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Leader selection and leadership outcomes: Height and age in a sporting model

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ABSTRACT

There is emerging interest in drawing insights from evolutionary biology to understand the nature of human leadership as a position within a social system. This perspective assumes that natural selection favors individuals who recognize leadership qualities that will benefit both leaders and followers. Physical stature, in particular, is frequently mentioned as a preferred human leadership trait. The present study documents and analyses the choice of leaders and its consequences for organization outcomes, using a model sporting system – the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics. Team captains were no taller than their teammates, but they were consistently older, which had significant implications for team outcomes. The age of the captain was not correlated with team success, but it did influence team discipline: the frequency of serious infringements per game was negatively correlated with captain age. These results contradict the view that physical stature is a favored leadership trait, but nevertheless suggest that for human organizations, the search for leadership qualities might be profitably confined to those attributes that are likely to change with age and/or experience. Further, the evidence-based methodological approach highlights the value of examining directly the link between leadership attributes and real-life organization outcomes.

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Introduction

> *The discipline and the belief they showed in the way they played the game, that has to come from good leadership.* – Michael Cheika, Head Coach, Wallabies 2014

There is an emerging interest in addressing questions of human leadership from the perspective of evolutionary biology (Nicholson, 2005; Spisak, Nicholson, & van Vugt, 2011; van Vugt, Hogan, & Kaiser, 2008; Yammarino & Dansereau, 2011). Broadly, such an approach asks whether leadership in human society has evolved through the process of natural selection — an approach that has successfully identified ecological and other factors that favor leadership in animals ranging from insects to elephants (Krause, Hoare, Krause, Hemelrijk, & Rubenstein, 2000; Couzin, Krause, Franks, & Levin, 2005; Fischhoff et al., 2007; Dussutour, Nicolis, Despland, & Simpson, 2008; McCoomb, Shannon, Durant, Sayialel, Slotow, Poole, & Moss, 2011; Hodgkin, Symonds, & Elgar, 2014). An ongoing issue for research into leadership concerns causality: is leadership an intrinsic, behavioral characteristic of leaders, or is it a position within a social system (e.g. Lord & Emrich, 2001; Spisak et al., 2011)?

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From an evolutionary perspective, the question of causality influences both the nature of the research questions and the empirical approach.

If leadership is considered a behavioral trait subject to natural selection, then we require estimates of heritability (e.g. Chaturvedi, Zyphur, Arvey, Avolio, & Larsson, 2012, de Neve, Mikhaylov, Dawes, Christakis, & Fowler, 2013) and measures of the reproductive success of leaders relative to followers. The acquisition of a leadership role is expected to enhance the reproductive success of leaders, which is likely to be frequency dependent. On the other hand, if leadership represents a position within a social system, delegated to an individual through consensual agreement among followers (and others involved in the selection process), then natural selection acts principally on the followers, favoring those who correctly identify leadership qualities that convey fitness benefits to both followers and leaders. An evolutionary perspective thus emphasizes the role of followers in selecting leaders (see also Oc & Bashshur, 2013; Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe, & Carsten, 2014), and asks whether they consistently prefer individuals with particular leadership characteristics. Such an approach mirrors that of sexual selection theory, which successfully predicts that females of diverse species consistently prefer males with extravagant secondary sexual traits (e.g. Andersson, 1984, Kokko, Jennions, & Brooks, 2006). The important point is that the preference enhances the reproductive success of both leaders and followers (see also Hodgkin et al., 2014). Both perspectives assume individual variation in the expression of leadership traits among leaders, and the preference for particular leadership traits among those selecting leaders (see also Antonakis, Day, & Schyns, 2012).

