CATEGORIZING LEADERS BASED ON THEIR GAZE

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Abstract

The visual dimension of leadership has been emphasized in our contemporary, visual, era. This research discusses visual elements, and more specifically the gaze, as signs of leadership. Nine portrait paintings were shown to the participants, who were seven persons working in the field of social and health care, front-line managers and researchers. The participants were asked to reflect on the leadership qualities of the people in the paintings. The data was analyzed by membership categorization analysis in order to study what kinds of leadership categories the participants created on the basis of the visual qualities of the leaders' gaze. Four categories of leaders were recognized in the analysis: egotistic leader, uncertain leader, indifferent leader, and communicative leader. This research raises the question of how conscious we are of the power of visual features in our interpretations of leadership, which can become concretized, for example, during recruitment.

Keywords

Leadership, Visual, Gaze, Membership Categorization Analysis

1. Introduction

We live in a visual world and use visual elements to communicate, express, and construct our understanding of it. Visual communication is largely based on visual orders embodying

cultural habits of producing, interpreting, and understanding the visual. Different times and cultures have different visual orders that create conditions for perceiving and interpreting the visual. Visual orders play an important role in person perception as well, forming normative expectations of how people look and act in their everyday lives and roles. (Seppänen, 2005) Many times, we are not aware of the visual orders but make use of them unconsciously (Buck & VanLear, 2002).

The visual dimension of leadership has been emphasized in our contemporary, visual, era. Some researchers even claim that nonverbal, and visual, communication plays a more important role than verbal communication in interaction (Ekman, 1973; Hall & Mast, 2007). Research shows that a leader's nonverbal communication may affect subordinates both positively and negative. The members of a work community make far-reaching interpretations of leaders based on their visual features, such as facial expressions, physical appearance, gestures, and attire (Cherulnik, Turns, & Wilderman, 1990; Martikainen & Hujala, 2107; Stroker, Garretsen, & Speeuwers, 2016; Talley & Temple, 2015). A leader's gaze has been previously studied in terms of turn-taking in interaction (Liuzza et al., 2011), but there seems to be less research examining the interpretations the perceivers make based on the visual qualities of a leader's gaze.

This research discusses visual elements, and more specifically the gaze, as signs of leadership. Nine portrait paintings were shown to the participants, who were seven persons working in the field of social and health care, front-line managers and researchers, in Finland. The participants were asked to reflect on the leadership qualities of the people in the paintings. The initial analysis of the data revealed that the participants categorized leaders based on their visual cues. Among the visual cues, the leaders' gaze emerged as significant. Accordingly, this research applies membership categorization analysis in order to study what kinds of leadership categories the participants created on the basis of the visual qualities of the leaders' gaze.

2. Theoretical Background: Gaze and Facial Expression in Interaction

People make inferences about other people's social characteristics on the basis of their visual appearances (Congo-Poottaren, 2017; Hess, Adams, & Kleck, 2008; Little, 2016). This is regarded as a basic human process in terms of predicting other people's intentions and future behavior (Ilies et al., 2013; Skowronski & Ambady, 2008). Among nonverbal cues, facial

expressions, and especially gaze, play a major role (Little, 2016; Skowronski & Ambady, 2008; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2008).

Gaze behavior in interaction has been widely discussed in research literature. Mainly, this focuses on examining the role of gaze during dialogue, especially in terms of turn-taking (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2002; Ho, Fouslham, & Kinstone 2015; Kendon 1967; Macdonald & Tatler, 2013). Research show that for little children, gaze has a communicative value already before the development of spoken language skills (Thoermer & Sodian, 2001). Birmingham, Bischof, and Kingstone (2009) claim that when observing images of people, observers tend to focus on examining the eyes in order to make inferences of the intentions and motivations of the people in the images (see also Castelhano, Wieth, & Henderson, 2007). Gullberg (2002) suggest that people pay attention to the gaze even more in real interactions, since gaze is experienced as expressing information about people's communicative skills and interactional intentions (Friesen & Kingstone, 1998; Kobayashi & Koshima, 2001). Furthermore, gaze is considered to evoke emotional responses in onlookers (Fox et al., 2007; Hietanen & Leppänen, 2003; Holmes & Green, 2006). The inferences based on human gaze are made both explicitly and implicitly (Emery, 2000).

