



Face and fortune: Inferences of personality from Managing Partners' faces predict their law firms' financial success

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ABSTRACT

First impressions can predict numerous subjective and objective outcomes. Here we show that judgments of the faces of the Managing Partners (MPs) of America's top 100 law firms relate to their firms' success. Participants' ratings of Power (competence, dominance, and facial maturity) from the MPs' faces significantly correlated with the profit margin, profitability index, and profits per equity partner (PPP) that the firms earned. Participants' ratings of Warmth (likeability and trustworthiness) showed no relationship with these variables, however. These effects remained after controlling for important factors, such as facial attractiveness, MP years of experience, photo quality, and firm size, as measured by number of lawyers. Based on previous research and leadership theory, traits related to leadership may therefore become manifest in individuals' faces, influencing the performance of the organizations that they lead.

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Nonverbal behavior and appearance communicate important information about individuals (e.g., Zebrowitz, 1997). So strong are these cues, that our quick, first impression judgments of others can be surprisingly predictive of others' behavior. For example, judgments of teachers from brief video clips can predict how they are evaluated both by their students and their supervisors (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). In this case, brief judgments (in just a few seconds) significantly corresponded to longer judgments (across the entire semester).

But recent work has shown that the validity of such “thin slice” judgments need not rely on outcomes that are subjective, or context-dependent. That is, participants judging video clips of teachers in a laboratory may base their evaluations on the same cues from appearance and behavior that the teachers' actual students do when in the class. However, in some domains, perceptions in the laboratory can predict outcomes that are not ostensibly related to the targets' behaviors or appearances.

Rule and Ambady (2008) showed that judgments of photographs of the faces of Fortune 1000 Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) related to their success. Ratings of personality traits and leadership by naive college undergraduates significantly related to how much profit each CEO's company made. From the perspective of Calder's (1977) attribution theory of leadership, it might be supposed that perceivers were able to detect subtle, distinctive differences in the appearances of the CEOs that led them to attribute higher leadership abilities to some CEOs over others (see also Funder, 1995). These brief snap judgments of the CEOs' faces, however, led to inferences that might be considered accurate, insofar as they were significantly related to an objective measure of the CEOs' success: their organizations' financial performance. Thus, there would appear to have been something distinct about the CEOs' faces that reflected the performance of the groups they led.

It is a surprising finding that judgments of CEOs' faces should reflect their companies' success, as there is no immediate explanation for why CEOs' appearance should influence their organizations' performance. Delving deeper, however, social psychological theory may be able to provide some explanation for this effect. As reviewed above, facial appearance can exert an

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important influence on an individual's outcomes. The “kernel of truth” hypothesis suggests that appearances can convey information about underlying traits and dispositions (e.g., [Berry, 1990](#)). Similarly, the Gibsonian approach to social perception ([Gibson, 1979](#)) would suggest that there is inherent utility in our perceptions of others' faces that guides our behaviors and reactions to them (see [Zebrowitz & Collins, 1997](#)). This applied notion of face perception may be particularly useful when considering the appearance of leaders. Observation of the *zeitgeber* phenomenon suggests that individuals can influence the behaviors of others via nonverbal cues ([Bernieri & Rosenthal, 1991](#); [Bluedorn & Jaussi, 2008](#)). Consistent with [Kaiser, Hogan, and Craig's \(2008\)](#) review of leadership, particular individuals who “stand out” may be recognized as leaders, treated as leaders, and therefore command a following. It is unclear, however, whether this effect is the product of the individual, the environment, or both.

Inherent differences in appearance may permit some individuals to be attributed leadership qualities over others. The observation of naturally emergent leadership and status hierarchies among non-human animals suggests that there may be some evolutionary or biological component underlying the nonverbal expression of leadership ability (see [Mazur, 2005](#)). One particularly relevant component may be the expression of dominance, which plays an important role in establishing status hierarchies among primates (e.g., [Mazur, 2005](#)). Interestingly, in two previous studies, CEOs who looked more dominant and powerful were associated with companies that earned more profits ([Rule & Ambady, 2008](#)) and individual compensation ([Rule & Ambady, 2009](#)). One explanation for this could be that CEOs who look like better leaders or who look more dominant might be hired by more successful companies. Previous work would support the link between inherent aspects of facial appearance and success. For instance, teachers' judgments of children's facial attractiveness affect their progress in school ([Clifford & Walster, 1973](#)). Similarly, [Collins and Zebrowitz \(1995\)](#) found that individuals' facial appearances affected their job opportunities and their levels of success within particular jobs (see also [Stevenage & McKay, 1999](#)).

