

Nonverbal power cues: Higher rankings lead to less cooperative facial expressions

23 November 2011, by Jared Wadley

(Medical Xpress) -- New University of Michigan research indicates that people in higher-ranked positions tend to exhibit facial expressions that are perceived by others as less cooperative, influencing how others react to them.

"Our studies show that the effects of rank on cooperativeness spill over into the individual's [nonverbal cues](#), which are not only picked up by observers, but also lead them to act differently towards the individual," said Patricia Chen, a U-M psychology graduate student and the study's lead author.

The findings contribute to broader research on rankings, cooperativeness and nonverbal expressions, as well as negotiations, leadership and [group dynamics](#).

In three studies, Chen and colleagues tested the hypothesis that the higher the rank of an individual's group, the less cooperative the facial expression of that person is judged to be. They showed that these effects occur even when independent evaluators know nothing about the target's identity, group or actual rankings.

One study examined the effect among top [business school](#) deans. Thirty-five U-M undergraduate students and alumni completed an [online survey](#) involving cropped photographs of the faces of deans from top business schools at other universities.

Respondents, blind to the actual rankings and identities of the people they rated, viewed these photographs and then reported how cooperative the deans looked. The results showed that the higher the rank of the business school, the less cooperative the dean appeared.

In a second study, the researchers manipulated the relative rankings of student participants in a quiz bowl competition. Some students were told

that their competitor was from a higher-ranked university, while others were told that their competitor was from a lower-ranked community college.

Photographs of these participants were taken and given to independent raters, who were blind to the manipulated ranks. The findings indicate that students assigned to positions of higher ranks were perceived as less cooperative, and vice versa.

These results show that less cooperative-looking people are not necessarily selected into higher-ranked organizations. Rather, situational cues of these positions evoke hierarchical facial expressions.

A final study demonstrated that the repercussions of these observations extend beyond the mere perception of cooperativeness to actual behavioral intentions. Nearly 140 participants were randomly assigned to an interaction partner, whose photograph was either that of a top-ranked business school dean or a lower ranked one.

Blind to the identity and rank of their negotiation partner, who was introduced as a fictitious associate dean in charge of allocating money to student groups on campus, respondents faced a scenario in which they were asked to negotiate the annual budget for their student organization.

Again, the results indicate that participants judged the higher-ranked negotiation partner as appearing less cooperative than the lower-ranked one.

Furthermore, these perceptions of cooperativeness predicted how collaborative and receptive the associate dean appeared to be, and the amount of money participants requested from him for their student group. Thus, less money was requested when participants negotiated against a higher-ranked person who appeared less cooperative.

"Leaders need to be aware that their ranking might spill over into their facial expressions when they interact with others in the organization, affecting what others think of their cooperative intentions," said co-author Christopher Myers, a doctoral student in the Ross School of Business.

The researchers noted that if followers do not perceive the leader as cooperative, they tend to be less motivated, committed and open in their communication. They also said that the study only tested the effect of rankings on [facial expressions](#) of men, but that they would expect a similar pattern of results of rankings on women.

Chen and Myers conducted the research with Shirli Kopelman, clinical assistant professor of management and organizations, and Stephen Garcia, associate professor of psychology.

The findings will appear in the forthcoming issue of the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

Provided by University of Michigan

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