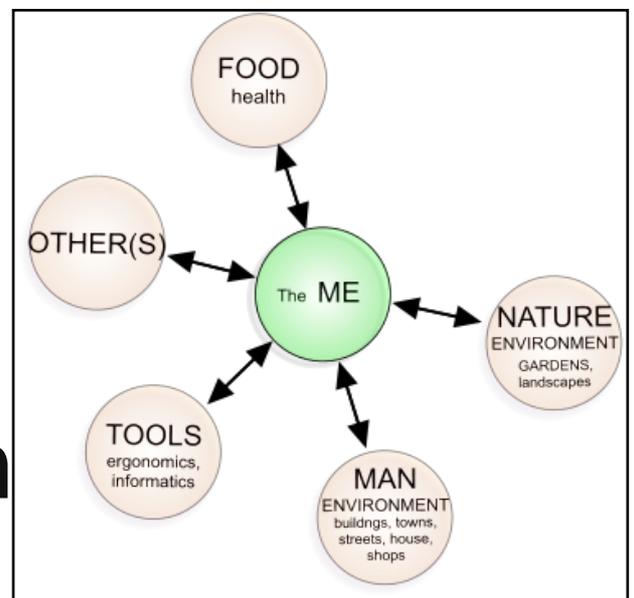


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Effortless thinking: Why stereotyping is an evolutionary trap



Survival in the jungle dictates judging everything on first impressions – but life in the urban jungle demands



Don't judge a book by its cover

Martin Godwin/Getty

By Kate Douglas

We are born to judge others by how they look: our brains come hardwired with a specific face-processing area, and even shortly after birth, babies would rather look at a human face than anything else. Within their first year, they become more discerning, and are more

likely to crawl towards friendly looking faces than those who look a bit shifty. By the time we reach adulthood, we are snap-judgement specialists, jumping to conclusions about a person's character and status after seeing their face for just a tenth of a second. And we shun considered assessments of others in favour of simple shortcuts – for example, we judge a baby-faced individual as more trustworthy, and associate a chiselled jaw with dominance.



Effortless thinking

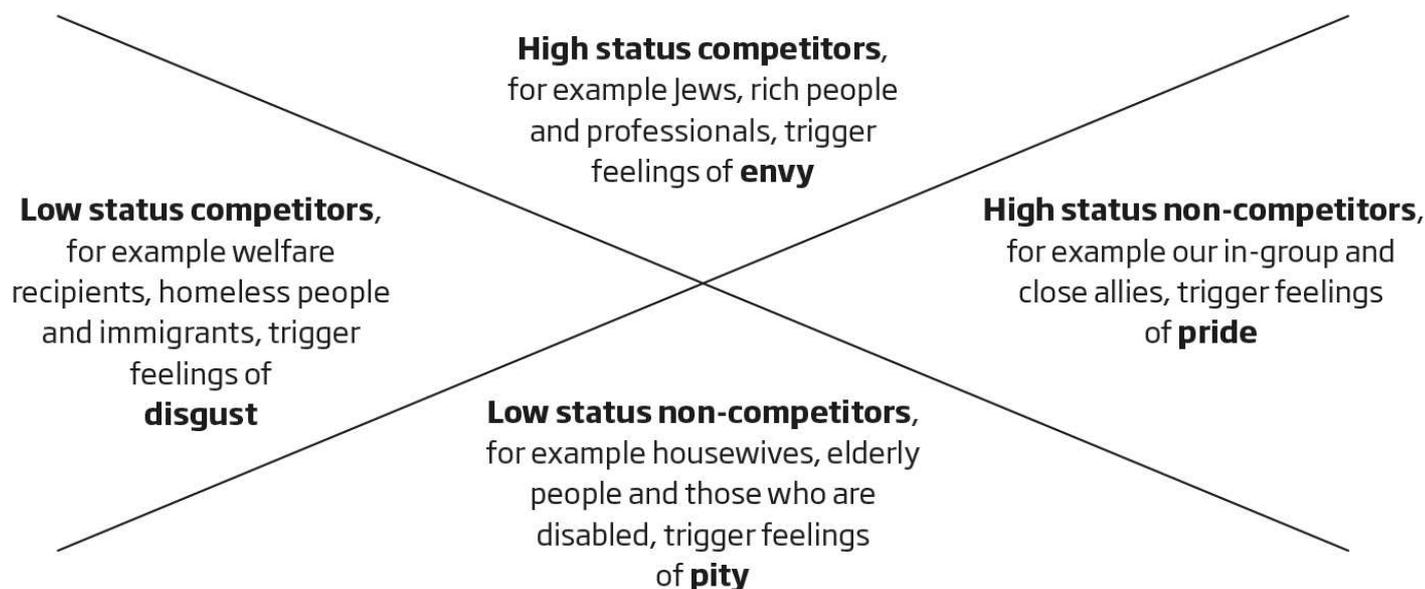
Sloppy thinking is at the root of many modern ills. We explore why our ideas are often so misguided

Unfair, it may be, but it makes good evolutionary sense. Ours is an ultra-social species, so being able to quickly assess whether someone is friend or foe and whether they have the power to help or hurt us is important survival information. But there is a problem. As psychologist Alexander Todorov of Princeton University points out, more often than not, our first impressions are wrong. It's not clear why, but he suggests that poor feedback and the fact that we meet many more strangers than our prehistoric ancestors would have, both play a part.

Another problem is that we don't stick to stereotyping faces one at a time. We are just as quick to categorise groups of people – and then discriminate against them as a result. Research by Susan Fiske, also of Princeton, and her colleagues has shown that group stereotypes, too, are based on levels of trustworthiness and status – or “warmth” and “competence” as they label them. The researchers have plotted these categories on a two-by-two grid (see “Four kinds of people”), each quarter of which is associated with a particular emotion: pity, disgust, pride or envy. This, they have found, informs our behaviour towards people in the group.

Four kinds of people

We instinctively categorise others according to whether or not we perceive them to be in competition with us for resources, and whether or not they have the status to help or harm us. These social stereotypes trigger emotional responses that influence our behaviour



Their findings don't paint us in a great light. We tend to dehumanise groups we judge to be lacking in warmth, and react violently to those with high status. "Historically, many genocides have been directed towards groups that fall into the envy quadrant," says Fiske. Even our relatively positive reactions have downsides: we may pity those of low status, but react by patronising them, and the pride we feel towards our own group can spill over into nepotism.

If you think you are above this kind of thing, think again. Even if you consciously reject stereotypes, the culture you live in does not, and experiments suggest that you are likely to share its biases. One study, for example, found that white Americans who showed no sign of racism on a standard test subconsciously dehumanise black people.

The best way to escape this evolutionary trap is to really get to know people from outside your echo chamber. Working together on a joint project is ideal because relying on someone forces you to look beyond simplistic first impressions. And don't trust social stereotypes – even your own national stereotype. The evidence suggests that we are not even accurate when it comes to judging ourselves.

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Leader: "The world urgently needs critical thinking, not gut feeling"

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