

Who's the boss? Americans respond faster to those with high social status

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Who do you look at in a group photo? If you're like most adults, you'll look at yourself first — unless your boss is also in the picture.

A study in *PLoS ONE* by researchers from the Brain and Creativity Institute at USC and Peking University examines how White Americans and Chinese people in China respond to pictures of their boss, suggesting cultural differences in our responses to authority figures.

Unlike people in China, who responded fastest to pictures of their direct supervisor, White Americans responded faster to pictures of their own face than to pictures of their boss, the study found. However, the American tendency toward individualism is less pronounced if the supervisor is considered someone with high [social status](#).

"What constitutes a social threat may differ across cultures," said Sook-Lei Liew, a doctoral student with the Brain and Creativity Institute at USC and lead author of the study. "Americans may be influenced more by one's social status than one's hierarchical position as a boss."

Past research has shown that people respond faster to their own faces than to the faces of others, suggesting "we have a different — and privileged — system for processing ourselves versus others," Liew explained.

In other words, we are quicker to react to faces we think are important. Most of the time this is our own face, but certain individuals may

interfere with how one thinks of oneself, the researchers said.

"The very concept of a "boss" may be different in different cultures," said Lisa Aziz-Zadeh, assistant professor with the Brain and Creativity Institute at USC. "These findings are particularly salient as globalization increases and, along with it, the prevalence of multicultural collaboration, particularly between East Asian and Western partners."

While Americans did not respond faster to photos of their boss than to themselves, they did respond faster to photos of their boss compared to photos of their peers, suggesting that for Americans, the boss figure is influential in the social arena without directly affecting one's self-concept.

The so-called "[boss](#) effect" among people in China was first identified in 2009 by Yina Ma and Shihui Han of Peking University, both authors on this study.

More information: Liew, et. al, "Who's Afraid of the Boss: Cultural Differences in Social Heirarchies Modulate Self-face Recognition in Chinese and Americans." PLoS ONE: February 16, 2011.

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