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The Times

August 24, 2006

How trust is built in the blink of an eye

By LEWIS SMITH, SCIENCE REPORTER

Human beings use their intuition to decide in as little as one tenth of a second whether they trust a stranger, researchers have shown.

A study of reaction times reveals that not a word needs to be spoken, nor a single muscle moved for someone's character to be judged. Just a glimpse of a face is enough for a snap judgment to be made on whether a newcomer is likeable, competent or even trustworthy.

Researchers used timed experiments in which volunteers were shown pictures of people they had never met before. The results revealed that the volunteers came to the same conclusions about the face they had been shown whether they had 100 milliseconds, 500 milliseconds or a full second to decide.

Alexander Todorov, a psychologist at Princeton University in the US, said that the speed of decision-making showed that the human brain is "hard-wired" to drawn instant inferences about character. He said. "The link between facial features and character may be tenuous at best, but that doesn't stop our minds from sizing other people up at a glance.

"We decide very quickly whether a person possesses many of the traits we feel are important, such as likeability and competence, even though we have not exchanged a single word with them. It appears that we are hard-wired to draw these inferences in a fast, unreflective way."

The study, published in the journal *Psychological Science*, follows research last year on how voters respond to a politician's face. Dr Todorov said that the study involved a series of experiments involving 200 volunteers.



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