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FlashReport

Self-face advantage is modulated by social threat – Boss effect on self-face recognition

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ABSTRACT

Human adults usually respond faster to self-face than to faces of others. The self-face advantage has been associated with an implicit positive association with the self. The current work investigated whether social threats modulate self-face recognition by asking graduate students to identify orientations of self-face in a high-threat context, in which self-face and a faculty advisor's face were presented in one block of trials, or in a low-threat context, in which self-face and a face of another faculty member were presented in one block of trials. We found a self-face advantage in the low-threat context but a self-face disadvantage in the high-threat context (i.e., slower responses to self-face compared to the advisor's face). Moreover, the self-face disadvantage positively correlated with the degree of fear of negative evaluations from advisors. Our findings suggest that self-face recognition is strongly modulated by social interactions with influential superiors within social hierarchies.

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Introduction

A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind. –William James, *The principles of psychology* (1890/1950, Vol. I, p. 294)

The distinctiveness of the self is reflected in multiple cognitive processes, such as self-face recognition (Keenan et al., 1999) and self-referential memory (Klein, Cosmides, Tooby, & Chance, 2002; Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977), which have been associated with neural activity in several brain regions (see Northoff et al., 2006; Zhu & Han, 2008). However, since the time of William James, it has been noted that self-concept depends greatly on social contexts in which the self interacts with others. For example, while one may remember information about the self better than information about others (Conway, Wang, Hanyu, & Haque, 2005; Rogers et al., 1977), this self-advantage in memory is weakened in a context that includes close others (e.g., mother/father/best friend, Zhu & Zhang, 2002).

Similarly, self-face recognition is also influenced by contextual information. Human adults manifest distinct self-face recognition, responding faster to their own faces than to faces of unfamiliar or familiar others in visual search (Tong & Nakayama, 1999), face owner identification (Keenan et al., 1999), or face orientation identification tasks (Ma & Han, in press; Sui & Han, 2007). However, our

recent research showed that self-face recognition is strongly affected by experimentally manipulated contexts. While adults responded faster to orientations of self-face compared to familiar faces, the self-face advantage was eliminated when self-concept was threatened by a priming procedure that associated the self with negative traits (Ma & Han, in press). The results support an implicit positive association (IPA) theory, which posits that self-face recognition and the concomitant self-awareness activate positive attributes in self-concept, which in turn facilitate behavioral responses to self-face and result in self-advantage in face recognition (Ma & Han, in press).

The current work assessed whether social threats confronted in naturalistic social situations to one's positive associations also modulate self-face recognition. One social threat commonly experienced is being negatively evaluated by influential superiors within a social hierarchy such as one's boss, which usually results in difficulty of promotion or even loss of one's job. The psychological consequences of such a social threat may include a reduction of positive self-associations, which induces weakened self-advantage during face recognition according to the IPA theory. Given that face perception induces both the processing of physical appearance and automatic access to information about familiar individuals such as personal traits and attitudes (Gobbini & Haxby, 2007), we hypothesized that the appearance of influential superiors within a social hierarchy may induce social threats and lead to elimination of self-face advantage. To assess this, we asked graduate students to identify orientations of self-face that was shown in one block of trials with either their faculty advisor's face (high-threat condition) or with the face of another faculty member who was not within

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their own lab (low threat condition)¹. As negative evaluations from advisors constitute higher threats to self-esteem compare to those from other faculty members, as indicated by subjective reports of greater fear of being negatively evaluated by advisors (see “Results”), we expected that the self-face advantage would be reduced in the high than low threat conditions. To further quantify the relation between subjective evaluations of social threats and behavioral performances associated with face recognition, we examined whether differential responses to self-face and advisor’s face co-varied with individuals’ subjective ratings of fear of negative evaluations from the advisor. We would expect stronger influences on self-face recognition for those who reported greater fear of being negatively evaluated by their advisors.

Method

Participants

Twenty healthy Chinese graduate students (10 females, mean age = 24.8, SD = 1.94) participated in this study. All had worked with their advisors more than a year (14–48 months). All were right-handed and had normal or corrected-to-normal vision.

Questionnaire measurement

The Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation (Brief-FNE) scale (Leary, 1983) was modified to assess participants’ fear of being negatively evaluated by others. All items were the same as the original Brief-FNE scale, except that participants had to rate each statement twice, once for the advisor and once for another faculty member who worked at the same department but not within one’s own lab (e.g., I am frequently afraid of Prof. XXX noticing my shortcomings). Participants had to indicate how properly each statement applied to themselves using a 5-point scale (1 = not at all and 5 = extremely right). An independent question was used to evaluate subjective ratings of social status (defined as an individual’s overall ability to control or influence other people and institutions) of the advisor and another faculty member using an 11-point scale (0 = not all dominant and 10 = extremely dominant).