Liuzza et al. (2011) used eye-tracking technology to examine how the gaze of political leaders influences the gaze of followers. They found that social status plays a crucial role in gaze behavior (Liuzza et al., 2011). Facial expressions convey important information about leaders, and they evoke various behavioral responses in perceivers (Mcdermott, 2014; Nana, Jackson, & Burch, 2010; Olivola, Eubanks, & Lovelace, 2014; Trishas & Schyns, 2012). Spisak and his colleagues (2012) and Little (2014) suggest that visual orders concerning a leader's facial expression may be gender-specific. The existing research on leaders' gaze seems to apply mainly quantitative methods. In order to detect more nuanced experiences of the participants concerning a leader's gaze, this study applies qualitative membership categorization analysis. The objective of the study is to examine how the participants interpret leaders' gaze and what kind of categories of leaders they construct based on the gaze.

3. Research Method

We continuously categorize people and environments. Categorization is a fundamental human activity that is carried out both consciously and unconsciously (Bowker & Star, 2000; Housley & Fitzgerald, 2015). A large amount of the knowledge that people have and share is

stored in categories (Sacks, 1992; Fitzgerald, 2015). By categorizing people and environments, we use our cultural knowledge to orientate ourselves in our everyday lives: that is why categorization is an important resource in social interaction (Fitzgerald, 2015; Lepper, 2000). This research uses membership categorization analysis to detect how the participants in the research categorize leaders based on their gaze.

Membership categorization analysis was developed by Harvey Sacks in the 1960s, when he wanted to research the principles and methods through which people categorize themselves and other people into various membership categories in social situations (Fitzgerald, 2015; Hester & Eglin, 1997; Lepper, 2000). Membership categorization can be roughly understood as a means of recognizing people by locating them in specific categories (Lepper, 2000). We do not categorize people verbally only, but also visually on the basis of what we see (Bowker & Star, 2000; Lepper, 2000; Sacks, 1992). Thus, the visual characteristics of people and their behavior can serve as category-bound features on the basis of which we categorize them, for example, when acting in various social roles (Jayyusi, 1984). Sacks' (1972, 1992) ideas of visual categorization resemble the concept of visual order introduced in visual culture studies, referring to culturally learned ways of interpreting and understanding the visual (Seppänen, 2006).

This qualitative small-scale research discusses the visual qualities of leaders' gaze as signs of leadership. Nine portrait paintings of leaders were shown to the participants, who were seven persons working in the field of social and health care, as front-line-managers and researchers. The participants were then asked to reflect on the leadership qualities of the people in the paintings. All the participants were female and their age varied between 35 and 55. When perceiving portrait paintings of leaders, the participants first observed them on their own for approximately five minutes, writing down their thoughts and experiences. This was followed by a conversation in which each participant brought up her own points of view. Finally, the paintings were reflected on collaboratively. The conversation was recorded and transcribed.

The analysis focuses on finding out what kinds of categories of leaders the participants formed on the basis of the visual qualities of their gaze. In the analysis, the attention was paid to the ways the participants described and interpreted leaders' gaze verbally. These interpretations referred to specific leadership characteristics that formed the basis for categorizing leaders. The paintings functioned as cultural mirrors or counter images (Martikainen, 2011) that directed the participants to reflect on their conceptions of leadership based on visual cues.

4. Results

When the participants observed leader portraits, facial expressions emerged as important cues in terms of categorizing the leaders. The participants paid careful attention to the facial features, making inferences about leaders based on them. The important role of facial expressions came forth when interpreting a leader portrait in which the leader was standing backwards. The participants categorized this leader tentatively based on other visual features, such as posture and clothes, but pointed out that it was impossible to make any definitive categorizations without seeing the face.

"He is backwards and I can't see his face … so it's difficult to say what he is like." (participant 3)

"I would like to see his face before nominating him a leader." (participant 5)

Among facial expressions, the gaze seemed to play a crucial role. The participants analyzed the quality of the gaze closely, constructing four distinct categories of leaders based on it. These four categories are: egotistic leader, uncertain leader, indifferent leader, and communicative leader. (Figure 1) The first two, the egotistic and uncertain leaders, are interconnected in terms of authority and self-confidence, embodying the opposites; however, the last two, the indifferent and communicative leaders, are interconnected in terms of involvement and communication, expressing the opposites as well. The four categories of leadership will be discussed below and elucidated by the excerpts of data.

