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Authors

Lee, Christopher
M.A., Sarah McCrackin
Itier, Roxane
et al.

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You said something about me: Contextual self-relevance during a first encounter with a face impacts later face recognition

Christopher Lee

University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Sarah McCrackin M.A.

University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Roxane, J. Itier

University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Myra A. Fernandes

University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

Self-relevant information (i.e. related to the observer) is better remembered than other-relevant information. However, it remains to be seen how self-relevance during an initial social encounter can impact later face recognition. We presented 63 participants with sentences describing an opinion varying in self-relevance (self/other-relevant) and valence (positive/negative), followed by neutral face pictures of each opinion holder. Eye-tracking ensured the sentences were read and participants rated the valence and affective arousal of how each face made them feel. Participants then completed a surprise recognition task for the target faces. Recognition accuracy was greater when faces were preceded by self-relevant than other-relevant sentences, and these faces were more arousing. Sentence self-relevance and valence interacted to affect participant valence ratings of the face, but not recognition accuracy. This indicates that initial social encounters can have a lasting effect on one's memory of another person, producing an enhanced memory trace of that individual.