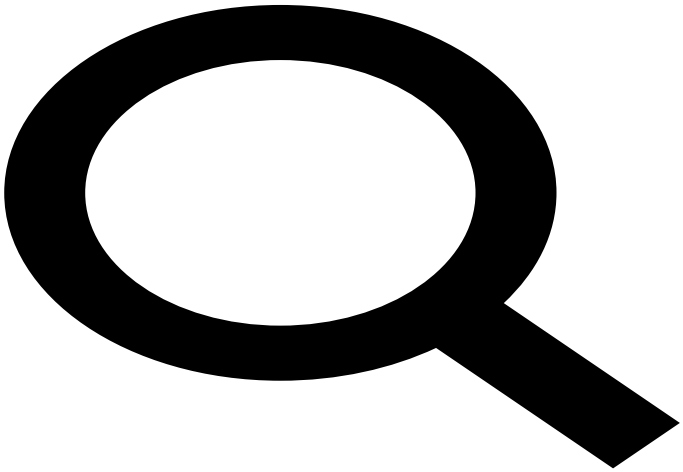
Our face tells a lot about us. Well, at least this is what other people seem to think: having seen our face for a few seconds-or even a few milliseconds-they will think that we are more or less attractive – unsurprisingly – but also competent, dominant or trustworthy (e.g. Todorov et al., 2008). And people seem to act on the basis of these evaluations: such inferences will influence judge's verdicts (Zebrowitz & McDonald, 1991) and employers' decisions (Collins & Zebrowitz, 1995). They also seem to play a role in the way we vote. In a series of studies, Alexander Todorov and his colleagues have shown that the evaluations of politicians' faces, even after an exposure as short as one tenth of a second, can often predict their electoral success: those who were rated higher on competence tended to win more races (Willis and Todorov, 2006, available here).

Do such evaluations vary across cultures? This is the subject of a new paper by Nicholas Rule, and Nalini Ambady from Tufts, Reginald B. Adams from Penn State, and Hiroki Ozono, Satoshi Nakashima, Sakiko Yoshikawa, and Motoki Watabe from Kyoto University. They set out to find if people from different societies would pass similar judgments on the faces of people belonging to other groups (Rule et al., 2010, available here).



Who would you vote for? (OK, Palpatin didn't look like that when he was elected…)

Quite a few things are already known about cross-cultural variation in perception of faces. Mostly, that there isn't much of it: people from different culture (at least for the usual suspects, mostly the US vs. China) pretty much agree on the personality traits that are reflected by different faces (Albright et al., 1997). The first goal of this study was to replicate these findings in the case of American and Japanese politicians. And replicate they did: American and Japanese participants are in close agreement about the attribution of traits related to warmth (such as trustworthiness) and power (such as competence or dominance) to the faces of American and Japanese politicians.

This data also allowed for a replication of the effects observed by Willis and Todorov (and many others) that such evaluations would be predictive of electoral success. This was easy to do since the faces that had been used belonged to the candidates for the Senate and the Diet, respectively, and since the winners of all these races were already known. Here cultural differences start to emerge.

As in previous studies, it was found that the ‘power' dimension – and this dimension only – was a significant predictor of who would win the race in American elections [as an aside: Republicans tend to score higher on this scale than Democrats – make of that what you will; Rule & Ambady, 2010]. However, for Japanese politicians, it was the ‘warmth' component that was the sole significant predictor of success. So, while American and Japanese participants agree on who looks ‘warm' or ‘powerful' (these are statistical constructs, the questions are framed in more specific terms), they seem to disagree on what trait is most important in a politician.

So far so good. The next step the researchers took was to enquire about peoples' explicit predictions: what would American and Japanese participants say when asked to predict who would win the race? Here participants displayed a strong ‘self-projection' bias: Japanese participants tended to use warmth related traits as a predictor whereas Americans were more inclined to rely on traits associated with power. This shows that people are aware, on some level, of what traits are going to influence people from their culture. This allows them to be better than chance at predicting the outcome of electoral races on the sole basis of the faces of the candidates – when the race occurs in their country. However, participants also tended to use the same traits to judge the races of the other country. And there they were at chance: since there is little correlation between evaluations of warmth and power, grounding one's predictions on one of these dimensions if it is the other that people actually use is not going to do any good.

While not exactly groundbreaking, this study shows, I believe, that it is possible to apply well known methodologies and theories from psychology in order to reach a better understanding of cross-cultural differences and similarities without battling for the everything-is-cultural or the everything-is-universal side.

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