
Processing of emotional expression in subliminal and low-visibility images

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Abstract

This thesis investigated the processing of emotional stimuli by the visual system, and how the processing of emotions interacts with visual awareness. Emotions have been given ‘special’ status by some previous research, with evidence that the processing of emotions may be relatively independent of striate cortex, and less affected by disruption to awareness than processing of emotionally neutral images. Yet the extent to which emotions are ‘special’ remains questionable. This thesis focused on the processing of emotional stimuli when activity in V1 was disrupted using transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS), and whether emotional properties of stimuli can be reliably discriminated, or affect subsequent responses, when visibility is low.

Two of the experiments reported in this thesis disrupted activity in V1 using TMS, Experiment 1 with single pulses in an online design, and Experiment 2 with theta burst stimulation in an offline design. Experiment 1 found that a single pulse of TMS 70-130 ms following a presentation of a body posture image disrupted processing of neutral but not emotional postures in an area of the visual field that corresponded to the disruption. Experiment 2 did not find any convincing evidence of disruption to processing of neutral or emotional faces. From Experiment 1 it would appear that emotional body posture images were relatively unaffected by TMS, and appeared to be robust to disruption to V1. Experiment 2 did not add to this as there was no evidence of disruption in any condition.

Experiments 3 and 4 used visual masking to disrupt awareness of emotional and neutral faces. Both experiments used a varying interval between the face and the mask stimuli to systematically vary the visibility of the faces. Overall, the shortest SOA produced the lowest level of visibility, and this level of visibility was arguably outside awareness. In Experiment 3, participants’ ability to discriminate properties of emotional faces under low visibility conditions was greater than their ability to discriminate the orientation of the face. This was despite the orientation discrimination being much easier at higher levels of visibility. Experiment 4 used a gender discrimination task, with emotion providing a redundant cue to the decision (present half of the time). Despite showing a strong linear masking function for the neutral faces, there was no evidence of any emotion advantage. Overall, Experiment 3 gave some evidence of an emotion advantage

under low visibility conditions, but this effect was fairly small and not replicated in Experiment 4.

Finally, Experiments 5-8 used low visibility emotional faces to prime responses to subsequent emotional faces (Experiments 5 and 6) or words (Experiments 7 and 8). In Experiments 5, 7 and 8 there was some evidence of emotional priming effects, although these effects varied considerably across the different designs used. There was evidence for meaningful processing of the emotional prime faces, but this processing only led to small and variable effects on subsequent responses.

In summary, this thesis found some evidence that the processing of emotional stimuli was relatively robust to disruption in V1 with TMS. Attempts to find evidence for robust processing of emotional stimuli when disrupted with backwards masking was less successful, with at best mixed results from discrimination tasks and priming experiments. Whether emotional stimuli are processed by a separate route(s) in the brain is still very much open to debate, but the findings of this thesis offers small and inconsistent evidence for a brain network for processing emotions that is relatively independent of V1 and visual awareness. The network and nature of brain structures involved in the processing of subliminal and low visibility processing of emotions remains somewhat elusive.

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	3
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	5
TABLE OF CONTENTS	7
LIST OF FIGURES	11
LIST OF TABLES	17
DECLARATION	19
CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW	21
1.1. INTRODUCTION	21
1.2. VISUAL AWARENESS	21
1.3. THEORIES OF VISUAL AWARENESS AND ITS DISRUPTION	26
1.4. SUBLIMINAL RESPONSE PRIMING AND CURRENT CONTROVERSIES	34
1.5. EMOTIONAL PROCESSING	42
1.6. SUBLIMINAL EMOTIONAL STIMULI AND THEIR IMPACT ON BEHAVIOUR	45
1.7. LOW VISIBILITY EMOTIONAL PRIMING: ALTERNATIVES TO VALENCE CONGRUENCE EFFECTS ..	50
1.8. PROBLEM OF MEASURING AWARENESS	52
1.9. THE PROCESSING OF EMOTIONAL STIMULI IN THE BRAIN	55
1.10. A DUAL ROUTE TO VISUAL PROCESSING?	58
1.11. A BRIEF WORD ABOUT SUBLIMINAL PROCESSING OF NON-EMOTIONAL STIMULI.....	66
1.12. A BRIEF WORD ABOUT VISUAL ATTENTION	67
1.13. SUMMARY	70
CHAPTER 2: TRANSCRANIAL MAGNETIC STIMULATION: BASIC PRINCIPLES, POSSIBILITIES, AND APPLICATIONS TO RESEARCH IN VISUAL PROCESSING 73	
2.1. INTRODUCTION	73
2.2. THE NEUROSCIENCE 'NICHE' OF TMS	73
2.3. HOW TMS WORKS.....	74
2.4. SPATIAL RESOLUTION OF TMS	75
2.5. STIMULATION PROTOCOLS AND TEMPORAL RESOLUTION	76
2.6. MAIN ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF TMS	79
2.7. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRESENT STUDIES.....	81

