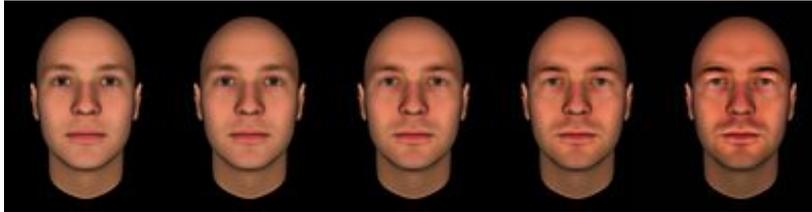


The Dangers of First Impressions

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Changing the shading of a face can make it look less trustworthy. Photo: Alexander Todorov/Social Perception Lab

As highly social animals, human beings need to be able to recognize the individuals in their community. So evolution has engineered into the human brain an intricate face-recognition system. The system is a network of 12 groups of neurons known as face cells, some 200 of which suffice to identify any given face instantly and to generate a memory that can then be maintained for decades. But that's not the recognition system's only trick. We also make instantaneous value judgments about the faces' owners. This first impression takes about 35 thousandths of a second, and it is involuntary, being integrated with the seeing process rather than the product of conscious thought.

"Face Value: The Irresistible Influence of First Impressions," by Princeton psychologist Alexander Todorov, raises a compelling and unresolved issue: First impressions are reasonably consistent, meaning that people largely agree on which faces they judge trustworthy or threatening or dominant. Yet these judgments may be far from accurate, leading to great social injustice in myriad daily interactions where the undeserving make a good impression and the more meritorious leave a bad one.

The value of first impressions is a contested subject in psychology. During the 19th century, scholars generally accepted the folk wisdom that the face was a window to the soul and provided a reading of the owner's character. Modern psychologists later repudiated this view, but recent studies have resurrected the notion that some character traits can be read from the face.

Mr. Todorov believes that such studies greatly overstate the accuracy of such judgments. Some basic attributes of a person, he acknowledges, can reliably be assessed from faces—such as the owners' sex, age and ethnicity and whether they are fat or thin. But we habitually try to infer much more than this, namely important character traits such as whether an individual is trustworthy, aggressive or competent.

These first impressions have far-reaching consequences in daily life. Politicians who appear to be more competent get more votes. Capable-looking CEOs are awarded higher salaries. Cadets with a dominant appearance achieve higher military rank. Untrustworthy-looking defendants receive stiffer sentences.

So should all first impressions of character be rejected, or do they hold some probability of truth despite their frequent inaccuracy? Mr. Todorov seems inclined to throw out both baby and bathwater.

First impressions, he says, are "compelling yet inaccurate." True, everyone learns at a young age that first impressions can be misleading and should be held in check until further evidence is at hand. But if they have no validity at all, then why have we evolved so that the mind makes them almost simultaneously with perceiving a face?

Surely in earlier eras, when one's life could depend on judging a stranger's intentions immediately, a snap judgment that was merely correct more often than not would have been a lot better than nothing. Hence the facial-evaluation system must have some validity, one might suppose. If it didn't, natural selection would long ago have eliminated its owners from the gene pool.

In "Thinking, Fast and Slow" (2011), Daniel Kahneman related his work with Amos Tversky in delineating the mind's two appraisal systems, one a purveyor of snap judgments about the world and the other more leisurely and analytical. First impressions are evidently generated by the snap-judgment system. Commenting on Mr. Todorov's research, Mr. Kahneman wrote that "the accuracy of face reading is far from perfect. . . . Still, even an imperfect ability to assess strangers confers a survival advantage." This seems a plausible claim.

But Mr. Todorov is unimpressed with evolutionary arguments and keeps them at arm's length. He concedes that facial impressions can be a good guide to the person's immediate state of mind but denies them any further validity. "With the help of context, most of the time we can tell how another person is feeling at that particular moment," he writes. "But this momentarily accurate inference is a poor guide to what the person is like in general."

Mr. Todorov is understandably concerned that people who look untrustworthy should not be unfairly treated by society on the basis of their looks alone. But the reader may fear that this political goal, worthy though it may be, has interfered with the scientific goal of understanding the world as it is. First impressions can be singled out in the laboratory, and Mr. Todorov's book excels in explaining how he and other researchers have figured out many of the subtle cues that the mind uses in constructing them. But the reader is left eager for an explanation of how first impressions manage sometimes to be so truthful.

—Mr. Wade is the author of "A Troublesome Inheritance: Genes, Race and Human History."