

# HOW TO DESCRIBE APPEAREANCE IN ENGLISH

UzSWLU, 1<sup>st</sup> year student

Qudratova Zilolaxon

Group:2234

Scientific adviser: Bobodjonov X.

## Abstract

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We form first impressions from faces despite warnings not to do so. Moreover, there is considerable agreement in our impressions, which carry significant social outcomes. Appearance matters because some facial qualities are so useful in guiding adaptive behavior that even a trace of those qualities can create an impression.

Specifically, the qualities revealed by facial cues that characterize low fitness, babies, emotion, and identity are over generalized to people whose facial appearance resembles the unfit (anomalous face overgeneralization), babies (baby face overgeneralization), a particular emotion (emotion face overgeneralization), or a particular identity (familiar face overgeneralization). We review studies that support the overgeneralization hypotheses and recommend research that incorporates additional tenets of the ecological theory from which these hypotheses are derived: the contribution of dynamic and multi-modal stimulus information to face perception; bidirectional relationships between behavior and face perception; perceptual learning mechanisms and social goals that sensitize perceivers to particular information in faces.

**Keywords:** Face Perception, Impression Formation, Appearance, Attractiveness, Babyface, Emotion, Familiarity, Fitness

Although we are admonished “don’t judge a book by its cover”, we repeatedly defy that warning as we go about our daily lives responding to people on the basis of their

facial appearance. The impact of faces is shown in our impressions of people as well as in our behavior towards them, such as whom we help, whom we hire, or whom we ask for a date.

Appearance matters not only when our reactions to a face are arguably relevant to our choices, but even when those choices should be driven by more objective information. For example, facial appearance predicts criminal justice decisions, as well as congressional elections.

Why does facial appearance matter? Why do particular faces create certain impressions? What cues drive our impressions of these faces?

Here we describe how hypotheses derived from an ecological approach to social perception provide insights into social psychological face perception and the role of facial appearance in impression formation.

### The conceptual framework

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The ecological approach to social perception, grounded in Gibson's theory of object perception, holds that people's faces provide adaptive information about the social interactions they afford. For example, the 'cute' face of a baby elicits approach and protective responses an angry face potentiates avoidance and defensive responses. Although ecological theory assumes that our perceptions of faces will often be accurate, it also proposes that attunements to certain facial information can produce biased perceptions through *overgeneralization effects* .

Specifically, the qualities that are accurately revealed by the facial cues that characterize low fitness, babies, emotion, and identity tend to be perceived in people whose facial appearance resembles the unfit, babies, a particular emotion, or a particular identity. Thus, according to the ecological approach, facial appearance matters because some facial qualities are so useful in guiding adaptive behavior that even a trace of those qualities can elicit a response. The errors produced by these

overgeneralizations are presumed to be less maladaptive than those that might result from failing to respond appropriately to persons who vary in fitness, age, emotion, or familiarity.

Moreover, generalizing across faces is just one instance of the broader cognitive mechanism of stimulus generalization that is essential for adaptive behavior. The world would be quite overwhelming if we had no expectations about our social and non-social environment because we failed to generalize from known cases to similar unknown ones.

The focus of ecological theory differs markedly from traditional impression formation research that, until quite recently, has largely eschewed effects of external appearance, focusing primarily on internal mechanisms.

On the other hand, ecological theory intersects with evolutionary psychology theories, and it has much in common with a long line of research on nonverbal communication that is also concerned with reactions to facial cues. It also complements contemporary models of face perception in the cognitive neuroscience literature. One is the dual process model that differentiates mechanisms for the perception of identity versus the perception of emotion and other changeable facial qualities. Another is a model that predicts face recognition from the position of faces in a mental face-space where faces are coded relative to an average face with distances between faces representing similarities in their appearance. Ecological theory adds to these models by emphasizing that face perception guides behavior, expanding the domain of face perception to include perceived traits and social interaction opportunities, and predicting these perceptions from the overgeneralization of adaptive responses.

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