

Does Depressive Mood Trigger Emotion Identification of Faces with Out-group Features?

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Introduction: Stimuli with features of an unfamiliar cultural background (out-group) might influence reaction, e.g. to emotion expressions. The Islamic headdress (niqab), as an out-group feature in Western cultures, leaves only the area around the eyes visible and thus additionally impedes identification of facial features. Patients with psychiatric disorders, e.g. depression, have been shown to react more stereotypically to out-group stimuli.

Aims: The aim of our study is to examine the ability of depressives in the identification of facial emotions with in- and out-group features.

Methods: Twenty five patients with depression (HAMD >10) and 25 healthy controls were assessed. We employed a paradigm which consisted of six female faces with the emotion expressions happy, angry, sad and fearful. The faces were either covered by cap/ scarf (in-group) or by niqab.

Results: Only correct answers were analyzed. Patients with depression needed significantly longer to identify emotions than healthy controls. In both groups, anger was the emotion recognized significantly faster, whereas reaction to sadness was slowest. The interaction of emotion item x stimulus type indicated a faster reaction to happy faces in the cap / scarf condition and a faster reaction to sadness in the niqab condition in both groups.

Conclusions: Results of our study replicate recent findings of a general out-group / in-group effect in emotion identification and can be interpreted as further evidence for a context-dependent stimulus processing. Larger sample sizes and higher scores on HAMD might be needed to indicate a specific out-group / in-group effect in depressed patients.