Twins study sheds light on trust

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New research from the University of Aberdeen and the University of Western Australia has looked at the basis of trust and what makes some of us trust more readily than others.

Researchers studied 1,264 twins to understand whether differences in

trust are based on genetic, shared or personal environments. They showed the twins images of faces and asked them to rate how trustworthy, attractive and dominant each face was.

Scientists reported that the twins' ratings were not the same, ruling out an overarching effect of genetics and implying a key effect of personal experience on these trait perceptions. So, who we individually trust is mostly a product of our individual life experience, rather than either nature or nurture.

Our impressions of trustworthiness can have extreme consequences, such as decisions about financial lending, partner selection, and even death penalty decisions so it is important to understand how they come about and what influences our perceptions of trust.

Dr. Clare Sutherland who led the research while at the University of Western Australia, explains: "We aimed to discover the origins of first impressions of trust and specifically, why do we differ in who we trust?

"We think that as we go about our lives we learn who looks trustworthy to us based on specific social interactions we have with others. So, for example, if I experience particularly trustworthy interactions with people with green eyes, whereas you experience particularly trustworthy interactions with people with feminine features, then I might learn to specifically trust people with green eyes and you might learn to specifically trust feminine features.

"This finding is new. Most research on first impressions of trust focuses on what we have in common, not why we disagree. Here we show that impressions of trust can also lie 'in the eye of the beholder.' Importantly, we also can show where these impressions come from. Face impressions of trust haven't been studied in this way before.

"Previous research has found that individual differences in face identity recognition are strongly driven by genes, which offers a sharp contrast to the current work. It suggests that the cognitive architecture of face perception is more complex than perhaps we might have thought.

"Our study sheds new light into the origins of a critical aspect of human social cognition—and tells us about everyday trusting experience in society. As our online worlds grow increasingly fragmented, especially in these troubled times, our results suggest that disagreements in trust will also grow."

Dr. Jemma Collova, a postdoctoral researcher who worked on the project at the University of Western Australia, adds: "Our study offers a new perspective on the origins of trust and on our capacity to change whom we trust, for good or for ill. As the information we access online becomes increasingly individual, especially in these strange times, our findings also suggest that disagreements about whom we trust are also likely to increase."

Provided by University of Aberdeen