

Are Wider Faced Men More Self-Sacrificing?

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Picture a stereotypical tough guy and you might imagine a man with a broad face, a square jaw, and a stoical demeanor. Existing research even supports this association, linking wider, more masculine faces with several less-than-cuddly characteristics, including perceived lack of warmth, dishonesty, and lack of cooperation. But a new study suggests that men with these wide, masculine faces aren't always the aggressive tough guys they appear to be.

“Men with wider faces have typically been portrayed as ‘bad to the bone,’” says psychologist Michael Stirrat. But he and David Perrett wondered whether the relationship between facial width and personality was really so simple. They suspected that men who look aggressive and untrustworthy might actually be good guys in some contexts.

In their new study, published in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), they predicted that more physically robust men, as identified by a wider face, would be self-sacrificing when their group was competing with another group.

The researchers gave University of St Andrews students money to play a game in groups where they could either benefit themselves and free-ride on the cooperation of others or they could risk their money to benefit their group. Half of the students were told that the outcomes of the game would be compared between St Andrews students, the other half that they would be compared with a rival university. The prediction was that the wider faced men would respond to the rivalry in the second condition and sacrifice their money for their own group.

The results of the study confirmed their hypotheses and turned the typical associations with facial width on their head: the more robust looking, wider faced men in the study were more self-sacrificing than other men.

“It was surprising that our predictions were confirmed,” reports Dr. Stirrat. “When we mentioned Edinburgh University, our St Andrews participants with wider faces were more cooperative than the other men. When we didn't mention the rivalry, they were less cooperative than other men.”

The present finding provides a more nuanced understanding of masculinity and male behaviour. Compared with women, men appear to be more sensitive to intergroup relationships and to whether they are being observed. The results of this experiment suggest that while more robust males may show more ‘masculine’ behaviour in anti-social ways such as physical aggression they are also more likely to make sacrifices to support the groups to which they belong. In short, the same characteristics in men predict both anti-social and pro-social behaviour, depending on the context.

These findings are particularly interesting in light of recent research that has shown that the facial width of male CEOs predicts their business performance and facial width of male presidential candidates

predicts their drive for achievement. This new study suggests that facial width may be related to performance and achievement because these men may be more self-sacrificing in time and effort for their group.

To learn more about facial perception research being conducted by Michael Stirrat, David Perrett, and other members of the Perception Lab at the University of St. Andrews, visit www.perceptionlab.com.