



ILLUSTRATION BY LAUREN NASSEF

Predictive Smiles

● Say cheese and stay married? Yes, according to Matthew Hertenstein, a psychology professor at DePauw University in Greencastle, Ind. He and three colleagues recruited more than 600 people for a review of their college yearbook photos. The researchers rated the yearbook smiles by coding muscle movements around the mouth and the eyes.

The researchers found a surprising correlation: the less people smiled, the more likely they were to later divorce. The effect was statistically significant, though not huge. But when Hertenstein compared the top 10 percent of brightest smilers with the bottom 10 percent of weakest smilers, the "lowest were five times more likely to be divorced than the top."

The researchers also recruited 51 people to submit photos of their choosing. The relationship between smiling and staying married held even for the photographs this group submitted — posed and candid shots from when the subjects were, on average, 10 years old. "I'm more confident in the smiling effect because it held even with a) childhood and b) candid photos," Hertenstein says. Studying smiles in photos is only the latest in what has come to be called "thin slice" research, popularized in the book "Blink," a couple of best sellers ago from Malcolm Gladwell. For example, from very short video clips, research volunteers have determined

with surprising accuracy the personality, socioeconomic status and sexual orientation of those on camera. A still photograph is merely an extremely wafer-thin slice.

The why of the smiling effect remains elusive. Hertenstein acknowledges potentially "dozens" of possible explanations, going with perhaps the most straightforward and benign. He says his "gut inclination is that people who smile on average in their photos have a positive disposition that serves them well in life and relationships."

He cautions that his study is "not destiny." Readers who frowned in their yearbook photos are not putting off the inevitable if they fail to rush to court to file for divorce. "There are plenty of people who defy the odds," offers the professor, only slightly reassuringly. JEFF STRYKER