Stimuli and procedure

Ten digital face images were taken from each participant, his/her faculty advisor, another faculty member, and one of his/her labmates before the experiment. Participants knew the faculty as long as they knew the advisor. Half of the participants were of the same gender as the advisor/faculty member and half were of a different gender from the advisor/faculty member. An advisor’s face for one participant was used as the faculty’s face for another participant so as to match perceptual features of the stimuli. Faces oriented to the left (varied from 30° to 90°) in five images and to the right in the others. Face images were divided into 10 × 10 ar-

¹ A common belief in Chinese teachers is that most students would not develop well unless their shortcomings are uncovered frequently. Consequently, students receive more critiques than praise from their teachers. The psychological consequence of such social experience is that teachers such as advisors for each class in elementary, middle, and high schools, who frequently criticize students and remind them of their shortcomings, constitute a threat to students’ self-esteem and students care very much about how their advisors think about them. Similarly, graduate students in universities care very much about their advisors’ attitudes towards the self. However, not any positive/respected person constitutes a social threat to students’ self-esteem. A faculty member is treated as a positive/respected person but does not constitute a social threat to subjects’ self-esteem because a faculty member does not frequently criticize or give negative comments on students’ behaviors or work. Graduate students care less about other faculty members’ attitudes towards the self.

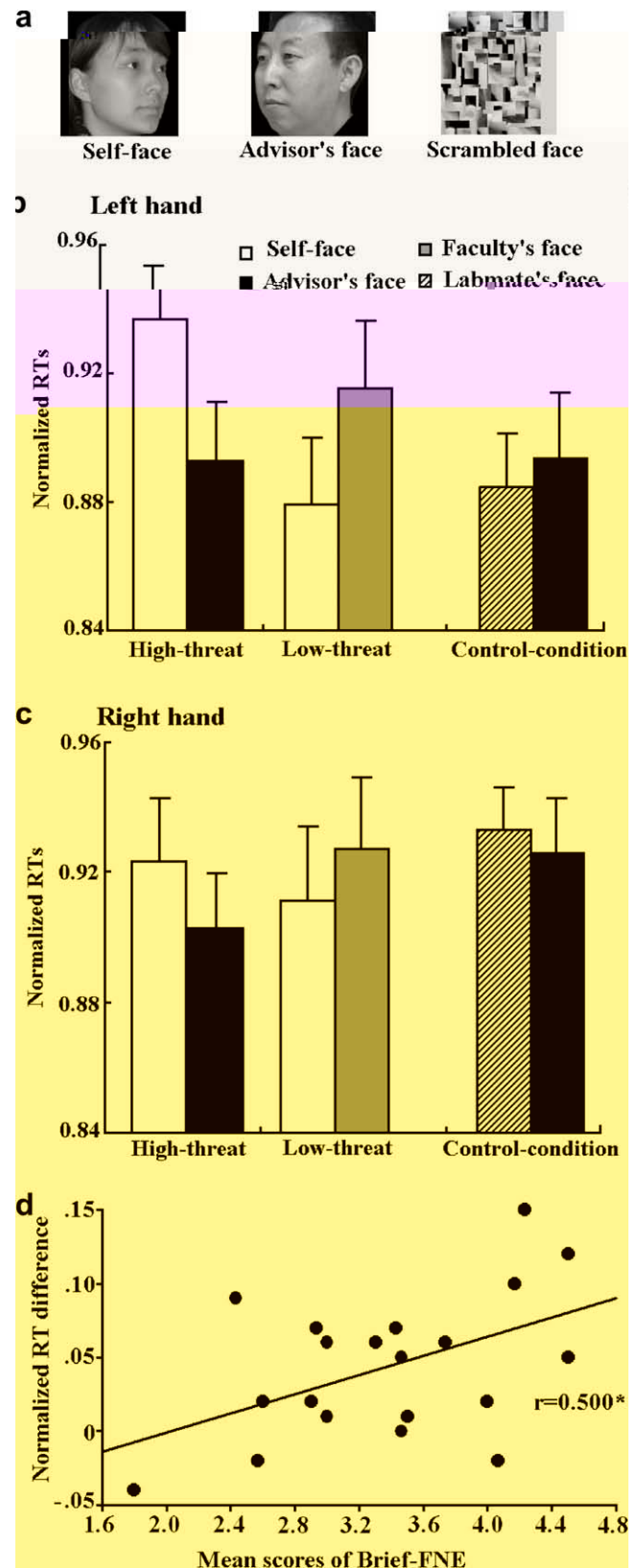


Fig. 1. (a) Illustration of face stimuli used in the current study; (b) the results of normalized response speeds with the left hand. The Y-axis represents the ratio of (self or other faces)/scrambled faces; (c) the results of normalized response speeds with the right hand. The Y-axis represents the ratio of (self or other faces)/scrambled faces; (d) the results of the correlation analysis. The X-axis represents the mean rating scores of the Brief-FNE scale related to advisors. The Y-axis represents the differential RTs (normalized RTs to self-face minus normalized RTs to advisors’ faces). Error bars denote standard errors.

