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## **A GOOD LEADER BASED ON GRADUATING STUDENTS' DRAWINGS: A SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS APPROACH**

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### **Abstract**

*This research examines graduating students' conceptions of a good leader and how positive leadership qualities are communicated visually. In order to address this research task, fifteen graduating students in a Finnish upper-secondary vocational college were asked to draw a picture of a good leader and elucidate their drawings verbally. Theoretically, the research draws on the theory of social representations and regards the participants' drawings as reflecting social representations of leadership among graduating students in Finland. The data were analyzed using content analysis. The results show that students regarded a good leader as approachable, caring, supportive, and responsible, as communicated through an either formal or casual but neat physical appearance. This research provides information on graduating students' conceptions of leadership. In addition, it shows the important role leaders' visual nonverbal behavior plays in terms of communicating leadership qualities. The results of this research can provide valuable information for leaders and recruiters on what kinds of assumptions and expectations future employees have of leaders, and what should be taken into consideration when meeting newcomers to the labor market in, for instance, a job interview. In the future, it would be interesting to conduct a similar research with a larger group of*

*participants consisting of students at various levels of education. In addition, it would interesting to study conceptions of leadership among students coming from various cultural backgrounds.*

### **Keywords**

Leadership, Graduating Students, Social Representations Theory, Physical Appearance, Visual Nonverbal Communication

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## **1. Introduction**

Visual nonverbal communication plays a significant role in social interaction (Hall & Mast, 2007). People draw inferences from each other based on visually perceivable characteristics, such as facial expressions, gestures, and attire, which are understood as signs communicating people's personal and social characteristics (Martikainen, 2017; Martikainen & Hujala, 2017; Montepare, 2010). The habit of making judgments on people based on their visual characteristics applies to situations of leisure as well as occupational life (Augoustinos, Walker, & Donaghue, 2014). Often, the formation of impressions based on visual features occurs unconsciously, influencing social interaction in a tacit way (Uleman, Blader, & Todorov, 2005). That is why it is important to study the visual dimensions of social interaction and increase awareness of them.

Prior research has found that leaders' visual nonverbal behavior may contribute to a work organization's atmosphere either positively or negatively (Martikainen, 2017; Martikainen & Hujala, 2017; Nagel, Maurer, & Reinemann, 2012; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). Leaders' facial expressions, gestures, and clothing style may evoke a range of responses influencing subordinates' conceptions of the leader (Little, 2014; Nana, Jackson, & St. J. Burgh, 2010; Stroker, Garretsen, & Spreuwers, 2016; Talley & Temple, 2015). Even leaders' gaze has been found to contribute to conceptions of leaders' relations to their subordinates (Liuzza, Cazzatto, Crostella, Caprara, & Aglioti, 2011; Martikainen, 2017). As prior research shows, leaders' visual features are perceived as communicating their leadership qualities.

We live in a world in which visibility plays an important role (Gil-Glazer, 2017). Image-building is a phenomenon relevant to all areas of social life, including leadership (Amegbe, Owino, & Kerubo, 2017; Nagel et al., 2012). It also affects the ways people conceptualize leadership. This research focuses on discussing graduating students' conceptions of a good leader, based on their drawings and verbal reflections related to their drawings. It will be studied which visually perceivable features characterize a good leader, and which leadership

characteristics the visual features are understood to represent. The data will be analyzed using content analysis.

This kind of research is important because it can provide valuable information for leaders and recruiters on what kinds of assumptions and expectations future employees have of leaders, and what should be taken into consideration when meeting newcomers to the labor market in, for instance, a job interview.

## 2. Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore graduating students' conceptions of a good leader, based on their drawings and verbal reflections. The research questions of this study are: 1) how do graduating students define a good leader and 2) how is good leadership communicated visually. The research focuses on detecting which visual features are understood as characterizing a good leader. In addition, the research attempts to find out which favorable leader characteristics are associated with certain visual features. Recent research on leadership and management has been increasingly interested in visual dimensions of leadership (Martikainen, 2017; Martikainen & Hujala, 2017; Nagel et al., 2012; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2106). The participants in these studies have mainly consisted of employees in various organizations. Deviating from that body of research, the participants of this particular research are graduating students who are about to enter the labor market. Giving voice to graduating students' conceptions of leadership can be identified as the research gap, which this study addresses.

