to leader choice and this attribute has been studied in terms of facial masculinity being valued differently under different contexts. While some facial traits might be expected to be preferred in leaders generally, it is also possible that some face traits are differently valued according to the leadership situation. Different faces possess different traits that may be seen as more or less important according to current circumstances. Previous work has highlighted that competencies for specific tasks are important in evaluating leadership abilities (Van Vugt, 2006). Such context-dependent variability in choice is a common feature in other human preference research examining mate choice (e.g., Little, Jones, Penton-Voak, Burt, & Perrett, 2002).

One example of such facultative leader choice comes from studies demonstrating that masculine and feminine faces are favoured differently when voting under war-time and peace-time scenarios (e.g., Little et al., 2007). In the first demonstration of

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