rays using MatLab and reorganized randomly to form scrambled faces that did not contain any facial features but contained a gray bar on the left or right (Fig. 1a). All images were calibrated in luminance and contrast. Each stimulus subtended a visual angle of $2.13^{\circ} \times 2.17^{\circ}$ at a viewing distance of 70 cm and was presented for 200 ms at the center of the screen followed by a fixation cross with a duration varying between 800 and 1200 ms. Participants had to judge whether each face oriented to the left or right or to judge locations of a gray bar in scrambled faces (left or right) by pressing two keys using the index and middle fingers. Instructions emphasized both response speed and accuracy.

There were 40 faces and 20 scrambled faces in each block of trials. Self-face was presented in a high-threat context in two blocks of trials (20 trials of self-face and 20 trials of advisor's face in each block) and in a low-threat context in two blocks of trials (20 trials of self-face and 20 trials of another faculty member's face in each block). A labmate's face and the advisor's faces were presented in two blocks of trials to examine whether participants responded generally faster to advisors' faces even when shown in one block with other non-self faces. For each stimulus condition, participants responded with the left hand in one block but with the right hand in another block. The orders of responding hands and conditions were counterbalanced across

The fact that the self-face disadvantage in the high-threat context positively correlated with subjective feelings of fear of being negatively evaluated by advisors supports the proposal that social threat modulates self-face processing through changing one's IPA and provides further evidence for the role of IPA in self-face advantage (Ma & Han, *in press*). The effect of social threats on self-face advantage indicates that positive self-associations depend on social interactions with influential superiors in real life situations since negative evaluations from the influential superiors alert individuals to the possibility of social exclusion (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). The presence of influential superiors modulates self-face recognition by shaping self-concept and gives rise to multiple social self-identities.

Although the correlation analysis suggests a relation between the self-face disadvantage in the high-threat context and subjective feelings of fear of being negatively evaluated by advisors, such correlation was more salient with left-hand than right-hand responses. Similarly, the effect of self-concept threat on self-face recognition was more salient on left-hand than on right-hand responses (Ma & Han, *in press*). Prior brain lesion and neuroimaging studies suggest right-hemisphere dominance in self-face recognition (Breen, Caine, & Coltheart, 2001; Keenan, Nelson, O'Connor, & Pascual-Leone, 2001; Sui & Han, 2007; Uddin, Iacoboni, Lange, & Keenan, 2007; but see Turk et al., 2002 for opposite observations). There is also evidence that the right hemisphere dominates the processing of negative emotion such as fear (Adolphs, Damasio, Tranel, & Damasio, 1996; Davidson, 1992) and the processing of negative concepts (Cunningham, Espinet, DeYoung, & Zelazo, 2005). Thus the correlation results possibly reflected the interaction between self-face recognition and anxiety about negative attitudes on the self from influential superiors that are represented mainly in the right hemisphere.

It should be noted that, as only 20 subjects were recruited, our study provided a preliminary test of the effect of social threat on self-face recognition. Moreover, self-concept is strongly influenced by cultures such that Western cultures encourage the independent self that is autonomous and insusceptible whereas East Asian cultures foster the interdependent self that emphasizes the interconnectedness of human beings and is vulnerable to contextual influences (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Recently, Sui, Liu, and Han (*in press*) showed that self-face advantage was stronger in Westerners than in Chinese and that such cultural difference in self-face advantage was associated with frontal activity as early as 300 ms after sensory stimulation. Cultural attitudes towards peoples' status within social hierarchies also exist between Western and East Asian cultures. An individual's dominant behavior is positively reinforced and people are generally encouraged to dominate and climb the hierarchy in the United States (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). In contrast, a collectivist society (e.g., Japanese society) encourages subordination (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998) and praises being agreeable rather than being dominant (Moskowitz, Suh, & Desaulniers, 1994; Realo, Allik, & Vadi, 1997). The fact that advisors constitute a high threat to positive self-association may be specific to East Asian cultures that foster both interdependent selves and subordination. In Western cultures, however, one may expect less effects of social anxiety of threat from influential superiors on self-face recognition. This can be assessed in future cross-culture studies. Future research may also examine the interaction of emotion and social relevance using advisors' faces with positive or negative expressions.

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