

Faces aren't always to be believed when it comes to honesty

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UBC Professor Stephen Porter. Credit: UBC

UBC researchers have determined that certain facial features, not the expression, influence whether people think someone is trustworthy.

UBC psychology professor Stephen Porter, who teaches psychology at UBC's Okanagan campus, and PhD student Alysha Baker, recently completed two studies determining that people often make judgments of trustworthiness based solely on the face.

"Our findings in this and our past studies suggest that your physical appearance can have major implications for your assumed credibility and other character traits, even more powerful than the manner in which you behave and the words you speak," says Porter. "The implications in social, workplace, corporate and criminal justice settings are enormous."

In their studies, the researchers asked participants to watch a video, listen to audio-only pleas or examine a photo of people publicly asking for the return of a missing relative. They then asked for their personal perceptions of general trustworthiness and honesty.

"A lot of information that feeds into our impressions about one's trustworthiness is deduced from the face," says Baker, who conducted much of the research. "More specifically, there are certain [facial features](#) considered that make an individual look more trustworthy—higher eyebrows, more pronounced cheekbones, rounder face—and other features that are perceived to be untrustworthy-looking—downturned eyebrows, or a thinner face."

The studies cited two real criminal cases, one with an 81-year-old woman and one with a father of a missing nine-year-old girl. People believed the elderly woman's public appeal for justice, even though it was later determined she had killed her husband. Many judged the father to be lying, based on his facial features, even though he later proved to be innocent.

"When encountering a person in any given situation, we automatically and instantaneously form an impression of whether a target is worthy of

our trust because, evolutionarily, this kind of assessment has helped our survival. For example, assessing 'friend or foe'," says Baker. "We're typically not aware of this quick decision and it may be experienced as 'intuition', but this can be particularly problematic in the legal system because these first impressions are often unfounded and can lead to biased decision-making."

Baker cautions that in some legal settings those who are untrustworthy-looking may be judged more harshly and receive different outcomes than those deemed to be trustworthy-looking. This has occurred in the United States where untrustworthy-looking men are more likely to receive the death penalty than trustworthy-looking men convicted of similar crimes.

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