

People think the 'typical' member of a group looks like them

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(PhysOrg.com) -- What does a typical European face look like according to Europeans? It all depends on which European you ask. Germans think the typical European looks more German; Portuguese people think the typical European looks more Portuguese. That's the conclusion of a new study which will be published in an upcoming issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science. The results shed light on how people think about groups they belong to.

Other studies have found that, when [people](#) choose typical characteristics for a group they're in, they'll pick characteristics more like themselves. But that research was done using words. Roland Imhoff and Rainer Barse of the University of Bonn, Ron Dotsch and Daniël H.J. Wigboldus of Radboud University Nijmegen, and Mauro Bianchi of the University Institute of Lisbon chose to take a different approach: pictures.

The researchers recruited two sets of participants, in Germany and Portugal. Each person sat in front of a computer for about 20 minutes looking at pairs of pictures—770 pairs in all. Every picture was based on the same composite photograph of a man, but each had been computer-manipulated in a different way to introduce noise, distorting the picture and the man's features. Each time, the participant was supposed to pick the picture they thought looked more European. The researchers averaged the pictures that were chosen in each group to come up with one average picture for the Portuguese group and one for the German group.

The average picture created from the Portuguese participants' opinions looks darker, with wider-set eyes. The face created by the Germans has lighter hair and looks more German. The researchers had other people rate the two pictures and found that these observations held up—[Germans](#) had come up with a “typical European” face that looked more German, while Portuguese people thought of the “typical European” as more Portuguese-looking.

It may also be that this is just a sort of a mental shortcut people use to think of an abstract concept, like “European” or “America,” Imhoff says. It may also be that people are expressing a kind of subtle belief that they think their group is better than others. “It has been claimed that I can elevate my own group by claiming it’s particularly typical,” Imhoff says. This could have implications for racial profiling. For example, if a white police officer thinks of “British” as someone who is white like him, he may be more suspicious of someone who doesn’t look like that. Much more research is needed to find out if that’s true, Imhoff says.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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