Face-ism and kernels of truth in facial inferences

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In a recent article in the Science & Society section of this journal [1], Olivola and colleagues delivered a powerful argument about fighting the phenomenon that they called "face-ism":

1. Many important social decisions are made on the basis of people's facial appearance.
2. Social inferences based on facial appearance are inaccurate and unreliable.
3. Therefore, we need to stop people from using faces as a basis for social decisions.

We very much agree with the conclusion of this argument. We as scientists must leverage our understanding of facial judgments to design policies that will prevent people to judge a person guilty just because that person looks untrustworthy -- or to design policies that will prevent people from elevating a person to power simply because that person looks like a leader. But even though we agree with this conclusion, we take issue with the claim that facial appearance can only yield inaccurate and unreliable social inferences.

Although our argument could apply to many social inferences [2], we will focus in this letter on trustworthiness judgments. Indeed, many recent articles demonstrated that people could trust the right individuals on the sole basis of their facial appearance [3-8]. Is this effect large? No. The studies point to small effects, just above the level of random guessing. Facials signals of trustworthiness are noisy, elusive, and better ignored in favor of more reliable signals if the goal is to reach an accurate judgment. Furthermore, people have no conscious insight about their ability to detect trustworthiness from faces [3], making it unwise to try to rely on this capacity to make social decisions. From a policymaking perspective, this opacity and limited reliability are unredeemable shortcomings: It simply cannot be advised to make decisions based on facial trustworthiness.
judgments. From a scientific perspective, though, the evidence remains that people have some
minimal capacity to detect trustworthiness from facial features.

We believe that the commendable, legitimate, and benevolent social motivation of Olivola and
colleagues (i.e., fighting face-ism) led them to deemphasize the evidence for a kernel of truth in
facial judgments, to such an extent that non-informed scientists may form a wrong impression of the
state of the art. Attempts to identify trustworthiness or cooperativeness from facial features have not
been "debunked and abandoned" within the scientific community, as the authors state in the article.
On the contrary, new findings continue to be published that refine our understanding of
trustworthiness detection from faces, its correlates, and its boundary conditions. Although these
findings must be critically examined [9], they cannot be ignored.

Consider for example the finding that adolescents gradually improve at the task of detecting
trustworthiness from the faces of unknown adults [5]. At age 13, adolescents playing a trust game
with adult partners are barely able to discriminate trustworthy and untrustworthy partners, making
correct decisions for about 53% of faces (where random guessing would lead to a 50% accuracy
rate). Trusting decisions, however, get better with each passing year, up to a 60% accuracy rate at
age 18 (compared again to a 50% accuracy rate in case of random guessing). Consider also the
finding that urban French participants could detect the cooperativeness of rural Senegalese men
simply by looking at their pictures, with a 58% accuracy rate, significantly greater than the 50%
accuracy that would be expected from random guessing [8]. These developmental and cross-cultural
findings require an explanation, and this explanation is unlikely to be consistent with the
assumption that facial inferences are wholly and hopelessly inaccurate.

Desirable social outcomes, though, can be achieved without committing to this assumption. We
agree that facial inferences are inaccurate to such an extent, and with such untoward consequences, that the only sensible course of action is to educate citizens not to make any consequential decision based on another individual's facial appearance. For policy-making purposes, the kernel of truth in facial judgments is simply not significant enough to compensate the negative consequences of face-ism.

We should be careful, though, to separate the political from the scientific. In the political arena, there are good reasons to not mention evidence for a kernel of truth in facial judgments -- but there are no such reasons to disregard this evidence in a scientific forum. It is important that we investigate the cognitive mechanisms that drive successful inferences from faces, their biological correlates, their boundary conditions, and their adaptive function.

We must be careful, of course, about the way we communicate these findings, for we should never facilitate unfair decisions by giving the impression that facial appearance is a reliable, usable mirror to the soul. But we must be just as careful when we address face-ism in a scientific forum: we can and we must aim at defeating face-ism without overlooking the evidence for accurate facial judgments.


