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Original Article

Does a competent leader make a good friend? Conflict, ideology and the psychologies of friendship and followership

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ABSTRACT

Research demonstrates that the physical traits of leaders and political candidates influence election outcomes and that subjects favor functionally different physical traits in leaders when their social groups face problems related to war and peace, respectively. Previous research has interpreted these effects as evidence of a problem-sensitive and distinct psychology of followership. In two studies, we extend this research by demonstrating that preferences for physical traits in leaders' faces arise from an integration of both contextual and individual differences related to perceptions of social conflict and that these effects relate only to leader choices. Theoretically, we argue that increased preferences for facial dominance in leaders reflect increased needs for enforced coordinated action when one's group is seen to face threats from other coordinated groups rather than from random natural events. Empirically, we show that preferences for dominant-looking leaders are a function of (1) contextual primes of group-based threats rather than nature-based threats and (2) political ideology (a core measure of perceptions of group-based conflict) such that, across contexts, conservatives prefer dominant-looking leaders more than liberals. For the first time, we demonstrate that the effects of these contextual and individual differences are non-existent when subjects are asked to choose a friend instead of a leader: irrespective of ideology and context, people strongly prefer non-dominant friends. This finding adds significantly to the results of past research and provides evidence of the existence of a distinct psychology of followership that produces leader preferences that are independent of preferences for other social partners.

1. Introduction

Preferences for facial traits in leaders and political candidates have been shown to vary as systematic responses to the context under which the choices of leaders are made. Across a series of studies, subjects show greater preferences for a dominant-looking, masculine leader when primed with scenarios involving between-group conflict and war than when primed with scenarios of between-group cooperation and peace (Hall, Goren, Chaiken, & Todorov, 2009; Little, Burriss, Jones, & Roberts, 2007; Spisak, Dekker et al., 2012; Spisak, Homan, Grabo, & van Vugt, 2012). Consistent with this, anthropological records show how Native American tribes had different chiefs in times of war and peace, respectively (Hoebel, 1954; Price & van Vugt, 2015).

These findings have been argued to reflect how humans are equipped with a distinct psychological system of followership that processes all of the relevant cues that have correlated with contextual leadership competence over human evolutionary history (for a related perspective, see also Lord, Foti, & De Vader, 1984). Among these cues are the physical features of leaders, including their facial traits. When facing conflict, people prefer a leader capable of the punitive enforcement of collective action: the masculine and dominant-looking leader (see, e.g., von Rueden, Gurven, Kaplan, & Stieglitz, 2014). However, the benefits of having a dominant leader must be traded off against the associated costs: the increased likelihood that a dominant leader will engage in within-group exploitation (Boehm, 2000). When peace relaxes the need for collective action, the ratio between the benefits of punitive enforcement and the costs of exploitation changes and individuals come to prefer a less dominant-looking leader.

In this article, we provide the first detailed evidence of the psychological trade-offs involved in decisions to follow dominant leaders. First, we replicate existing findings and demonstrate a contextual effect on preferences for facial cues of dominance in leaders. Second, we extend previous research by demonstrating how preferences for facial cues of dominance in leaders reflect the integration of both external contextual information and internal psychological information related to perceptions of conflict. Specifically, we investigate the role of a key individual difference related to perceptions of the level of social conflict: political ideology. Third, and most importantly, we predict and demonstrate that the effects of both context and ideology on preferences for dominance are unique for leadership preferences and do not generalize to other social relationships, such as preferences for dominance in friends. People have no general preferences for dominant-looking individuals; specifically, it is dominant leaders they want, and only so when

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contextual information and/or individual predisposition suggests the existence of high levels of between-group conflict. We argue that this set of findings provides evidence for a dedicated psychology of adaptive followership that is designed to trade the benefits of having a dominant leader capable of punitively enforcing collective action in conflicts for the costs of having a dominant leader that is relatively likely to engage in within-group exploitation.

1.1. Trade-offs in followership decisions

Leaders hold important positions in social hierarchies and are able to harvest a wide range of resources (Buss, 2009a; De Waal, 1996; Price & van Vugt, 2015). In return for holding these elevated positions, leaders function as the focal point within the groups and orchestrate solutions to collective problems (Price & van Vugt, 2015; van Vugt & Kurzban, 2007). Leaders have therefore most likely been important for the successful navigation of problems related to group living over human evolutionary history (e.g., Price & van Vugt, 2015; van Vugt, 2006; van Vugt & Ahuja, 2010; van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008). Consequently, we should expect natural selection to have selected for a suite of mechanisms constituting a system of adaptive followership psychology regulating leader preferences (van Vugt & Kurzban, 2007). But how should we more specifically expect such computational machinery to be functionally organized?

