

Challenging Perceptions of Effective Leadership through Role Models

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Mini Review

Volume 4 Issue 6

Received Date: November 28, 2019

Published Date: December 06, 2019

DOI: 10.23880/pprij-16000233

Abstract

In America, images of powerful leadership appear relatively homogenous. The mental representations individuals form of people effectively engaged in prestigious and impactful leadership roles is light skinned. We review relevant literature suggesting the psychological processes by which atypical exemplars of diverse leadership in specific roles, but also more broadly across powerful institutions, may change these mental representations. We propose these mechanisms may impact adolescents to a greater degree than adults. We discuss the implications of these psychological processes in the context of adolescents' position as the next generation of leaders and decision-makers.

Keywords: Leadership; Diversity; Adolescents; Role models

Introduction

Individuals in positions of power serve as aspirational role models, shaping others' beliefs about possibilities for the future. The President of the United States serves as one particularly salient exemplar of a leader and role model. Prior to 2008, all forty-three presidents identified as White and male. This homogeneity held the potential to create a very narrow representation of the racial and gender composition of what constitutes prototypical, expected, and effective leadership. The 2008 election broke some of this demographic equivalence, seeing the inauguration of Barack Obama, a self-identified Black man. Could America's racially homogenous history or Obama's campaign for the presidency influence beliefs of what effective leadership looks like?

Mental Representations of Leadership

In October of 2007, just before Barack Obama's first Election Day and nine months after his official campaign launch, we measured the mental image voters created when they envisioned this candidate [1]. We assessed

visual representations of his facial features, noting whether they saw him as darker in skin tone and hence more prototypical of Black people or lighter and more prototypical of White people—the only racial demographic reflected in this political position to date. We identified subgroups of voters: some represented his skin as lighter than it actually was, while others represented his skin as darker. Forming a mental image of Obama as lighter skinned, statistically adjusting for political party affiliation and indicators of racist ideologies, increased the odds that Americans cast their vote in his favor. In fact, 75% of individuals who represented his skin as lighter voted for him in the election, while 89% of those who represented his skin as darker voted for the alternative candidate, John McCain. In other words, those who envisioned Obama as more prototypically Black in appearance supported the other candidate—Obama's competition—who reflected the status quo. Those who formed an image of Obama not as he actually appeared, but instead as more similar to White people, however, showed greater support for this atypical candidate. These results suggested that effective

leaders—in the minds' eye—do not look like prototypically Black Americans.

The associations between light and good, in addition to dark and bad, are not exclusive to the sampled voters in this study alone. Indeed, John McCain's campaign team had noticeably darkened Democratic candidate Barack Obama's skin tone in attack advertisements intended to activate associations of criminality and general negativity [2]. Hillary Clinton's campaign team during the Democratic Primary also darkened Obama's skin tone in attack ads defaming his political actions [3]. Outside of this particular candidate and this specific election, archival analyses of a decade of media depictions of Black and White politicians and social celebrities showed a systematic pairing of photographs depicting individuals with darker skin tone when disparaging their character compared to when praising those very same people [4]. Individuals in the spotlight who are well regarded in the most important, prestigious, and esteemed positions of power in society were skewed towards appearing White—at least until the start of Obama's eight-year presidency.

Challenging the Status Quo

Through his two-term administration, Obama challenged the status quo of White leadership and may have shifted beliefs about who can be a leader and what successful leaders look like. Indeed, experimental evidence suggests that exposure to positive Black exemplars like Martin Luther King, Jr. increases implicit positive regard for African Americans compared to White Americans [5]. It is possible that individuals who have been exposed to a more heterogeneous presidency in their lifetime may hold beliefs that imply greater support for demographic diversity in positions of power—such individuals would be current day adolescents. For adolescents in middle school now, most of their lives have been marked by a Black presidency. For these adolescents, Obama serves as a particularly salient role model and holds the possibility for strongly swaying views on who belongs in such powerful positions.