## 3. Theory

As members of cultures and societies, people share common-sense understanding about social matters and phenomena. Serge Moscovici (2001), the founder of the theory of social representations, conceptualized such common-sense understanding as social representations. He regarded social representations as essential facilitators of social life, enabling people to communicate and interact with each other.

Some social representations may acquire a hegemonic position in society (Ben-Asher, 2003; Glăveanu, 2009; Kaprāns, 2015). Due to frequent repetition and efficient distribution in the media, for instance, they may become taken for granted and naturalized (Höijer, 2011; Kaprāns, 2015). Naturalized social representations often influence people's thoughts and actions unconsciously, without people being aware of them (Glăveanu, 2009; Kaprāns, 2015). In

addition to hegemonic social representations, other types of social representations circulate in societies, as well. These can be characterized as emancipatory and polemic social representations rivaling, challenging, or opposing hegemonic social representations (Ben-Asher, 2003; Glăveanu, 2009). Emancipatory and polemic social representations include novel ways of understanding social phenomena typical of various minority groups, for instance (Ben-Asher, 2003). These various kinds of social representations are in dynamic relation, and thus, the status of social representations is subject to change (Ben-Asher, 2003; Glăveanu, 2009).

According to Moscovici (2001), social representations are related to three basic processes in communication: anchoring, objectification, and naturalization. Anchoring refers to the act by which cultural social representations are used as tools for making sense of social phenomena (Privetti, Melotti, & Bonomo, 2017). Objectification, for its part, conceptualizes the verbal or visual expressions of sense making. Through objectification, social representations gain a material form (Sammur, Andreouli, & Gaskell, 2015). Finally, naturalization refers to the process by which social representations become taken for granted due to frequent repetition by the media (Höijer, 2011; Sammut et al., 2015).

Prior research on leadership has recognized and discussed several leadership types and styles. In addition to the classic division of leaders into authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire styles of leadership introduced by Lewin, Lippit, and White (1939), recent research has introduced such conceptions of leadership as charismatic leadership (Grabo & van Vugt, 2016; Sacavém, Martinez, Vieira da Cunha, Abreu, & Johnson, 2017), narcissistic leadership (Anninos, 2018; Nevicka, De Hoogh, Den Hartog, & Belschak, 2018), destructive leadership (Aravena, 2017; Hoffrén, Syvärinen, & Laulainen, 2017), ethical leadership (Avelia, 2017; Caldwell & Anderson, 2017; Ko, Ma, Bartnik, Haney, & Kang, 2018), servant leadership (Amah, 2018; Ling, Liu, & Wu, 2017), and authentic leadership (Ling et al., 2017; Quraishi & Aziz, 2018). Bearing in mind that each of the aforementioned leadership styles have multiple layers, classifying them into either negative or positive leadership styles is problematic (see Khan et al., 2015). However, recent research often relates authoritarian, destructive, laissez-faire, and narcissistic leadership styles to negative aspects of leadership (Anninos 2018; Aravena, 2017; Chaudhry & Javed, 2012; Jian, Chen, Sun, & Yang, 2017), whereas authentic, democratic, ethical, and servant leadership styles are usually related to positive aspects of leadership (Amah, 2018; Foels, Driskell, Mullen, & Salas, 2000; Ko et al., 2018; Mubarak, Noor, & Nunn, 2018).

The participants of this research study visual culture studies at an upper secondary vocational college. Their studies do not include courses on leadership and management. For this reason, it is obvious that various leadership styles aren't familiar to them in theory. In contrast, all of them have some work experience because a five-month internship is included in their curriculum. In addition, most of them have summer jobs. Through these experiences, the participants of this research have gained some practical knowledge and experience of leaders.