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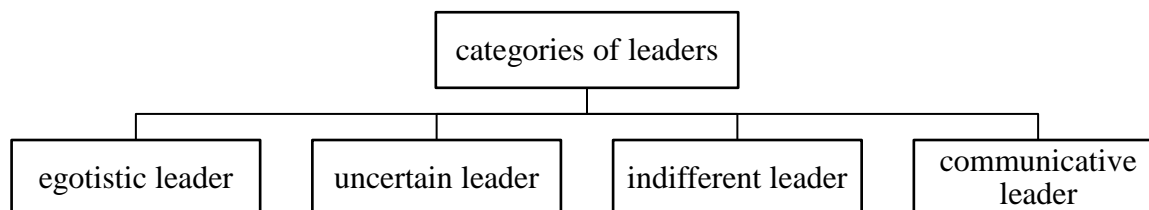
Figure 1: *Categories of leaders based on their gaze*

4.1 Egotistic Leader

In the category of the egotistic leader, the most decisive characteristic was a downward directed gaze. The participants experienced this kind of gaze as judging, cold, and distant. Some participants interpreted the downward-looking gaze as a sign of arrogance and self-emphasis that made the leader appear superior. The leader emerged as proud and strong.

"She is cold, distant, and proud. She looks down on you and judges you." (participant 2)

"She looks down on you, which creates a slightly unpleasant feeling of the person. She seems to think she is above everybody else. She must be very strong." (participant 5)

Some participants regarded the downward-looking gaze as an expression of ignorance, as well. The leader appeared mean, emphasizing their authority and underestimating their superiors. This created an impression that the leader does not value the efforts of staff members.

"This judging gaze downwards (…) seems to express that she couldn't care less about my opinions." (participant 1)

4.2 Uncertain Leader

The leaders described as uncertain were those who did not look directly at the spectator, but looked down or past the spectator. This was experienced as a sign of reserve and even shyness. As a leader characteristic, this was experienced as disturbing and unfavorable.

"It disturbs me that he doesn't look at me … he looks down. Maybe he is reserved." (participant 1)

"She looks down (…) I think it is a sign of uncertainty." (participant 4)

Leaders with a sideways-depicted torso glancing at the spectators over their shoulder were also experienced as uncertain. Some participants characterized this type of gaze as suspicious, as if the leader was uncertain about the staff members' attitudes towards them. Others interpreted this as a sign of a leader who does not trust their subordinates.

"I get the impression that he is fearful (…) or even suspicious. He glances furtively over his shoulder, and the other half of his face is in the shadow. (…) He looks cautious. (participant 4)

A few participants considered the hint of reserve in the gaze as a sign of the leader's irresponsibility. This point of view was based on the assumption that the leader has not put full effort into their job, and for this reason, avoids looking into the eyes of staff members.

"I think his gaze is reserved (…) He doesn't take responsibility. I wouldn't choose him for a leader." (participant 3)

4.3 Indifferent Leader

The leaders who did not look straight at the spectator were experienced as not being interested in their communication partner. This created the impression of disinterest in terms of interaction with staff members. In addition, the leaders who focused their full attention on the task they were doing were regarded as not being communicative.

"Well, this person isn't interested in the job at all. (…) She doesn't want to communicate. (…) She looks past, not at me." (participant 1)

"He concentrates too much on details. A leader should see things in a wider perspective. (…) And he isn't communicative at all (…) because his gaze is concentrated on something that he holds in his hands." (participant 2)

Another characteristic the participants interpreted as mediating meanings of indifference was a gaze that they described as hollow, listless, or inattentive. The leader with a hollow gaze was experienced as bored, as well as lacking initiative. The empty gaze seemed to signal that the leader is not living to the full at present.

