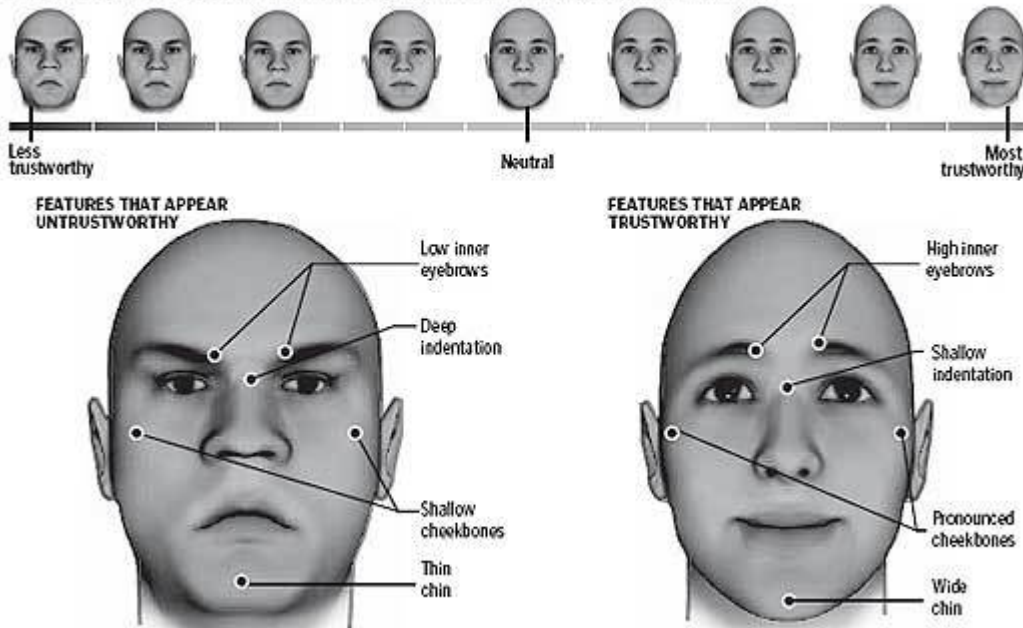


A face you can trust

Princeton psychologists recently showed that certain faces, even when expressionless, strike people as trustworthy or untrustworthy. Features like the shape of the eyebrow are part of an unconscious language of trust that powerfully affects human interaction.



SOURCES: Alexander Todorov, Sean G. Baron, and Nikolaas N. Oosterhof, Princeton University

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Confidence game

How impostors like Clark Rockefeller capture our trust instantly - and why we're so eager to give it to them.

By Drake Bennett | August 17, 2008

Lots of people trusted Christian Karl Gerhartsreiter. At least two women married him - though they each knew him by a different name. The members of elite social clubs in San Marino, Calif.; Greenwich, Conn.; and here in Boston embraced him and vouched for him. A series of investment firms offered him jobs as a stockbroker and bond salesman, even a vice president, despite his lack of credentials, experience, and, as quickly became clear, his at best rudimentary knowledge of finance. And over the last decade or so, neighbors and acquaintances have believed that he was Clark Rockefeller, a retiring, somewhat aloof man who implied, but never came out and said, that he was an heir to the Standard Oil fortune.

As he sits in a Boston jail cell, and police try to unravel the tangled trail he's left since coming to the United States from Germany 30 years ago, the question the rest of us are left with is how he got away with it for as long as he did. How could the people he befriended - and, in at least two cases, married - believe his fantastical stories?

The answer is that you probably would, too. Human beings are social animals, and our first instinct is to trust others. Con men, of course, have long known this - their craft consists largely of playing on this predilection, and turning it to their advantage.

But recently, behavioral scientists have also begun to unravel the inner workings of trust. Their aim is to decode the subtle signals that we send out and pick up, the cues that, often without our knowledge, shape

our sense of someone's reliability. Researchers have discovered that surprisingly small factors - where we meet someone, whether their posture mimics ours, even the slope of their eyebrows or the thickness of their chin - can matter as much or more than what they say about themselves. We size up someone's trustworthiness within milliseconds of meeting them, and while we can revise our first impression, there are powerful psychological tendencies that often prevent us from doing so - tendencies that apply even more strongly if we've grown close.