Acquired differences in appearance could also be responsible for these effects. For instance, CEOs who are more successful in climbing the corporate ladder may develop an appearance that reflects their effort. Indeed, previous work has shown that life experiences can subtly alter facial appearance. In one study, [Zajonc, Adelman, Murphy, and Niedenthal \(1987\)](#) reported that pairs of spouses converged in appearance over time. The specific mechanism in this instance is believed to be chronic facial mimicry and mirroring of one another's behaviors. For example, smiling and laughing with a particular style can lead to the accentuation of facial muscles in a specific fashion. Repetition of such movements over time may lead to the development of a distinct muscular tone that reflects these movements, as well as wrinkling of the skin (e.g., [Malatesta, Fiore, & Messina, 1987](#)). Thus, leaders who express themselves in a particular way may over time develop facial appearances that reflect those expressions. The successful negotiation of groups and organizations through leadership could therefore be associated with a particular nonverbal style that is represented in the face over time.

Similar effects have been reported between individuals' personalities and their facial appearance ([Zebrowitz, Collins, & Dutta, 1998](#); see also [Zebrowitz, Voinescu, & Collins, 1996](#)), a phenomenon called the “Dorian Gray effect.” Tensing facial muscles in particular ways can affect jaw development and subsequent facial appearance ([Kreiborg, Jensen, Moller, & Bjork, 1978](#)) and people who are often angry can develop facial appearances such that over time they come to look angry even when exhibiting a neutral expression ([Malatesta et al., 1987](#)). Such effects can be linked to specific behaviors: for example, [Zebrowitz et al. \(1998\)](#) found that women with more attractive personalities in their youth were more physically attractive as adults; an effect that was related to the women's grooming behaviors.

The inherent differences explanation would presume that successful CEOs do not necessarily possess the traits of power and good leadership but that they simply look the part. In their review, [Kaiser et al. \(2008\)](#) discuss how individuals skilled in impression management often advance above competitors who are actually skilled leaders; inherent appearance could play a role in this. Indeed, even among experienced leaders and selection committees, it is possible that aspects of appearance (such as attractiveness; see [Calder, 1977](#)) may serve as surrogates for inferences of leadership, allowing relatively unqualified individuals to advance. Previous ambiguity in the literature about the importance of the CEO to a company's performance may also lend some support to such a possibility, given that some CEOs may be legitimately skilled leaders whereas others may simply be good faces for their companies (e.g., [Agle, Nagarajan, Sonnenfeld, & Srinivasan, 2006](#)). [Ranft, Zinko, Ferris, and Buckley \(2006\)](#) discussed how increased media attention has donned many CEOs with a celebrity status, making them the public face of the organizations for which they work. CEOs' appearances and the attributions made to them may therefore reflect upon their companies. Under such conditions, CEOs who “look the part” may be especially valuable and more successful companies may be able to hire CEOs who look like better leaders by way of their advantaged status and financial resources. The explanation of the relationship between perceptions of power and leadership with company profits therefore may not be that the leader predicts the accrual of profits but that the accrual of profits predicts who is chosen as the leader.

In contrast, if the look of leadership is the consequence of experience, individuals who are able to climb their way to the top of an organization would be endowed with a particular set of traits that permit their success. Over time, these traits may become expressed in their appearance, in a Dorian Gray type effect (see [Zebrowitz et al., 1998](#)). This set of traits need not be inherently present but could be a product of experiences and learning how to be a good leader that may lead to looking like a good leader. For company CEOs, there is no minimum requirement for candidacy. Indeed, American culture is characterized by stories of individuals who have worked their way to positions of success in business from the most humble beginnings (see [Gladwell, 2008](#)). Thus, it is possible, even if unlikely, that individuals without inherent ability might be able to secure positions of leadership in business based solely on their appearance and the advantages that their appearance affords them. This is not true of all domains, however, and so we conducted the present investigation to examine the relationship between facial appearance and success in a domain that necessitates a high baseline level of ability: leadership in law firms.

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