

face-ism without overlooking the evidence for accurate facial judgments.

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Response to Bonnefon *et al.*: Limited ‘kernels of truth’ in facial inferences

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In a recent letter [1] Bonnefon and colleagues commented on an article that we published in this journal [2]. We thank Bonnefon and colleagues for the opportunity to address the issue of the accuracy of character inferences from faces, which we have discussed extensively elsewhere [3–5]. Part of our argument that such inferences are harmful relies on the assumption that these inferences are generally inaccurate. These authors question this assumption, arguing that the ‘evidence remains that people have some minimal capacity to detect trustworthiness from facial features.’

Before we address this evidence it is good to remind ourselves of Walter Mischel’s seminal work from the 1960s [6]. Mischel showed that personality is not a very strong predictor of behavior across situations: we would not expect people who cheat in economic games to also cheat on their partners. One of the studies cited by Bonnefon *et al.* [7] found zero correlation between two measures of altruistic behavior: cooperation in public goods games and charitable contributions. Trustworthiness judgments from faces predicted the former but not the latter.

What should we make of the better-than-chance trustworthiness judgments in these fairly constrained situations? We have already shown that ‘better-than-chance’ is an extremely feeble criterion for measuring performance [3]. In a nutshell, in most real-world situations where the guessed categories are unequally prevalent, relying on judgments from faces makes predictions worse. Rather than reiterating our findings, we can demonstrate their logic

using Bonnefon *et al.*’s own results [8] which show that participants are less likely to invest in ‘abusers’ than in ‘cooperators’ in a trust game. At first glance, these results give the deceptive impression that relying on faces to judge ‘trustworthiness’ is a profitable strategy. Nevertheless, had their participants ignored the faces and trusted everybody, they would have nearly doubled their profits. The reason has to do with the unequal distribution of abusers and cooperators – a ratio of 1 to 5 in their data. Their participants only invested half of the time in trustworthy partners. With this level of trust, and given the preponderance of cooperators, even if their participants had been perfect at detecting ‘abusers’ they would still have obtained lower profits than they could have by closing their eyes and trusting everyone. In sum, ‘better-than-chance’ performance is an insufficient reason for celebration [3].

People may indeed derive valid information from faces, but this information is limited to intentions in specific situations [5]. It is important not to confuse these situation-constrained intentions with broader inferences about character traits. If face images were a reliable guide to character, it would not be possible to dramatically alter character judgments such as trustworthiness by simply presenting different images of the same person [4]. Yes, the face may contain ‘kernels of truth’ about specific intentions or situations [9] in the form of subtle expressions [4,10], but these kernels do not lead to accurate generalizations across situations. We do not need to appeal to ‘social motivation’ to shun these judgments as a guide to figuring out other people or the world around us.

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