"Trust is the baseline," says Susan Fiske, a social psychologist at Princeton University. "Trustworthiness is the very first thing that we decide about a person, and once we've decided, we do all kinds of elaborate gymnastics to believe in people."

According to researchers, the subtler aspects of body language or physiognomy are difficult, if not impossible, to manipulate. But what has become public about Gerhartsreiter's methods - his preppy clothes, penchant for approaching people at country clubs and society events, and modest hints at a storied lineage - matches up with a body of research that suggests just how

powerful signals of common identity and status can be, and how they can override our better judgment.

And they illustrate how, though we live in an era of worry over faceless Internet predators and Web identity thieves, we can be at our most vulnerable face-to-face.

Why trust exists in the first place has been something of a puzzle for scholars of human behavior. Evolutionary biologists (and economists) have traditionally assumed that people are self-interested, concerned only with maximizing their own well-being and passing on their genes to succeeding generations. That model doesn't leave much room for trust - why would we assume that someone would act on our behalf rather than simply his own?

Yet human society would not function without trust. We loan things to friends, we take to the road assuming our fellow drivers are not suicidal, we get on airplanes piloted by people we've never seen before, and, when asked to sign something, we rarely read the fine print. If people stopped to double-check the background and references of everyone they had an interaction with, social life would slow to a standstill.

Reconciling trust with selfishness has been a challenge for at least a generation of social scientists. One of the most influential formulations was laid out in a short paper by a Harvard biology graduate student named Robert L. Trivers in 1971. Trivers hypothesized that the sort of advanced cooperation that allowed people to build pyramids, fight in phalanxes, and hold quadrennial elections had emerged out of what he called "reciprocal altruism," a basic "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" instinct. The evident benefits of cooperation had ensured that a package of human emotions evolved to encourage it. Trust was one of them, but so was guilt, which discouraged us from cheating in collaborative situations, and moral outrage, which galvanized the community to punish anyone who did cheat.

In recent decades, a whole body of research has grown out of work such as Trivers's. Much of the literature looks at trust games, stripped-down situations like the Prisoner's Dilemma in which participants are given a choice of cooperating or acting selfishly, with stark rewards and punishments set to encourage them to do one or the other. Over repeated iterations of such games, one of the most common strategies among participants - and one of the most effective - is a basic tit-for-tat: start out assuming a partner will cooperate, but if they don't, punish them by refusing to cooperate as well.

"The default is trust until there's a reason not to," says Robyn Dawes, a psychologist at Carnegie Mellon University.

The art of the con is based on a variation of this idea: that trust is more reflexive than skepticism. And research has suggested that, once people form an initial impression of someone or something, they seem to have a hard time convincing themselves that what they once believed is actually untrue - Daniel Gilbert, a psychology professor at Harvard, calls this "unbelieving the unbelievable."

Indeed, what's notable from the facts that have emerged about Gerhartsreiter is how much he was able to get away with despite playing his roles, in certain ways, rather poorly. People who knew him in his various incarnations have remarked on how his perpetually unwashed clothes and junky cars didn't match up with the story he told about himself. He struck others as plainly ignorant about mores and business matters that someone of his background would know, and he seemed at times to go out of his way to antagonize co-workers and neighbors.

Trust games don't really explain how this congenital gullibility works. To do that, researchers need to observe the actual social world - a place where there is often too little time and too little information coming from too many different places to form a reasoned judgment.

When deciding who to trust, the research suggests, people use shortcuts. For example, they look at faces. According to recent work by Nikolaas Oosterhof and Alexander Todorov of Princeton's psychology department, we form our first opinions of someone's trustworthiness through a quick physiognomic snapshot. By studying people's reactions to a range of artificially-generated faces, Oosterhof and Todorov were able to identify a set of features that seemed to engender trust. Working from those findings, they were able to create a continuum: faces with high inner eyebrows and pronounced cheekbones struck people as trustworthy, faces with low inner eyebrows and shallow cheekbones untrustworthy.