"Her gaze is so inattentive. (…) It seems that life just goes over her." (participant 3)

"I think she is resigned, bored … reminds me of a dog breed. (…) Does she live here and now? (…) Her gaze is so hollow, lacking liveliness." (participant 4)

4.4 Communicative Leader

In the category of communicative leader, the most decisive feature was a straight gaze looking at the spectator. This created the impression of immediacy—the experience that the leader was there for the staff members. These kinds of leaders were regarded as energetic and straight in terms of determination and full involvement in working for the company. The direct gaze also implied authenticity.

"I see determination in her gaze. Yet, her gaze is soft as well. (…) she is not rigorous. She is a potential leader." (participant 3)

"She is brave and not afraid to throw herself into projects (…) she looks straight and makes straight contact with you. (…) I think she is authentic (…) and present." (participant 7)

In addition to involvement, direct gaze was also interpreted as a sign of openness and willingness to communicate with the members of the work community. Most participants felt that it would be easy to approach this type of leader. The interaction was assumed to be fluent.

"There is a light in her eyes. Her eyes are beautiful. They represent openness for me. It would be easy to interact with her (…) and face her as a leader." (participant 6)

The leaders looking straight at the spectator were mainly evaluated positively. However, some participants interpreted leaders with "gentle and soft eyes" as too kind to be a leader. That is why these participants did not regard them as good leaders, despite their openness to communication.

"I see her as a communicative leader with good interactional skills. I get the impression that she is very kind. (…) Her eyes look so gentle and soft. (…) I think she couldn't deal with tough negotiations. (…) She would be a very kind person, but I cannot see her as a leader. I wouldn't hire her." (participant 4)

One participant brought up her point of view that the leader should not be too open. She regarded too much openness as a drawback for a leader, and claimed that a leader should not be an open book.

"I think she is communicative (…) and meets everybody openly. But her gaze says that you can read her like an open book. And I think a leader cannot be an open book." (participant 3)

4.5 A Few Additional Remarks on the Interpretation of the Gaze

In addition to gaze, most participants commented on other features of facial expressions as well. These contributed to the categorization, fostering the impression formed on the basis of the gaze. For example, the way the mouth was depicted contributed to the categories of egotistic and uncertain leaders.

"Bright red lipstick. (…) She is (…) self-confident." (participant 6)

"I got the impression that he is a little bit shy and reserved. (…) His lips are pursed … as if he was uncertain." (participant 2)

In many comments, facial expression was described in general as expressing certain characteristics of the leader. These descriptions functioned as a "frame" for the interpretation of the gaze. For example, in the category of egotistic leader, the overall facial expression was described as selfish and ruthless, whereas the facial expression of an indifferent leader was described as "phlegmatic".

"I think she could be very extrovert and strong (…) and narcissist. Her facial expression also indicates that she might be very selfish and ruthless." (participant 1)

"She would not be an executive leader. She would delegate her tasks to others. Her phlegmatic facial expression creates the impression. A phlegmatic bystander." (participant 4)

The meaning of a facial expression was not always easy to define. In spite of the contribution of other visual elements, the participants were sometimes left speculating as to the meaning of the facial expression, without being able to reach a conclusion.

"The mouth is stiff, but I can't say if it expresses arrogance or uncertainty" (participant 3)

The data revealed that participants had clear opinions on how a leader should look, or what kinds of facial expressions were appropriate for a leader. In addition to categorizing leaders into negative and positive types of leaders based on facial expressions, they also regarded some types of facial expressions as improper. This shows that participants had conceptions of visual orders regarding leaders' facial expressions that they used as means of categorizing leaders. One participant claimed that it is not appropriate for a leader to show distress or confusion.

> "I get the feeling of catastrophe and chaos (…) I noticed, I think, that a leader must always look calm. (…) A leader cannot look that distressed – at least not when among the staff." (participant 5)

In summary, the participants categorized leaders based on their facial expressions. Among these, the gaze emerged as an important basis of categorization. The participants associated the visual qualities of the gaze with a number of social characteristics forming categories of leaders. A downward-looking, judging gaze was regarded as a sign of an egotistic leader, whereas leaders looking past the spectator were interpreted as uncertain or indifferent, depending on the overall facial expression and the posture of the torso. The category of communicative leader was mainly based on the leader's direct gaze at the spectator. Even though the participants used other facial features to define the expressive content of the gaze, they could not always reach a definitive interpretation. When interpreting the gaze and categorizing leaders based on it, the participants seemed to use their knowledge of visual orders connected with a leader's appropriate visual appearance.

