

For power and status, dominance and skill trump likability

Finding the next Barack Obama or Warren Buffett might be as simple as looking at who attracts the most eyes in a crowd, a new University of British Columbia study finds.

For the study, which used eye-tracking technology, participants who observed groups of strangers were able to accurately predict who would emerge as leader of the group in 120 seconds or less.

According to the study – to appear in the forthcoming *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* – two sets of behaviours will accurately predict future leadership and catch people's attention. The first is prestige – the appearance of skill and competency. The second is dominance, which includes the ability to impose ideas on others through bullying and intimidation.

"Our findings suggest there are really two ways to top the social ladder and gain leadership – impressing people with your skills or powering your way through old-fashioned dominance," says lead author Joey Cheng, a PhD candidate in UBC's Dept. of Psychology. "By measuring levels of influence and visual attention, we find that people defer to and readily spot the prestigious and dominant leaders."

Surprisingly, the study finds that one's likeability – long considered essential for modern leaders – does not consistently predict the attainment of greater status. While participants preferred leaders with prestige, they were surprisingly likely to choose dominant leaders. They were also more forgiving of dominant behaviour than outside observers, the researchers say.

The findings might explain the ongoing prevalence of aggressive leaders in business and politics, such as Donald Trump or Toronto mayor Rob Ford. According to the researchers, today's dominant behaviour has evolved from resource and power battles from our evolutionary past. Prestige's viability as means of attaining status, has increased with the rise of meritocracy in society.

Backgrounder

The study had two parts. First, 200 participants completed a problem-solving task in small groups while being videotaped. Group members rated participants' dominance, prestige and influence during the task, including their own. Participants who were more dominant or prestigious had a greater influence on the task and were perceived as more influential by group members.

In the second part of the study, 60 additional participants watched a total of 120 seconds of short videos of the initial group interactions while wearing an eye-

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tracking device. These participants paid significantly greater attention to individuals in the clips who appeared more dominant or prestigious, indicating their higher levels of influence.

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Study co-authors include Jessica Tracy, Alan Kingstone, Joseph Henrich (UBC psychology) and Tom Foulsham (formerly UBC, now University of Essex).

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