As espoused in Bandura's social cognitive learning theory, people learn from watching others. Seeing diverse others engaged in behaviors, including leading, shapes beliefs and teaches people how to follow in suit. Indeed, the interaction among individuals, behaviors, and environments serves as input for observational learning [6]. Such imitation can have implications for career aspirations, beliefs about belongingness, and attitudes regarding who fits in certain fields [7,8].

As people look around, individuals imitate the people they see and determine are worthy of emulation [9]. Determinations of worth, in this regard, and emulation as a result are informed by shared demographic characteristics, perhaps particularly so for members of underrepresented social groups. For instance, in science, technology, engineering, and math, where women are traditionally underrepresented, female undergraduate students performed better and stayed in the field longer when women rather than men taught introductory courses in these areas [7]. Likewise, Black cadets at the West Point Military Academy were more likely to emulate their tactical officer's career trajectory when training under a Black rather than White officer [8]. Further, for Black elementary and middle school students, having Black teachers, compared to White teachers, improved performance in reading and math [10]. Exposure to similar role models that defy stereotypes of racialized leadership hierarchies enhances achievement and influences aspirations, particularly among individuals who have been underrepresented in these positions of power.

Of course, beliefs about what good leadership looks like originate from more than just the role models to whom individuals are exposed. The cognitive associations between dark and bad are pervasive and basic but serve as input for social evaluations [4]. These associations emerge in early childhood and exist across nearly every age, gender, racial, and national group investigated [11,12]. They manifest in implicit measures of social evaluation of Black and White children among early adolescents [13]. And they shape common preferences like whether a child chooses to play with a Black doll over a White doll [14-16] and the number of tokens redeemable for stickers that are given to a Black child than a White child [17].

However, research suggests that the associations young people hold pairing skin tone and favorability are malleable [18]. For instance, exposure to greater diversity, by way of racially integrated classrooms, shifted preferences among Black and White children; the Black doll was chosen more often for play relative to children's choices in segregated classrooms [18]. Moreover, when teachers selected the Black rather than White doll to assume an imaginary leadership role in the classroom, children's preferences for including the Black doll in their own play also increased.

Today's adolescents saw Barack Obama's presidency coupled with additional changes in societal trends with

regards to representation in other leadership positions. The 2018 American Congress was the most racially diverse seen to date [19]. People of color have nearly quadrupled their share of leading roles in broadcast television in a recent five-year period of time [20]. Latino-owned business revenue is surpassing that of White-owned businesses [21]. As the demographics of leaders who are determined worthy of modeling diversify, so too may the representations of effective leadership for members of underrepresented social groups and majority groups as well.

Conclusion

In 2009, Obama nominated Sonia Sotomayor to the United States Supreme Court. Sotomayor's father, who died when she was nine, was born in Puerto Rico, did not speak English, received a third-grade education, and worked as a machinist [22]. Her mother, also a native Puerto Rican, was a telephone operator and nurse, who raised her children alone after her husband's passing [23]. Sotomayor graduated summa cum laude from Princeton University and received her J.D. from Yale Law School [22]. As the first and only Hispanic and Latina Supreme Court Justice, she wrote, "But a role model in the flesh provides more than inspiration; his or her very existence is confirmation of possibilities one may have every reason to doubt, saying, yes, someone like me can do this" [24].

Shifts in representation of the types of people who hold leadership roles may affect beliefs individuals hold but also those known to society at large. However, their more immediate and most stark impact may emerge among today's adolescent population [25]. The changing demographics in leadership brings increased opportunities to diversify the set of high-profile role models adolescents have available as sources of input while forming their beliefs about what leadership looks like. This happens by way of observational learning in addition to destabilizing cognitive associations that couple people of color with qualities antithetical to leadership [26]. By seeing leaders who do not look like the status quo, society may in fact change the status quo.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by a grant awarded to Balcetis from the NYU Institute for Human Development and Social Change.

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