This study understands students' drawings as objectifications of social representations of good leadership. Through their drawings, participating students give a tangible form to their common-sense understanding of a good leader. In this research, the drawings, as well as their verbal reflections, are used as means of detecting graduating students' social representations of good leadership.

#### **4. Method**

Fifteen graduating students (all female) in a Finnish upper-secondary vocational college participated in the research. They were asked to draw a picture of a good leader and describe it in writing. Students could choose the materials for drawing the picture themselves. Similarly, they could decide whether to use colors or not. A period of approximately thirty minutes was reserved to complete the assignment. The assignment seemed to motivate the students to reflect on leadership, since all the students completed that task willingly and within the time limit.

The study design is based on the students' drawings. As Rose (2016) suggests, drawings may motivate participants to reflect on the research topic and reveal participants' unconscious conceptions about it. Drawing may also lead the participants to observe the topic from a novel position, which might be rewarding for them (Mannay, 2010). In addition, participant-created visual materials are often understood as more authentic than verbal materials, because they diminish the impact of the researchers' verbal concepts (Mannay, 2010, 2016). Furthermore, drawings and other visual materials may provide the participants with means of expressing their emotions (Rose, 2016; Mannay, 2016).

The data were analyzed using content analysis, which was used to observe and classify the data (Hughes, Johnson, Edgar, Miller, & Cox, 2016; Krippendorff, 2004). Visual content analysis focuses on identifying the visual characteristics of the images (Johnson & Christensen, 2013; Rose, 2016). When scrutinizing the drawings, attention was paid to the gender, age, posture, gestures, facial expression, and attire of the leader depiction. These were understood to

express favorable leadership qualities. The observation of the aforementioned visual elements formed the basis of classification (see Hughes et al., 2016).

The classes of good leaders presented in the results section are based on the verbally expressed leadership characteristics. The examples of drawings, as well as the excerpts from students' verbal comments, will be used to elucidate which visual features communicated the verbally expressed leadership characteristics.

## 5. Results

The students participating in the research depicted a good leader visually in different ways. Eight students drew a picture of a male leader dressed either formally or casually. Five students drew a picture of a female leader who looks either calm and friendly, or efficient and determined. In addition, two students drew a picture in which the gender of the leader cannot be identified. Even though it is difficult to estimate the leaders' ages based on these drawings, three of them looked 20-30 years old, and 10 of them 30-40 years old. The age of the two androgynous leaders cannot be estimated. The results will be presented based on the leaders' gender. Consequently, the leaders are classified in three groups: male leaders, female leaders, and androgynous leaders. Each class of leader will be elucidated with picture examples and data excerpts.

**Table 1:** *Quantification of leader drawings*

Type of leader	Number of students
<b>Male leader</b>	<b>8</b>
Formally dressed	5
Casually dressed	3
<b>Female leader</b>	<b>5</b>
Friendly looking	3
Serious, determined looking	2
<b>Androgynous leader</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Age: 20-30 years</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Age: 30-40 years</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Age: cannot be estimated</b>	<b>2</b>

### 5.1 Male Leaders

Eight students drew a picture of a male leader. In five students' drawings, the leaders look slightly formal. Formal-looking leaders all wear a suit and a tie. Their facial expression is



serious and their gestures are restrained. These leaders' tidy and neat overall appearance is neutral and traditional, and does not attract attention (Figure 1). However, in their verbal accounts, students did not describe these leaders as formal or distant, which one might expect based on the drawings. Instead, the leaders' appropriate appearance was meant to communicate involvement in leading the work community, and ability to organize and manage matters related to work organization.

*“A good leader takes his position as a leader but is no dictator. He keeps things together, but at the same time, listens to his subordinates. He is involved in working for the organization. His neat appearance is meant to communicate this kind of professionalism.” (student 1)*

This kind of leader was considered to be skillful and effective, showing an example to employees. In addition, this type of leader was regarded as responsible, taking the needs of employees into consideration.

