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Evaluating Faces on Trustworthiness

An Extension of Systems for Recognition of Emotions Signaling Approach/Avoidance Behaviors[Alexander Todorov](#)**First published:**March 2008 [Full publication history](#)**DOI:**10.1196/annals.1440.012 [View/save citation](#)**Cited by:**76 articles [Citation tools](#)

Address for correspondence: Alexander Todorov, Department of Psychology, Green Hall, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544-1010. Voice: +609-258-7463; fax: +609-258-1113.

atodorov@princeton.edu

Abstract

People routinely make various trait judgments from facial appearance, and such judgments affect important social outcomes. These judgments are highly correlated with each other, reflecting the fact that valence evaluation permeates trait judgments from faces. Trustworthiness judgments best approximate this evaluation, consistent with evidence about the involvement of the amygdala in the implicit evaluation of face trustworthiness. Based on computer modeling and behavioral experiments, I argue that face evaluation is an extension of functionally adaptive systems for understanding the communicative meaning of emotional expressions. Specifically, in the absence of diagnostic emotional cues, trustworthiness judgments are an attempt to infer behavioral intentions signaling approach/avoidance behaviors. Correspondingly, these judgments are derived from facial features that resemble emotional expressions signaling such behaviors: happiness and anger for the positive and negative ends of the trustworthiness continuum, respectively. The emotion overgeneralization hypothesis can explain highly efficient but not necessarily accurate trait judgments

from faces, a pattern that appears puzzling from an evolutionary point of view and also generates novel predictions about brain responses to faces. Specifically, this hypothesis predicts a nonlinear response in the amygdala to face trustworthiness, confirmed in functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) studies, and dissociations between processing of facial identity and face evaluation, confirmed in studies with developmental prosopagnosics. I conclude with some methodological implications for the study of face evaluation, focusing on the advantages of formally modeling representation of faces on social dimensions.

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