

## SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

# Status beyond what meets the eye

Conveying an impression of competence is important for jobseekers and politicians alike. New work from Oh, Shafir and Todorov suggests that subtle differences in clothing shape our impressions of how competent people are. In particular, subtly richer-looking clothes elicit greater perceived competence.

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It is popular wisdom that first impressions matter. New work from Oh, Shafir and Todorov<sup>1</sup> in *Nature Human Behaviour* suggests that our first impressions can be shaped by subtle differences in clothing. In a series of nine experiments, the researchers provide compelling evidence that people wearing clothing perceived as rich are viewed as more competent than those wearing clothing perceived as less rich. Astonishingly, this competence boost for rich apparel persisted even when research participants were told that clothing does not convey competence and also when given the chance to win a \$100 reward for being unbiased by clothing. Even when presented for just over a hundredth of a second, people still rated the faces of people wearing the richest attire as more competent, underscoring how readily impressions of competence are biased by clothing. This competence boost for high-status apparel was enhanced for individuals with naturally competent looking (vs less competent) faces. These findings complement recent work showing that faces appearing to be of higher status are also rated as more employable<sup>2</sup>. The key takeaway here is that signs of social status in our clothes and faces bias the way we are treated on a daily basis<sup>3</sup>, compounding disparities faced by the poor in health<sup>4</sup> and socioeconomic mobility<sup>5</sup>. These day-to-day and structural challenges faced by low-status individuals contribute to a sense that they must swim upstream just to get by.

This work by Oh and colleagues<sup>1</sup> is important because it demonstrates both the subtlety and persistence of the link between high-status attire and perceived competence. Clothes are frequently used to convey status in research, sometimes with large differences between the clothing used to imply low and high status (for example, sweatpants vs business suits<sup>6</sup>). To the credit of Oh and colleagues<sup>1</sup>, the difference between the 'richest' and 'poorest' clothes in their study was minimal. With the exception of initial experiments that included suits and ties, the outfits looked like men's casual



Credit: Brian Jackson / Alamy Stock Photo

wear. Nonetheless, even subtle differences between 'rich' and 'poor' attire were enough to bias competence judgments in favor of the richest dressed individuals. Now, if subtle differences in how rich one's attire looks can reliably shape impressions of competence, consider how larger differences in perceived status from apparel may impact impressions. Indeed, existing work has shown that lawyers wearing formal attire are perceived as twice as competent compared to when they are wearing casual wear<sup>7</sup>.



At first glance, this competence boost for high-status apparel may seem like common sense. However, this finding will likely impact the way researchers study how status shapes our judgments of others. Let us take for an example a researcher who wants to know whether decisions to punish perpetrators of financial exploitation depend on whether the perpetrator is high or low in socioeconomic status. Following the so-far frequent practice of using clothing to convey status, the researcher might simply present participants with pictures of perpetrators wearing rich and poor attire and have participants decide the extent to which they would punish those individuals for financially exploiting their victims. However, because high-status attire conveys both competence and social status<sup>1,7</sup>, the experimenter cannot be sure that any differences in punishment are due to the perpetrator's perceived competence, perceived status, or some combination of

the two. One way to avoid this dilemma is to look at status beyond what meets the eye. In our example of the punishment experiment, participants could first learn the status of perpetrators through short biographies that state whether each person is low or high in socioeconomic status before deciding whether to punish that person for financial exploitation. One possibility is that even when we know about someone's status beforehand, we still tend to think of high-status people as more competent than their lower status counterparts. This would be consistent with existing work showing that groups stereotyped as high status (for example, men, the wealthy) are also believed to be highly competent<sup>8</sup>. However, even if high-status attire and prior knowledge of high status both tend to make us see someone as more competent, it is not clear whether these cues are given the same importance when it comes to later updating and/or acting on those impressions. Examining how the brain processes these different status cues over time may shed further light on how we detect the status of others and ultimately how this shapes our thoughts, feelings, and actions towards them<sup>9</sup>.

Oh and colleagues' work<sup>1</sup> also raises important questions for applied contexts. At least in some cultures, there can be considerable variability in the style of attire allowed in schools and workplaces. Consider, for example, the adoption of a non-formal dress code in a secondary school or the occasional indulgence in less formal attire at work (for example, 'casual Fridays'). Might such policies lead us to focus more on others' apparel because it is less uniform? If so, does this promote a tendency to infer competence based on the status cues inherent in clothing as opposed to academic or job-related skill? Adding another layer to this question: is this potential competence boost for high-status attire sensitive to the person's race, gender, known social class or age? For example, evidence suggests that formal attire may boost perceived competence for men more than for women<sup>7</sup>.

This raises the question of whether, all else being equal, casual attire in schools and at work may diminish gender bias in perceived competence. Alternatively, perhaps when we already know someone's reputation as competent or incompetent (as we might in real life), their clothing makes little to no difference in our overall impression of their competence. This might be the case if one considers reputation to be a more reliable signal of competence than clothing. Because Oh and colleagues<sup>1</sup> relied exclusively on clothing to convey the status of unfamiliar young male faces, their findings do not speak to these questions. However, their groundbreaking study nonetheless sets the stage for future studies on the consequences

of attire for perceived status and competence in many everyday contexts. We anticipate that this will be an active area of research in the years to come. □

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## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.