This evolutionary perspective is largely silent on the underlying mechanisms by which followers identify leaders, despite recognition that human leadership typically involves modest, if any, coercion (Ahlquist & Levi, 2011). Whether leaders are selected directly by voting or appointment, or whether they emerge more slowly as the followers allow increasing influence of the most prototypical individuals (Hogg, 2001) is probably not that critical from an evolutionary perspective. Of more significance is the impact on the followers of their choice of leader: in contemporary society, the selection of leaders likely falls along a continuum, from a democratic vote of followers typical of political office, to the appointment of a leadership position, such as the head of a government department or a conventional chief executive officer, by individuals that may not necessarily be followers. The latter might more closely approximate the evolutionary perspective, since natural selection ensures consequences for their decisions: those selecting the leader (and they may not necessarily be followers) are directly accountable for their choices. In contrast, while elected leaders are accountable to their voting followers, those voting are not accountable for their choice of leader. Nevertheless, it is unclear how natural selection can act on the complex process by which leaders emerge, especially given the multiple leadership traits that may be relevant in some contexts but not in others (e.g. Lord, Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001, Lord & Emrich, 2001, Mumford et al., 2000c, Zaccaro, 2012).

A recurring theme in leadership research concerns the prevalence, role and impact of physically large, and potentially intimidating, leaders — the so-called *Big Man* model (e.g. Gladwell, 2005, Kramer, 2006). Recent studies attempt to provide an evolutionary perspective to this model by drawing on inferences about the lifestyles of our ancestors (Blaker et al., 2013; Murray & Murray, 2011; Murray & Schmitz, 2011; Spisak et al., 2011) and the frequently reported size asymmetry in the outcome of non-human animal contests (e.g. Hardy & Briffa, 2013). While details of this perspective are likely to be controversial, it emphasizes the role of followers by arguing that natural selection favors followers' ability to identify leadership characteristics that will benefit both followers and leaders: in this case, physically intimidating leaders will provide some security against attack by other groups. Importantly, the advantage of selecting physically large individuals as leaders lies in their capacity to intimidate opponents outside, rather than those within the group. Support for this view of leadership selection among contemporary humans is mixed: two-thirds of studies ($n = 24$) employing a variety of methodologies and with subjects that included both adults and children, report positive associations between height and leadership (Bass, 1990), with more recent studies providing further support (e.g. Gladwell, 2005; Masur, Masur, & Keating, 1984; Gawley, Perks, & Curtis, 2009; McCann, 2001; but see Stulp, Buunk, Verhulst, & Pollet, 2013). Several recent questionnaire instruments similarly document a preference for taller leaders (e.g. Blaker et al., 2013, Hamstra, 2014, Murray & Schmitz, 2011) and, indirectly, positive correlations between height and workplace success (Judge & Cable, 2004). On balance, there is likely very weak evidence for a relationship between body size and leadership, since the relatively large number of studies that report either a negative or no association suggests there are many more that are unreported (Bass, 1990).

The role of age in leadership attributes has received less recent attention (Walter & Scheibe, 2013), despite being easily discerned through facial cues (Spisak, Grabo, Arvey & van Vught, 2014). Bass (1990) provides equivocal evidence of a relationship between age and leadership, with only half the sample of studies ($n = 16$) reporting a positive association. Nevertheless, more recent studies indicate that age influences leadership styles and behaviors (e.g. Mumford, Marks, Connelly, Zaccaro, & Reiter-Palmon, 2000b; Spisak, 2012; Spisak, Grabo, Arvey, & van Vugt, 2014; Zacher, Rosing, & Frese, 2011), and organization outcomes are also affected by the age of the leader (reviewed in Walter & Scheibe, 2013). Precisely what age-related characteristics determine these outcomes are poorly understood: experience of leadership is not important (e.g. Fiedler, 1970), but broader knowledge and social judgment appear to be important for humans (e.g. Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000a), as they are for other animals (e.g. McComb et al., 2011; but see Antonakis, 2009). Accordingly, an evolutionary perspective might predict that those selecting leaders will use age as a proxy characteristic, although the direction of their preference may depend upon the goals of the followers (see Spisak et al., 2014).

Correlations between potential leadership traits, such as height and age, with a leadership role are typically hampered by the endogeneity between the identity of the leader and the leader's performance: leaders that perform poorly are likely to be quickly replaced (Ahlquist & Levi, 2011). Additionally, studies investigating traits that might be used to select leaders should ensure that leaders and others are drawn from the same sampling population. It is inappropriate to include in the sample of non-leaders,

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