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Situational affordances constrain first impressions from faces

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Abstract

Humans spontaneously attribute a rich variety of traits (e.g., trustworthy, competent) to strangers based on facial appearance. Despite decades of research on these facial first impressions, few studies have investigated how situational affordances relevant to human perceivers impact impression formation. Nearly all existing research comes from participants forming impressions of targets who bear no relevance (real or manipulated) to the participant. Here, we tested whether situational affordances (i.e., opportunities or obstacles to fulfilling one's goals) related to three fundamental social motives—mate-seeking, self-protection, and disease avoidance—constrain the way that perceivers form impressions from faces. Across 167,951 ratings from 400 Canadian undergraduates, situational affordances caused the structure of facial impressions to change, generally becoming more constrained when targets were rated in goal-relevant contexts versus a goal-neutral context absent any affordances. These changes may arise from participants forming impressions on one central, goal-relevant trait, which influences ratings on other less-relevant traits.