Myriads of problems have faced human social groups repeatedly over evolutionary history. At a general conceptual level, it is possible to differentiate between two overarching types of problems—or "games"—that humans confront: "games against nature" and "games against people" (Kurzban, 2012). To survive and reproduce, all individuals need to deal with problems such as acquiring food, protection from pathogens, building shelter, and protection from natural disasters, including floods and drought (Kaplan & Gurven, 2005; Sugiyama, 2003). Many of these problems require cooperation and collective action—e.g., hunting large game and building shelter—that is facilitated by coordination and enforcement from a leader. In addition to "games against nature," individuals confront people who seek to free-ride, impose their interests or in other ways are motivated by exploitation (Bowles, 2009; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Lopez, McDermott, & Petersen, 2011; Wrangham & Peterson, 1997). Navigating these social conflicts—or "games against people"—also requires collective action and, in particular, conflicts often involve collective action in the form of coalitions of individuals that compete against other coalitions (Tooby & Cosmides, 2010). Again, leaders would have served an important function over human evolutionary history in facilitating such behavior.

The existence of these conceptually distinct problems is important from a followership perspective because they put different demands on leader competences. While both "games against nature" and "games against people" require collective action, there is a key difference in the level of collective action required by the two types of games. In terms of level of coordination and invested effort, collective action against nature needs to meet the absolute threshold at which the game is won and the problem solved. Collective action against other groups is different because the required level of coordination and effort is always relative to the opposing group. Whether collective coalitional action is sufficient is a moving target, and group conflict is essentially an arms race between the groups about being the best-coordinated and most-investing group (Bowles, 2009; Fessler & Holbrook, 2014). In other words: All else equal, coalitional conflict places greater demands on the investments and coordination of group members than many other types of collective action. Accordingly, human followership psychology should be designed to put a premium on abilities to enforce collective action in the face of social conflict.

To ensure contributions to coalitional action (and other types of collective action), one of the most effective tools at the disposal of leaders is punishment (Fehr & Gächter, 2000; Tooby, Cosmides, & Price, 2006; von Rueden et al., 2014). Consequently, when making followership decisions in social conflict contexts, human followership psychology should be designed to scan for cues for whether potential leaders are motivated and capable of punishing non-contributors. In this regard, a relevant set of cues relates to the physical traits of leader candidates and, in particular, their physical strength and dominance. Previous research finds that physically stronger individuals are more likely to find utility in aggression (Sell, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2009); that larger individuals are viewed as more likely to win contests than smaller individuals, even among preverbal infants (Thomsen, Frankenhuis, Ingold-Smith, & Carey, 2011); and that people are more likely to withdraw from contests against physically stronger relative to physically weaker opponents (Nguyen, Petersen, Nafziger, & Koch, 2014). Cues of physical strength are also reliably available in the human face in the form of masculinity or facial dominance: a squarer jaw, smaller eyes, thicker, lowered and "bushier" eyebrows, thinner lips, and a larger facial width-to-height ratio (Carré, McCormick, & Mondloch, 2009; Keating, 1985; Keating & Bai, 1986; Sell et al., 2009; Zilioli et al., 2014). Consistent with the link between facial dominance and strength, some of these facial metrics have been shown to predict an individual's level of aggressiveness and combat skills (Carré & McCormick, 2008; Trebický, Havlícek, Roberts, Little, & Kleisner, 2013; Zilioli et al., 2014). Furthermore, facial dominance is well recognized by adults and 3-year-old children alike (Cogsdill, Todorov, Spelkea, & Banaji, 2014), suggesting that humans evolved to be attentive towards facial cues to dominant behavior. Given these reliable effects of physical dominance-related traits on cost-infliction ability and motivation, adaptive followership psychology is likely predisposed towards motivating preferences for physically and facially dominant individuals in contexts of conflict that require extensive coalitional action.

If dominance-related traits exclusively influenced a leader's competence with respect to securing collective action, dominant leaders should be universally preferred. Importantly, however, having a dominant leader is also associated with a specific range of costs and, accordingly, followers must carefully trade these costs against the benefits of the better enforcement of collective action. One key source of costs comes from an association between physical dominance-related traits and selfishness: Physically stronger individuals are more self-interested (Petersen, Sznycer, Sell, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2013), more supportive of inequality and oppression (Price, Kang, Dunn, & Hopkins, 2011), and people tend to view dominance-related physical traits as indicative of dishonesty and untrustworthiness (Buckingham et al., 2006; Jensen & Petersen, 2011; Perrett et al., 1998). While dominant leaders might be better able to "extract" aggressive collective action from group members, they might also be more inclined to use their position as a means to exploit the collective for their own benefit (see also von Rueden et al., 2014). This exploitation problem has been acute over human evolutionary history, and people display intense disregard for selfish leaders (Boehm, 2000; Hibbing & Alford, 2004). Accordingly, followers are expected to down-regulate their preferences for dominant leaders in non-conflict contexts (i.e., situations with a less acute need for collective action). In such situations, the benefits of enforcing contributions in between-group conflict from a dominant leader can be outweighed by the costs of within-group exploitation by the same leader. Additionally, a non-dominant leader might be better able to facilitate socially harmonious relations within the group when the threat of conflict is absent.

Consistent with the existence of this trade-off, a range of studies have all found an enhanced preference for masculine and dominant-looking leaders and political candidates in times of threat from outgroups or war (Hall et al., 2009; Little, Roberts, Jones, & DeBruine, 2012; Little et al., 2007; Spisak, Dekker et al., 2012; Spisak, Homan et al., 2012). In such coalitional "games against people," collective action is vital. In times of peace in which "games against nature"

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