*“A good leader is eager to work and make improvements, and by his example motivates other members of the work community do the same.” (student 12)*

A tidy, appropriate, and not eye-catching appearance was considered as ordinary for leaders, communicating trustworthiness and reliability. Leaders wearing a suit were regarded as neither emphasizing their status nor requiring any special attention. This was considered to be a characteristic of a fair leader who takes care of the employees.

*“A good leader doesn't reassert his status even though he wears a suit. Instead he appreciates the employees and they, in turn, should be able to rely on him.” (student 14)*

*“A good leader is humble and fair. He treats the employees equally. He is interested in the employees' matters and wants to promote their well-being. That's why this leader looks like an ordinary leader, nothing special.” (student 8)*

Three students drew a more casual picture of a leader. The casualness was expressed through a smiling face and more relaxed clothes, such as a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Despite the casualness, the clothes look neat. In addition, the gestures are livelier. One leader holds his thumbs up and carries a coffee mug in his hand (Figure 2). Another leader wears a shirt with a tie and jeans, holding his hands behind his back. With a casual appearance, the students communicated approachability and informal communication.

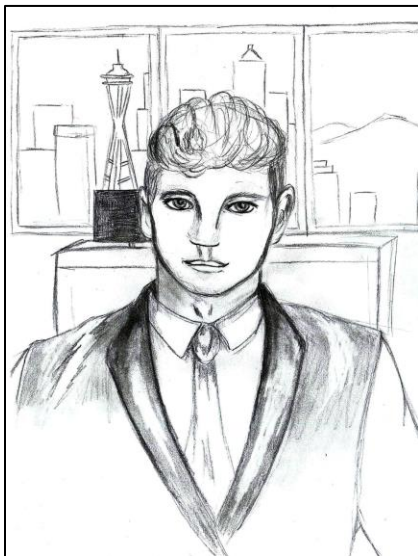
*“A good leader is casual. He wears trousers and just a normal shirt. He smiles, because he is fair, friendly, and easy to approach. He is a good listener.” (student 3)*

The casual looks referred to leaders' positive and supportive nature. They communicated leaders who appreciate employees and encourage them to do their best. In addition, leaders' casual looks seemed to signal that employees do not need to be afraid of making mistakes.

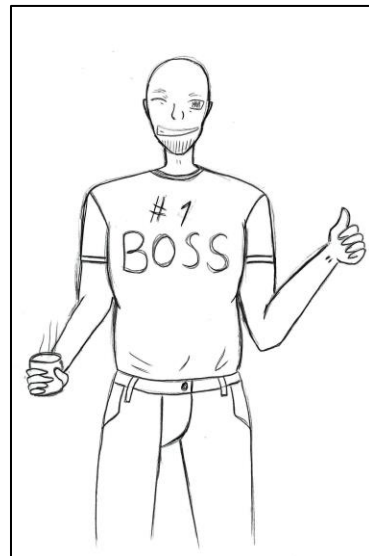
*"A good leader looks friendly and positive. He praises employees for good work and gives positive feedback." (student 2)*

*"A good leader doesn't mock others and doesn't punish if someone fails. Instead, he supports and gives advice on how to go on." (student 10)*

Even though the two types of male leaders detected in the data differed from each other in terms of their attire, facial expression, and gestures, they were meant to communicate quite similar leader characteristics. Both types were regarded as friendly and supportive leaders who do not emphasize their status, but instead, listen to the employees and are involved in promoting their well-being at work. However, while formally dressed leaders were more related to responsibility and hard work, the more casually dressed leaders were associated with approachability, as well as a positive and supportive attitude.



**Figure 1:** *Formally dressed male leader*  
(student 14)



**Figure 2:** *Casually dressed male leader*  
(student 2)

## 5.2 Female Leaders

Five students represented a good leader by drawing a picture of a female leader. While drawings of male leaders depicted either the full body or torso, drawings of female leaders typically depicted only the face/head or torso. Students did not explain the reason for this manner of depiction. However, verbal comments described the female leaders' caring relation to the



employees. For this reason, it seems that close-ups were unconsciously used to depict leaders' intimate and warm relations to the employees (Figure 3).