5. Discussion

Four categories of leaders were recognized in the analysis: egotistic leader, uncertain leader, indifferent leader, and communicative leader. This small-scale research is highly contextual and its results cannot be generalized. However, this research showed that the participants regarded the visual qualities of the leaders' gaze as category-bound features that characterized and defined the leaders. The visual qualities of the gaze were interpreted as expressing leaders' personalities, as well as their ways of acting and communicating. However, two key notions must be pointed out. In real-life situations, the visual element is not the only one that has an effect, but it is intertwined with both verbal and other non-verbal elements, as well as motion. Accordingly, examining still pictures may overemphasize the role of the visual element.

This particular research discusses the role of the gaze when categorizing leaders, but it must be remembered that participants could perceive a number of other visual features in the paintings, contributing to the impression formation (Adams & Kleck, 2005; Holmes, Richards, & Green, 2006). It may be that the separation of various visual features for analytical purposes does not do justice to the integrative nature of visual perception, in which various visual stimuli merge in impression formation (Viggiano & Marzi, 2010). However, bearing this in mind, this study shows that the participants were able to characterize various visual qualities of the leaders' gaze, as well as the inferences based on them.

In addition, research shows that the communicative meanings of the gaze are context-dependent (Ho, Fouslham, & Kinstone 2015; Itier et al., 2007; Macdonald & Taltler, 2013; Nummenmaa et al., 2009). Thus, the observations of still images may not fully correspond to the observations made in real-world interaction. Finally, the selection of pictures influences the research results. In the future, it would be interesting to create research situations in which participants produce pictures of leaders themselves or reflect on, for example, video material recorded in natural situations.

The categories of egotistic, communicative, and indifferent leaders have much in common with the classic conceptions of authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire styles of leadership (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939; Martikainen & Hujala, 2017). It was interesting to observe that the participants constructed similar categories on the basis of tiny visual details. The categories of egotistic, uncertain, and indifferent leaders clearly referred to negatively experienced leader characteristics, whereas the category of communicative leader referred to a positively experienced leader characteristic. This division of leaders into "positive" and "negative" categories seems to reflect a common habit of making good–bad judgments when perceiving and categorizing people (see Ames & Bianchi, 2008).

The data showed that the participants used their conceptions of the visual orders related to leadership when categorizing the leaders depicted in the portrait paintings. The application of such conceptions was both conscious and unconscious. It seemed that the visual characteristics that, according to the students, were not typical for a leader, made them aware of their normally tacit conceptions of visual orders (see Seppänen, 2005; Freeman & Ambady, 2014; Sacks, 1972). Thus, portrait paintings teased out the participants' tacit conceptions of leadership.

6. Conclusion

The results of this small-scale research are based on seven Finnish participants' observations of portrait paintings, which creates certain research limitations. Firstly, observations are based on visual cues only. In real life situations, perceptions of leaders consist of multimodal substrata affecting and modifying the meanings of the visual. Secondly, paintings are still images excluding changes in facial expressions as well as movement. Thirdly, all participants were Finns observing the leader portraits from the point of view of Finnish culture and norms in terms of leadership and visual orders. In summary, the results of this small-scale research are very contextual and cannot be generalized as such.

Despite the limitations, this research raises the question of how conscious we are of the power of visual features in our interpretations of leadership, which can become concretized, for example, during recruitment. Furthermore, this research raises the question of how conscious the leaders themselves are about their visual messages. As this study shows, people construct conceptions of a leader's personality, social skills, and work-related involvement based on their visual features—in this case their gaze—and categorize them according to certain types of leaders. This categorical work, based on a leader's visual features, may have far-reaching consequences in terms of interaction and the general atmosphere in the work community. This is why more conscious attention should be paid to the visual dimensions of leadership. This would benefit both leaders and staff members.

The interpretation of nonverbal behavior is culture-bound (Nualsri & Chaiya, 2016). In our modern era, organizations are getting increasingly multicultural, which creates challenges in terms of nonverbal visual communication as well. In the future, it would be interesting to examine how employees with various cultural backgrounds interpret leaders' gaze and other visual elements of leadership.

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