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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 48(0)

Authors

Michael, Marie M. G.

Haun, Daniel Benjamin Moritz

Publication Date

2026

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Peer reviewed

Sensitivity to Baby-Schema Features Independent of Perceptual Experience – A Face Discrimination Paradigm in Leipzig and Batek Communities

Marie M. G. Michael

Department of Comparative Cultural Psychology, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology Leipzig,
Germany

Max Planck School of Cognition, Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences, Leipzig,
Germany

Daniel B. M. Haun

Department of Comparative Cultural Psychology, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig,
Germany

Abstract

To recognize and act on baby-schema features – such as large eyes and a rounded face - is commonly seen as an automatic, innate capability in humans. Following this logic, adults' perception of baby-schema features should be independent of cultural background. Contrasting this, evidence shows that perception of adult faces is tuned by culture-specific visual experience. In this pre-registered study, we investigate whether sensitivity to baby-schema is dependent on visual experience in two diverse populations (urban German; small-scale Batek, Malaysia). We morphed child faces sourced from the target communities to different degrees of baby-schema and asked participants to detect the odd-one-out of three faces in both in- and out-group trials across seven difficulty (difference in baby-schema-degree) levels. While difficulty strongly affected accuracy in both communities, we found little evidence that baby-schema sensitivity was modulated by experience, suggesting robustness in perceptual processing and possibly generalized high relevance of this class of stimuli.