In a paper published in June, they suggested that our unconscious bias is a byproduct of more adaptive instincts: the features that make a face strike us as trustworthy, if exaggerated, make a face look happy - with arching inner eyebrows and upturned mouths - and an exaggerated "untrustworthy" face looks angry - with a furrowed brow and frown. In this argument, people with "trustworthy" faces simply have, by the luck of the genetic draw, faces that look a little more cheerful to us.

Just as in other cognitive shorthands, we make these judgments quickly and unconsciously - and as a result, Oosterhof and Todorov point out, we can severely and immediately misjudge people. In reality, of course, cheekbone shape and eyebrow arc have no relationship with honesty.

Another set of cues, and a particularly powerful one, is body language. Mimicry, in particular, seems to put us at our ease. Recent work by Tanya Chartrand, a psychology professor at Duke, and work by Jeremy Bailenson and Nick Yee, media scholars at Stanford, have shown that if a person, or even a computer-animated figure, mimics our movements while talking to us, we will find our interlocutor significantly more persuasive and honest.

Alex Pentland, an organizational scientist at the MIT Media Lab, has set out to quantify the effect of this separate, non-linguistic language, outfitting groups of people with sensors he calls "sociometers" that can track which direction each of them is facing, who they're near, the pitch and cadence of their voice. Along with mimicry, he is measuring qualities like how energetic a subject is while in conversation, how much their speech pattern matches that of the person they're talking to, and what he calls "consistency," the evenness of speech and movements.

What he has found is that how we say something can matter more than what we actually say. In one study, he had entrepreneurs wearing sociometers pitch their companies to a group of business executives. He found that he could predict, based just on sociometer data, which ideas the executives would like.

These subtle cues, Pentland emphasizes, are difficult to fake - he calls them "honest signals." But Bailenson and Yee's work suggests that the cues don't have to be subtle to work: most of their subjects didn't notice that they were being mimicked, even as they were proceeding to bond with the digital figure on the screen in front of them.

To earn someone's trust, in other words, even rather blatant aping can do the trick. One of the landmark studies on influence was done in 1965 by the Ohio State psychologist Timothy Brock. In it, shoppers at a paint store were approached by a research assistant who offered them advice on what type of paint to choose. He told half of the shoppers he approached that he had recently bought the same amount of paint that they were looking to buy, he told the other half he had bought a different amount.

By and large, the first group took his advice, and the second did not. Something as trivial as buying the same-sized bucket of paint, Brock argued, can forge a bond with a total stranger.

Of course, Gerhartsreiter himself may have been mimicking his fellow members in the Algonquin Club or the Inner Harbor Yacht Club in Greenwich not because he wanted to con them but because he actually wanted to be them. In certain ways, he didn't seem to be much of a con man at all.

The country's first celebrity con man was a Bostonian named Tom Bell who was kicked out of Harvard in the 1730s for stealing some chocolate. Over the next couple of decades he took on a variety of guises. He posed as a member of the Hutchinsons, one of the leading families in Massachusetts. He convinced the inhabitants of Princeton that he was a famous revivalist preacher. He showed up in New York City claiming to be the rich survivor of a shipwreck. And he made his way down to Barbados, where he claimed to be the son of the governor of Massachusetts.

Stephen C. Bullock, a history professor at Worcester Polytechnic Institute who has studied and written on Bell, believes he may even have conned Benjamin Franklin. In 1739 Franklin put an ad in his paper, the Pennsylvania Gazette, reporting that a man using one of Bell's aliases had gained his trust with his refined manners and extensive knowledge of Greek and Latin, then made off with a fine ruffled shirt and an embroidered handkerchief.

In a sense Gerhartsreiter is the opposite of Bell. Rather than using his elite background to cheat people, he cheated people to acquire the elite background. That is not to say Gerhartsreiter was harmless - he is, after all, a person of interest in an unsolved disappearance in California - but fooling people seems to have been not merely a means but an end.

Con men have a term, "taking off the touch," for the point in the con when they take the mark's money. Gerhartsreiter doesn't seem to have had much plan for taking off the touch. When he finally did steal something, it was his daughter, and it's hard to imagine that was for financial reasons. His divorce settlement had given him enough to live on. But that, apparently, was not all he needed.

Drake Bennett is the staff writer for Ideas. E-mail drbennett@globe.com. ■