*“A good leader is calm, understanding, honest, humble, friendly, caring – a warm person.” (student 5)*

However, close-ups were also used to depict another type of female leader, who is determined and work-oriented. This dimension of leadership was communicated through well-considered looks, as well as jewelry, such as earrings and a chain of pearls (Figure 4).

*“She is very efficient and works a lot. She looks tidy and can afford nice jewelry. She shows a good example for the employees. That is why she is a good leader. When necessary, she can also be strict.” (student 6)*

The students who drew pictures of female leaders paid attention to their eyes and gaze. While one student visualized the leader's fairness and honesty through a calm gaze directed toward the spectator (Figure 3), another student depicted the leader's ability to see things and understand the “big picture” by drawing the eyes wide open (Figure 4).

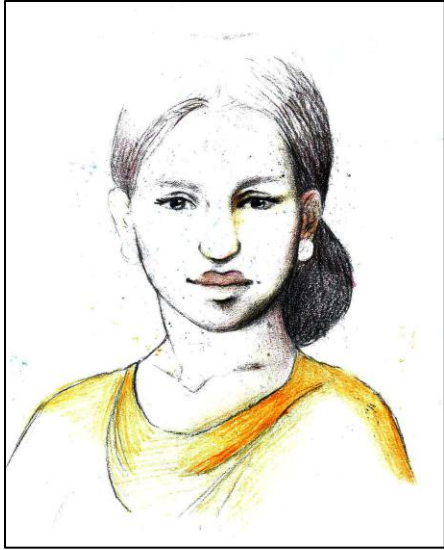
*“She has big eyes so that she can notice many things at the same time, including those workers who just want to stand around idle, without doing a thing.” (student 6)*

Two students wrote that the leader in the drawing looks tired because the work is challenging and working hours are long. On the other hand, one student characterized a female leader as well-organized and able to schedule her work well and efficiently.

*“She looks a little bit tired because she has been working too much.” (student 13)*

*“A good leader is responsible and caring. She can schedule her work and has time to listen to the employees' needs.” (student 11)*

The analysis of the drawings and verbal comments related to female leaders revealed two distinct types of female leader. The first was warm and empathetic, the other hard-working and effective. The latter type of female leader was occasionally characterized as tired because of work overload.



**Figure 3:** *Caring female leader*  
(student 5)



**Figure 4:** *Determined female leader*  
(student 6)

### 5.3 Androgynous Leaders

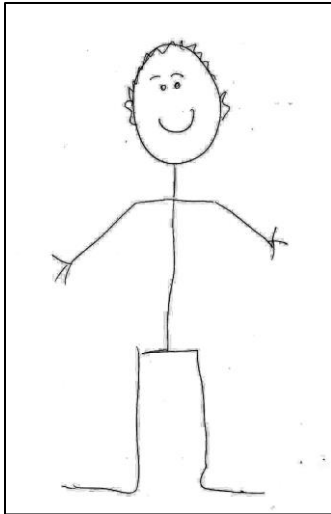
Two students depicted leaders whose gender cannot be identified. These were generalized depictions of human beings in which the drawing expresses an idea of leadership rather than a portrait of a leader. The first of these depictions was a stick figure standing in the middle of the paper, smiling and stretching their arms to the sides (Figure 5). The drawer's written explanation revealed that each visual element symbolized a certain leadership characteristic. All in all, the stick figure represented a friendly and welcoming, but also steady, type of leader.

