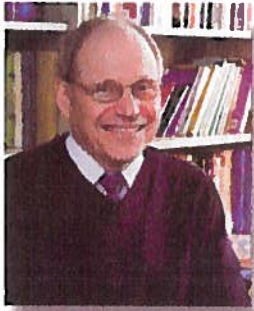


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ONE LAST TIME! IS LEADERSHIP BORN OR MADE?

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A question as old as the ages: Is leadership born or made? And a response that could only come from an academic: that depends on what leadership is. Why? Three very different aspects of leadership have been studied for close to a century: (1) who becomes a leader, (2) the behaviors and styles that existing leaders manifest and (3) leader effectiveness (i.e., the outcomes of leadership behaviors). Research on whether leadership is born or made have almost exclusively addressed the question of who holds a leadership position in the first instance. Research on this question started well before the end of World War 2, a time when identifying the right leader was often an issue of life or death, and Stogdill (1948) identified two broad findings (which have been remarkably robust across time) from more than 100 quantitative articles published by the end of World War 2.

First, research findings had already isolated the role of individual difference variables, or traits (e.g., extraversion, originality, self-confidence) and affect (e.g., self-control, emotional and mood control) before World War 2. The role of individual differences in leader emergence remains a popular topic for research (e.g., Bono & Judge, 2004), and three broad conclusions can be drawn. Individual differences such as extraversion (1) consistently predict leader emergence, (2) but the variance explained is typically weak at best. (3) Gender remains the most significant individual difference predictor of holding a leadership position, a phenomenon which becomes more pronounced higher in organizations (Barling, 2014).

Second, ascribed (rather than earned) status is a robust indirect predictor of later leader emergence. Socio-economic status either provides (or limits) critical developmental opportunities, for example the quality of schooling and roles models to whom children are exposed, which themselves directly predict whether who will assume a leadership position. Findings such as these, which reinforce within-status leader emergence and the appearance of an intergenerational transmission of leadership phenomenon, tend to leave many observers believing that leadership must be something people are "born with".

Perhaps not surprisingly, most research now focuses on genetic or neuroscientific explanations of leadership emergence. Twin studies over the past decade certainly point to the role of genetic factors in leader emergence. After appropriate statistical controls, genetic factors account for approximately 20-30% of the variance in leader emergence—substantially more than any individual difference variable studied, including personality or gender. At least two studies have now isolated specific genes, with Li et al. (in press) showing in separate samples that the DAT1 10-repeat allele indirectly affects leader emergence through its positive effects on moderate rule breaking, and its negative effects on proactive personality.

Complicating the issue for anyone ready to conclude that leadership is something you are born with, meta-analyses of well over 100 studies conducted over at least six decades across different countries show that leadership can indeed be taught (Avolio et al., 2009). Importantly from a practical perspective, this study shows that not only are leadership interventions effective, they are usually cost-effective too.

To conclude, is leadership is born or made? Both! And we should not be surprised. As with any complex social behavior, searching for simple answers to complex questions might satisfy the need for cognitive simplicity, but will always limit our understanding, and this is true for leadership emergence. Who becomes a leader is the result of multiple different determinants, and our understanding of leader emergence will be now expanded by crossing disciplinary boundaries and investigating the effects of gene-environment interactions.

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