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## Are wide-faced men rascals?

14:04 07 July 2011 by [Andy Coghlan](#)

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Can it be true that men with extra-wide faces are more likely to be liars and cheats? That's what a study published this week claims, but some researchers specialising in the [evolution of trustworthiness](#) have questioned the results.

The study's authors claim to have shown that men are most likely to cheat and lie if they have wider faces as measured by the facial width-to-height ratio, or WHR. Sceptics argue that the evidence supporting such a huge claim is weak, especially given that the conclusion could damage the reputations of the millions of men whose faces conform to the definition of "extra wide".

"In our data, 'high' WHRs tend to be those greater than 1.90, typically 1.90 to 2.08," explains lead author [Michael Haselhuhn](#) of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Historical examples include John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, with WHRs of 2.15 and 2.02 respectively. Those with low WHRs of 1.70 and below include John Lennon (1.63) and William Shakespeare (1.44).

Haselhuhn measured photographs from the university registry to obtain the WHRs of 192 male and female students participating in his study. He then randomly paired the students to negotiate by email a fictional business deal over property. The "seller" was told not to sell the property if it was to be developed commercially, but the "buyer" was told to buy the property to turn it into a hotel, providing opportunities for deception during the negotiations. The results suggested that men who lied were three times as likely to have wide faces as thin faces.

### Why all the fuss?

But [Paul Zak](#) of Claremont Graduate University in California points out that those figures do not tell the whole story. Just 18 out of the 192 students lied during the negotiations, and of the 115 men in the study, only 13 lied. "Why all this fuss over 11 per cent of the men?" says Zak. With such small numbers, he argues the effects found could be down to pure chance.

Although the numbers are small, Haselhuhn says the results are "robust and compelling", and his analysis suggests they are statistically significant.

Haselhuhn says that the results, coupled with the results of additional studies his team performed in the new paper, back up the hypothesis he set out to test – that wide faces relate to testosterone levels and dominance. "When they compete for resources with other men, relative facial width is a strong sign of aggressive, self-interested behaviour," he says. This means that other men defer to the "wide-faced", giving them more outright power,



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Even this starting hypothesis fails to convince Zak. "Alpha males have less rather than more incentive to cheat because they are on top of the world, with the best looks and the most attractive females," he says.

However, [Chris Frith](#) of University College London says that similar results to Haselhuhn's have been reported before. Despite the controversial conclusion, "I wouldn't dismiss it out of hand", he says. Frith's own team found in earlier experiments that men with wide faces were more likely to exploit the trust of others, and were also less trusted by others. Similar results have been reported by [Dave Perrett](#) and [Mike Stirrat](#) of the University of St Andrews, UK (*Psychological Science*, DOI: [10.1177/0956797610362647](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797610362647))

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