*“A good leader is a human—whether female or male. The ears are big so that they can hear what the employees say. The arms are open, communicating approachability. The feet are big, because the leader is steady and trustworthy. The smiling face expresses joy and support.”*  
(student 7)

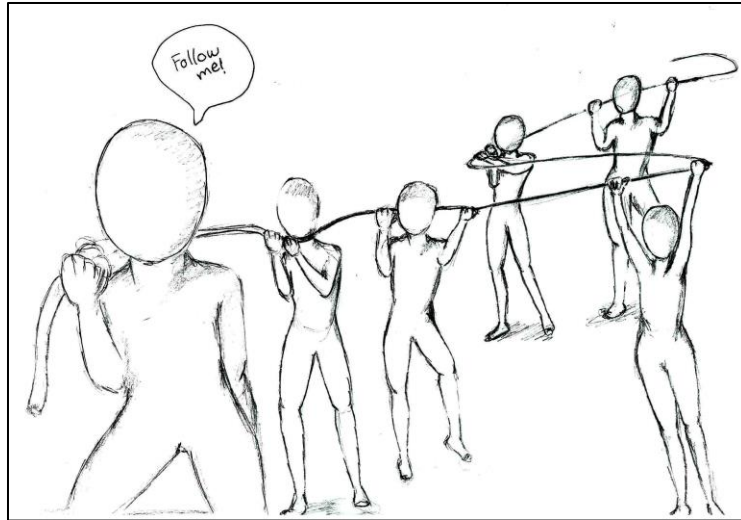
The other student who did not depict the leader as gendered, drew a picture in which the leader is leading five employees. The employees are connected to the leader by a length of string. The leader has a speech bubble saying *“Follow me.”* The employees seem to follow the leader willingly, or at least no signs of resistance are visible (Figure 6). With her picture, the drawer wanted to express that a good leader shows an example to the employees.

*“I want to express with my picture that a good leader leads by being an example. A good leader doesn't yell or command but shows an example. They take care of the employees and treat them equally. In addition, they are capable of identifying with the employees and don't appear to be superior.”* (student 4)

Even though these two drawings are different from each other, they seem to express a similar kind of good leader. Based on these two drawings, a good leader can be either a woman or a man who is communicative and willing to listen to the employees. In addition, a good leader shows an example to the employees in terms of being involved in working for the common goal.



**Figure 5:** *Androgynous leader(a)*  
(student 7)



**Figure 6:** *Androgynous leader(b)*  
(student 4)

## 5.4 Summary of Results

The research at hand shows that participants visualized a good leader in versatile ways in terms of gender, as well as in the level of formality communicated through facial expressions, gestures, and attire. However, the verbal comments revealed that differences in leaders' visual appearance did not mean that the students' conceptions of a good leader were notably different. Female, male, and androgynous leader images, as well as formal and casual-looking leaders, were meant to communicate that leaders are communicative, attentive, reliable, and supportive. However, students who drew more formal-looking leaders characterized a good leader as one who bears responsibility and works efficiently. More casual looks were meant to communicate a relaxed, positive, and supportive attitude of a leader who does not accuse others of mistakes.

## 6. Discussion

The results show that eight students depicted a good leader as a man, five students as a woman, and two as androgynous. Despite this division in visual representation, students did not define the gender verbally, except for one student. Instead, students wrote about "a good leader"

without explicitly determining the leader's gender. In addition, in the Finnish language, the third person pronoun "hän" is gender-neutral and is used when referring to both women and men. For this reason, it cannot be concluded how significant a role gender eventually played in students' conceptions of a good leader, or how conscious the choice of gender in the drawings was. In addition, both female and male good leaders were associated with similar leadership characteristics. Thus, it can be concluded that the drawings expressed gender-based differences, but, apart from one student, students did not verbally define the gender of the leader.

In visual terms, a good leader was seen as a person who looks tidy and appropriate. A leader's appearance clearly contributed to an image of credibility and professionalism (Martikainen & Hujala, 2017; Wiggs Harris, 2013). Male leaders looked neat wearing either a suit or a shirt with jeans. Both styles of physical appearance were explicated verbally as expressing communication and positive involvement in matters of work organization. Despite this common communicative basis, formal and casual dress were meant to communicate slightly different shades of leadership. While male leaders wearing a suit and looking serious were associated with hard work, reliability, and responsibility, male leaders smiling and wearing more casual clothes were associated with a positive and supportive atmosphere in the work organization. Depictions of female leaders made use of close-ups showing only their torso or face. These drawings communicated through the faces either the leader's intimate and caring relation to employees, or qualities of determination and efficiency. As prior research shows (Nana et al., 2010), facial features are often used as a basis for drawing conclusions about leaders in terms of their efficiency. Additionally, female leaders' eyes and gaze seemed to be important means of communicating leadership qualities (see Martikainen, 2017).

