



The face of leadership: Perceiving leaders from facial expression



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ABSTRACT

The aim of the two studies presented here was to add to our knowledge about the contribution of facial expression to the perception of leadership. We assessed participants' prototypes of leadership. In addition, participants were shown pictures of different facial expressions. First impressions of leadership from the facial expressions were compared to the participants' prototypes. The results indicate that the participants used all available information, including facial appearance, expression, context of communication, appropriateness, and authenticity of expression to form complex prototypes. When the facial expressions in the studies matched the participants' prototypes, first impressions of leadership were higher. Therefore, understanding what is inside the perceiver's mind is significant for understanding leadership perceptions. On the basis of these two studies, we recommend that leaders should be aware of the influence their facial expressions have on their followers' perception of their leader-likeness.

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1. Introduction

It has been widely demonstrated that facial expression influences perception, impressions and image (Aguinis, Simonsen, & Pierce, 1998; Cohn & Ekman, 2008; Glaser & Salovey, 1998; Krumhuber, Manstead, & Kappas, 2006). In fact, many professions, such as flight attendants (Hochschild, 1983) or bill collectors (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987), presuppose the use of specific facial displays as part of their professional identity. Leadership is another occupation where the expression of emotions is important. Famous leaders, such as Ronald Reagan and Martin Luther King, are renowned for their skills in communicating emotions (BBC NEWS, 2004; Ling, 2003). In addition, the importance of leaders' emotional expressivity has been highlighted in studies on charismatic, transformational, and authentic leadership (Ashkanasy & Tse, 2000; Bono & Ilies, 2006; Goffee & Jones, 2005). Furthermore, the use of positive emotions has been found to be important for leadership emergence (Kellelt, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006; Wolff, Pescosolido, & Druskat, 2002). However, our knowledge about the impact of these emotions, as conveyed by leaders' facial expressions, is still limited.

With respect to leadership, Kenney, Blascovich, and Shaver (1994) maintain that leadership lies in the perceivers' minds. Consequently, the understanding of perception plays an important part in understanding leadership. The studies presented here aim to add to our knowledge about influences on the perception of leadership; specifically, the contribution of facial expressions to first impressions.

In the area of leadership, prior research on expressions has mainly focused on political leaders' emotional displays (Bucy, 2000; Bucy & Bradley, 2004; Bucy & Newhagen, 1999; Masters & Sullivan, 1989; Sullivan & Masters, 1988) and leaders' general emotional displays (Damen, Van Knippenberg, & Van Knippenberg, 2008; Lewis, 2000). However, to our knowledge, research on facial expression has not yet used sophisticated methods available in other psychological settings (Ekman, 1992; Ekman & Rosenberg, 1997; Hess, Blairy, & Kleck, 2000; Knutson, 1996). Research has shown that subtle differences between facial

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expressions, in terms of facial muscle movement and intensity, can make a difference in terms of the perceptual impact (Ekman, Friesen, & Hager, 2002; Surakka & Hietanen, 1998). Consequently, the credibility of leadership research into emotional displays depends on the accuracy of the description of facial expressions (see Rosenberg, 2005).

Our research integrates psychological methods of investigating facial expressions and existing knowledge of leadership perception. Our aim is to explain in more detail how facial expressions create first impressions of leadership; that is, which facial expressions increase or decrease perceptions of leadership and how these facial expressions affect the perception of a leader's traits.

In the following, we draw on two different types of research to derive our hypotheses: (1) leadership impression formation as part of the wider area of perception, and (2) research on facial expression. Subsequently, we outline two studies examining first impressions of leaders' facial expressions. Finally, the general discussion and conclusions follow.

2. Theoretical background

Prior research has indicated that leadership is, at least partly, constructed by perceivers (e.g., Gray & Densten, 2007; Schyns, Felfe, & Blank, 2007). In the next sections, we review how leadership is perceived and how perception is related to facial expression.

Specifically, *stereotypes* play an important role in perception (Vonk, 1994). A stereotype is a set of expectations about characteristics of certain social groups (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Konst & Van Breukelen, 2005). Such expectations can be used as evaluative 'filters' which help interpreting behavior. For instance, the expectation of a leader being dynamic and competent is used when evaluating a person's behavior as leader-like. Stereotypes, therefore, implicitly and automatically define a large part of our perception of others (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). With respect to leadership, these schemas, stereotypes and prototypes are often referred to as implicit leadership theories.

2.1. Implicit leadership theories

ILTs are expectations of leaders' qualities and behaviors, based on previous experiences (Kenney et al., 1994). Based on an information-processing model, Hall and Lord (1995) argue that people use their ILTs as a reference point for the evaluation of leaders. The result of this comparison determines whether someone is categorized as a leader or not. Empirically, Schyns et al. (2007) found that ILTs affect actual leader perception. Gray and Densten (2007) suggested that leaders who behave in ways that are congruent with their followers' ILTs are more likely to win their support. Indeed, a match between an individual's leader prototype and a leader's actual behavior leads to more favorable evaluations (Nye & Forsyth, 1991). To conclude, people have expectations of leaders which serve as evaluative criteria for their perceptions.

In his seminal work on the attribution of leadership, Calder (1977) argues that believing that a leader's trait generates a behavior will result in the attribution of the trait when this particular behavior is observed. Transferring this idea to expectations of facial expressions, we can assume, for example, that if the trait 'dominant' produces a behavioral expectation of a frown, when someone perceives a frown the inference would be 'dominant.'

2.2. Leadership prototypes and perceptual components

A number of studies highlight the importance of perceptual components as integrated in symbolic information. For example, Rosette, Leonardelli, and Phillips (2008) found a link between leadership prototypes and leader race. Specifically, being white was found to be more central in participants' prototypes than not being white. Similarly, Scott and Brown (2006) showed that respondents found it easier to perceive agentic behaviors as leader-like when these were displayed by men rather than women. In another line of research, Niedenthal, Winkelman, Mondillon, and Vermeulen (2009) found that facial expressions are significant in understanding emotional concepts. This is important as it shows that facial expressions provide information which can be considered central in impression formation. Giessner and Schubert's (2007) results indicate that participants' evaluations of leaders' power were mentally represented in a vertical space. The latter reveals that perceptual features, such as vertical positioning in space, influence leadership perceptions. Finally, Lord and Shondrick (2011) highlight the significance of nonverbal channels, such as leaders' appearance and voice in creating solid embodied perceptual constructions which contribute to leadership perceptions. These three studies, as well as previous lines of research (Rosette et al., 2008; Scott & Brown, 2006), emphasize the significance of perceptual components in understanding symbolic information. To conclude, it seems that perceptual components are central to ILTs, and that facial expressions might be among the most important components.

2.3. Facial expressions and trait impressions: The underlying theory

Darwin's seminal writings (1872/1965) stress the informative character of facial expressions regarding emotions and behavioral intentions. He proposed an evolutionary perspective of the basic function of facial expressions in expressing emotions (e.g., an anger facial expression indicates that a person is angry) and more complex functions, such as predicting the behavioral intentions of others ('is the angry person going to attack or am I safe?'). Recent studies support that when observing facial expressions, perceivers go beyond the emotional label behind the expression to infer underlying intentions and personality traits (McArthur & Baron, 1983; Montepare & Dobish, 2003; Todorov, Said, Engell, & Oosterhof, 2008; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2008). Especially regarding personality traits, Secord (1958) proposed the concept of "temporal extension." Temporal extension means that facial

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