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Visual attention to threat in the Himba, a remote people of Namibia

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Abstract

Threatening stimuli capture visual attention more rapidly than benign stimuli. The canonical interpretation of this robust finding is that the brain evolved a “fear module” enabling rapid detection of threats common at the time of mammalian evolution, such as snakes and spiders. This rapid attentional capture is thought to enable prioritized processing of threatening stimuli, providing a survival advantage, and is assumed to be universal. However, these findings have been documented almost entirely in WEIRD (white, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) populations. Here, we address this gap by examining threat detection in a remote African culture, the Himba. Using a touch screen visual search task, we found that both evolutionary-relevant (snakes and spiders) and modern threats (knives and syringes) captured attention more rapidly than benign stimuli. To our knowledge, this is the first study showing that the same kind of threats that rapidly capture visual attention in the West also rapidly capture visual attention in the Himba.