Students appreciated approachability and a willingness to communicate with employees as the key characteristics of a good leader. It was regarded as important that the leader is genuinely interested in employees, listens to them, and attempts to promote their work-related well-being, reminiscent of the conceptions of ethical leadership (Avelia, 2017; Caldwell & Anderson, 2017; Ko et al., 2018), servant leadership (Amah, 2018; Ling et al., 2017), and authentic leadership (Ling et al., 2017; Quraishi & Aziz, 2018). In contrast, leaders emphasizing their status, giving orders, and being egocentric or distant were not considered to be good leaders. These characteristics, which can be related to narcissistic leadership (Anninos, 2018; Nevicka et al., 2018) or authoritarian leadership (Wang & Guan, 2018), were evaluated negatively.

In addition to communicativeness and equality, students seemed to appreciate a leader who takes their position as a leader seriously in terms of showing a good example, being involved in collaborating with employees, and managing favorable conditions in the work organization. These characteristics suggest that students regarded some degree of authority as a positive leader quality (see also Wang & Guan, 2018). However, communicativeness, support, care, and positive involvement in organizational matters were regarded as more important. In terms of the classic division of leaders into authoritarian, democratic, and laissez-faire styles of leadership (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939; see also Bhothisawang, 2017), the students' conceptions of a good leader came close to the democratic style of leadership.

In accordance with prior studies (Ford, Harding, Gilmore, & Richardson, 2017; Martikainen & Hujala, 2017; Talley & Temple, 2015), this study suggests that leaders' physical characteristics contribute to the employees' impression of the leaders. However, various students might perceive leaders' visual expressiveness in different ways. The graduating students visual and verbal reflections revealed that the most important social representations of good leadership clustered around approachability, fluent communication, responsibility, and positive involvement. These leadership qualities were associated with supportive and egalitarian leaders attempting to promote a work organization in which employees can feel that they are valuable members (see also Congo-Poottaren & Beebeejaun-Rojee, 2017). Based on this research, it might be necessary for leaders to pay conscious attention to their "material presence" (Ford et al., 2017) and to manage their visual nonverbal behavior in order to communicate the aforementioned leadership qualities. This could ease the anxiety of graduating students when entering work life and could promote their feeling of inclusion and belonging.

## 7. Limitations

This is a small-scale study with only fifteen participants. The results show how these fifteen graduating students conceptualized a good leader, but they cannot be generalized to cover the conceptions of graduating students in Finland at large. However, since social representations are culturally shared conceptions of various phenomena (Moscovici, 2001), it can be assumed that the results reflect a conception that is also more widely shared among graduating students in Finland. Since conceptions of good leadership and leaders' visual characteristics vary from one culture to another, these results cannot be generalized to other cultural contexts.

## 8. Conclusions

The students participating in the research regarded approachability, fluent communication, a caring attitude, and responsibility as the key characteristics of a good leader. However, at the same time, they seemed to regard it as important that the leaders take their position as the key figure in the organization without emphasizing their status. For graduating students participating in this research, it seemed to be important that the leaders care, guide, and meet the employees at the grassroots level. This might be a good leader's attitude when meeting graduating students who apply for a position for the first time, both in job interviews and when recruiting graduating students. This kind of attitude might temper the anxiety of the newcomers and make it possible for them to show the best they can be.

## 9. Scope of Future Research

In the future, it would be interesting to conduct similar research with a larger group of participants, in order to gain a more comprehensive view of the conceptions of a good leader among graduating students in Finland. In addition, it would be important to study the conceptions of graduating students at various levels of education. Because work organizations are increasingly multicultural nowadays, research comparing conceptions of a good leader in various cultures would benefit work organizations and companies internationally.

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