Rich man, poor man: study shows body language can indicate socioeconomic status

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A new study in *Psychological Science* reveals that nonverbal cues can give away a person's socioeconomic status (SES). Volunteers whose parents were from upper SES backgrounds displayed more disengagement-related behaviors compared to participants from lower SES backgrounds. In addition, when a separate group of observers were shown 60 second clips of the videos, they were able to correctly guess the participants' SES background, based on their body language.

Socioeconomic status (SES) is determined by a number of factors such as wealth, occupation and schools attended. SES influences the food we eat, hobbies we participate in and can even have an impact on our health. People with an upper SES background can often be accused of flaunting their status, such as by the types of cars they drive or how many pairs of Manolo Blahniks they have in their closet. It is easy to guess someone's SES based on their clothing and the size of their home, but what about more subtle clues? Psychologists Michael W. Kraus and Dacher Keltner of the University of California, Berkeley wanted to see if non-verbal cues (that is, body language) can indicate our SES.

To test this idea, the researchers videotaped participants as they got to know one another in one-on-one interview sessions. During these taped sessions, the researchers looked for two types of behaviors: disengagement behaviors (including fidgeting with personal objects and doodling) and engagement behaviors (including head nodding, laughing and eye contact).

The results, reported in *Psychological Science,* a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, reveal that nonverbal cues can give away a person's SES. Volunteers whose parents were from upper SES backgrounds displayed more disengagement-related behaviors compared to participants from lower SES backgrounds. In addition, when a separate group of observers were shown 60 second clips of the videos, they were able to correctly guess the participants' SES background, based on their body language.

The researchers note that this is the first study to show a relation between SES and social engagement behavior. They surmise that people from upper SES backgrounds who are wealthy and have access to prestigious institutions tend to be less dependent on others. "This lack of dependence among upper SES people is displayed in their nonverbal behaviors during social interactions," the psychologists conclude.

Source: Association for Psychological Science