SMASH UP THE BOXES

We all worry about making a good first impression, but it's just as important to get a clear picture of people. We found out why

THERE is rarely a better opportunity to meet loads of people than the start of the university year, whether you're a fresher, moving into new accommodation or you finally signed up for that five-a-side football team.

We often think we're deciding whether we like someone based on their personality (plus their ability to keep their section of the fridge clean).

But science suggests that beneath the surface, our brains are quietly putting people in boxes, often without us even realising.

So rather than just focus on how to make a good first impression, we spoke to physchologist Jana Uher about how to get a clearer first picture of the new people in our lives.

It takes less than a second to judge a face

We only give ourselves 200 thousandths of a second to make complex judgements about a stranger we meet for the first time, such as how trustworthy they are, according to a study led by Prof Alexander Todorov at Princeton University.

Dr Uher, a research fellow at LSE, says these quick judgements evolved to help ancient humans survive.

'Humans and other animals need to make decisions about what is important and how to behave in certain situations quite quickly,' she said. 'We cannot withhold from doing it, we just do it.'

And we use what we can spot easily.

'We already start to form impressions on the basis of this, and to derive ideas of how these people may behave towards us – what kind of person is this – are they nice or not, or chatty or not – and this gives us a sense of security when we interact with strangers,' Dr Uher says.

'We may not be completely aware of which cues we pay attention to.'

Much of this judgement is based on appearance

Most of us are visual animals. 'We are primates,' Dr Uher points out. 'For us the primary mode of perception is seeing. We have TV, Facebook and YouTube and all these are way more important than radio or online audio.'

She says we use a lot of visual clues when working out how to approach a stranger. 'Sometimes it's a sign that they have a similar background, that they belong to a group with which you identify,' Dr Uher says. 'We try to estimate whether we get along.'

Master of research student and Bangor graduate Kate Stuart has experienced this.

'I spotted a picture of a girl with half a skull face on my course's Facebook page,' she says. 'I decided we should be best friends on that basis.' Derby and Nottingham Trent creative writing grad Kristina Adams adds: 'My friend decided I was cool because I wore a leather jacket, had red hair, and talked loudly on the bus.'

Stereotypes influence how we see others

But we don't just use our powers of perception to embrace those with style or personality we admire.

Whether we believe in them or not, we all use society's stereotypes of certain groups of people to judge the individuals who belong to them.

Dr Uher has studied how this happens, focussing her research on race and gender.

She calls stereotypes 'exaggerated mental pictures'.

'We do not take individual differences much into account in these pictures,' she adds. 'We have learned a rich cultural repertoire of beliefs of how certain people are and these stereotypes are automatic.'

Studies prove gender and race affect our views

As part of her research, Dr Uher showed participants a picture of either a black woman, a black man, a white woman or a white man, who were all the same age and all wore the same formal office clothing, leaving their race and gender as their main discernible differences.

She asked each participant to judge how sociable, nervous, trusting and lazy the person in their assigned picture was.

Although 20 to 30 per cent of participants correctly complained they could not tell anything about their model's personality from the picture, the rest did make judgements based on one simple image.

Dr Uher said patterns emerged in how the people in the photographs were rated. For example, the white man was judged as the most outgoing and sociable, while the black man scored the lowest in this area.

The black woman was rated as the most trusting and the white woman was considered most likely to find fault with others.

In another study, participants watched a four-minute video, again of either a black woman, a black man, a white woman or a white man, each film portraying an identical situation at the main character's workplace.

Dr Uher found participants weighed the same social skills – such as how well someone communicated with their colleagues – differently for each person.

'Many of the differences are small,' she said while presenting her research at LSE.

'In the complex mental processes involved, even small differences can amount to larger differences in judgements of others that have nothing to do with their personality.'

The hardware our brain is using has a purpose

Dr Uher stresses that relying on stereotypes is useless when trying to find out what someone is really like.

'When we look at the empirical database of many behaviours and abilities, we find pronounced differences between individuals within a given group, be it age groups, genders, ethnicity,' she says.

'These individual differences are much larger than the average differences between the groups.

'For example there are large differences between [individual] men and [individual] women in many abilities and personality characteristics and the difference between the average man and the average woman is very small, mostly.

'It's just in our minds that we exaggerate that and see these two groups as very different.'

But she says the processes at work when we make initial judgements can help us make sense of the world.

'We would be completely overwhelmed if we had to deal with all information at the same time,' she adds. 'That's what happens to autistic people, because they perceive all details and all cues in their full blown complexity. Our minds are not made to deal with this.'

Rebooting your first impressions takes work

So the first judgements we form tend to be based on pretty shaky evidence.

Admitting you were wrong about somebody can lead to great things – think of the friend you presumed was stuck-up when you first met but is now like family.

But breaking down pre-formed ideas about people can be tricky.

Dr Uher says she was amazed at how difficult one woman who took part in her research found it to let go of her assumptions.

The study participant had only looked at a photograph of the woman she was being asked to judge, but had imagined an entire character for her.

When she was told the actual personality traits of the woman pictured, the participant said she couldn't believe they were true.

'I found that such a remarkable comment because she didn't know anything about that person,' Dr Uher says. 'It was almost as if she was suffering a bit from knowing.

'She imposes constraints in her own storytelling – if you're A you can't be B. It's that black and white thinking.

'We tend to ignore information that tells us (otherwise). We don't want to see information that challenges our views.'

One reason we cling to ideas like this is because the ability to reason evolved to help humans justify our beliefs to others, rather than arrive at a logical conclusion, according to cognitive scientists Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber.

In their book The Enigma Of Reason, they explain how our ancestors had to use clever arguments to win social standing, so got very good at grasping evidence to support what they were saying, rather than weighing up all views equally.

But you can rewrite your software

'The first thing have to do is acknowledge that we all have prejudices and stereotypical beliefs, no matter what group identity we may have,' Dr Uher says.

'I found in my study that even the privileged white man was stereotyped as being lazy because people said "well they get through their professions without doing much just because they are privileged".

'We all want to be judged on the basis of our achievements not just on stereotypes.'

Mixing with people who are unlike you in some way is the best way to dismantle your own prejudices, Dr Uher argues.

'Superceding pre-existing stereotypes through individual impressions is the most important way (to counter stereotypes),' she adds. 'When we get to know individuals of a certain group then we start to see individual differences in that group. Suddenly our exaggerated mental picture breaks down a bit.

'Our biological circuits, the brain circuits, they are just about decision making, seeking information and forming an impression. It's our social and cultural environment that provides the software of what to look for, to form an impression.'

Prof Todorov says we can minimise the effects of our hastily formed beliefs by getting more reliable information about people.

'A good real life example is the increase of the number of women in prestigious philharmonic orchestras,' he told the Princeton University Press blog.

'Until recently, these orchestras were almost exclusively populated by men. What made the difference was the introduction of blind auditions.'

> "It's just in our minds we exaggerate and see two groups, such as men and women, as different"
> **Dr Jana Uher, psychologist**

> "We might look for signs of a similar background – we try to estimate whether we get along"
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IN FIGURES: PREJUDICE AND PERIL

200 thousandths of a second: Time a recent study found it takes us to judge a face

7,500 years humans have been able to meet strangers without fighting, geographer Jared Diamond says

1530 year the pseudoscience of physiognomy – linking physical traits to personality – stopped being taught in UK universities

70 countries where minority groups risk becoming victims of mass killings (source: Peoplesunderthreat.org)

Find out more

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