

Effects of attention and emotion on face processing in depression: a functional MRI study

M.J. Desseilles¹*, S. Schwartz², T.T. Dang-Vu¹, V. Sterpenich¹, A. Darsaud¹, G. Albouy¹, G. Vandewalle¹, S. Gais¹, M. Schabus¹, G. Rauchs¹, C. Degueldre¹, A. Luxen¹, M. Ansseau³, P. Maquet¹.

¹University of Liège, Cyclotron Research Centre, Liège, Belgium;

²University Medical Centre, Laboratory for Neurology and Imaging of Cognition, Geneva, Switzerland;

³University of Liège, Department of Psychiatry, Liège, Belgium

Background: Although depression is a frequent and disabling psychiatric condition characterized by severe emotional and cognitive dysfunction, it remains unclear whether depression affects neural responses to emotional stimuli. Mood congruent processing bias is an intriguing feature of major depression in which ambiguous or positive events tend to be perceived as negative. Moreover, depressed patients show a diminished ability to discern affective facial expression. Such impairment in emotional perception might contribute to inadequate social adaptation classically observed in depression. The processing of facial expressions involves a large network of specialized brain areas, including the fusiform face area (FFA; response to faces), the superior temporal sulcus (STS; response to mouth and eye movements involved in facial expressions), and the amygdala (response to emotions such as fear). Enhancement of fMRI signal by emotional expression can occur in both the FFA and the amygdala, even in conditions of reduced attention to the face stimuli (Vuilleumier et al., 2001). In addition, a recent study found greater response to negative visual stimuli in the left fusiform gyrus for depressed patients (Davidson et al., 2003). However, it remains unknown to what extent such changes in neural activity during the processing of emotional stimuli in depression depends on top-down attentional influences.

Purpose: To investigate the modulation of brain response to task-irrelevant emotional faces by attentional load in both depressive and healthy populations.

Methods: Subjects with major depressive disorder (n = 5; drug-free) and without any psychiatric or organic history (n= 15) were scanned on a 3 Tesla MR scanner (Allegra, Siemens, Erlangen) using a gradient echo EPI sequence (32 transverse slices, TR: 2130 ms). During the main fMRI experiment, subjects were presented with a continuous rapid stream of colored letters at fixation (one letter every 750 ms) that were shown either alone or together with peripheral emotional faces (anger and fear) in both hemifields. In an ABBA block design, subjects had to detect either any red letter (easy, low load condition), or upright yellow/ inverted blue Ts (hard, high load), while the central letter stream and peripheral stimuli were the same in each condition. Data were analysed using SPM2 (<http://www.fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk>). Comparisons between the two populations were performed in regions of interest showing increased activity during emotional face presentation.

Results: Our preliminary data reveal increased activity in FFA during face presentation irrespective of load condition in the healthy population, but only during the low load condition in depressed patients. Finally, as compared to depressive patients, healthy subjects show activations in IPS and frontoparietal regions during the high load task with emotional face perception and in prefrontal cortex during the low load task.

Conclusions: Our results suggest that depression interferes with the modulation of neural response in ventral visual pathway by attention. By showing abnormal interaction between attentional and visual processing during the perception of face expression, our study provides new insights into the pathophysiology of depression and associated impairments in the perception of socially-relevant stimuli.

References

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