CHAPTER 3: TMS TO V1 SPARES DISCRIMINATION OF EMOTIVE RELATIVE TO NEUTRAL BODY POSTURES.....	83
3.1. ABSTRACT	83
3.2. INTRODUCTION	83
3.3. METHOD.....	89
3.3.1. <i>Participants</i>	89
3.3.2. <i>Stimuli</i>	89
3.3.3. <i>Materials</i>	91
3.3.4. <i>Procedure</i>	91
3.4. RESULTS	94
3.4.1. <i>Fixation check and stimulus eccentricity</i>	94
3.4.2. <i>Classification performance</i>	94
3.5. DISCUSSION.....	98
CHAPTER 4: THE EFFECT OF THETA BURST STIMULATION ON V1.....	103
4.1. INTRODUCTION	103
4.2. METHOD.....	105
4.2.1. <i>Participants</i>	105
4.2.2. <i>Materials</i>	105
4.2.3. <i>Stimulation sites and cTBS</i>	106
4.2.4. <i>Procedure</i>	107
4.3. RESULTS	109
4.3.1. <i>PT and MT changes</i>	109
4.3.2. <i>Number task</i>	110
4.3.3. <i>Face discrimination – overall results</i>	110
4.3.5. <i>Emotion specific effects</i>	113
4.3.6. <i>Face discrimination: impact of hemisphere stimulated</i>	115
4.4. DISCUSSION.....	117
CHAPTER 5: EMOTIONS ARE SPECIAL: USING VISUAL MASKING TO DISSOCAITE PROCESSING OF NEUTRAL AND EMOTIONAL STIMULI.....	121
5.1. INTRODUCTION	121
5.2. EXPERIMENT 3.....	124
5.2.1. <i>Method</i>	124
5.2.2. <i>Results</i>	127
5.2.3. <i>Discussion</i>	132
5.3. EXPERIMENT 4.....	133

5.3.1. <i>Methods</i>	134
5.3.2. <i>Results</i>	136
5.3.3. <i>Discussion</i>	141
5.4. GENERAL DISCUSSION	143

CHAPTER 6: INFLUENCING BEHAVIOUR WITH SUBLIMINAL EMOTIONAL FACES:

FOUR PRIMING EXPERIMENTS.....	145
6.1. INTRODUCTION	145
6.2. EXPERIMENT 5.....	149
6.2.1. <i>Methods</i>	149
6.2.2. <i>Results</i>	153
6.2.3. <i>Discussion</i>	156
6.3. EXPERIMENT 6.....	157
6.3.1. <i>Methods</i>	158
6.3.2. <i>Results</i>	159
6.3.3. <i>Discussion</i>	161
6.4. EXPERIMENT 7.....	162
6.4.1. <i>Methods</i>	163
6.4.2. <i>Results</i>	166
6.4.3. <i>Discussion</i>	170
6.5. EXPERIMENT 8.....	172
6.5.1. <i>Method</i>	174
6.5.2. <i>Results</i>	176
6.5.3. <i>Discussion</i>	182
6.6. GENERAL DISCUSSION	184

CHAPTER 7: SUMMARY, METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS, AND FUTURE

DIRECTIONS.....	189
7.1. INTRODUCTION	189
7.2. THEME SUMMARIES.....	189
7.2.1. <i>V1's role in visual awareness and emotion processing</i>	189
7.2.2. <i>The effect of visual masking on decision making about emotional stimuli</i>	190
7.2.3. <i>Subliminal emotional priming</i>	191
7.3. WHY WERE THE RESULTS INCONSISTENT?	192
7.3.1. <i>Methodological difficulties</i>	192
7.3.2. <i>Failures to replicate</i>	194
7.4. PRIVILEGED EMOTION PROCESSING?	195
7.4.1. <i>Alternative accounts</i>	196
7.4.2. <i>Anatomical basis</i>	197

7.5. MEASURES OF AWARENESS: CHOICE OF MEASUREMENT IN THIS THESIS.....	198
7.6. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS	200
7.6.1. <i>Replications</i>	200
7.6.2. <i>Extensions</i>	201
7.7. CONCLUSIONS	202
REFERENCES.....	203
APPENDIX 1: ITEMS ANALYSIS FOR EXPERIMENT 2.....	221
APPENDIX 2: ITEMS ANALYSIS FOR EXPERIMENTS 6-8.....	223
APPENDIX 3: MEDIAN ANALYSIS EXPERIMENTS 5-8.....	225

List of figures

Figure 1.1	30
Connectivity matrix summarising the interconnections within visual cortex and between visual cortex and other cortical areas. Reproduced from Felleman & Van Essen, 1991.	
Figure 2.1	78
Paradigms of TBS and Their Effects on MEPs. Reproduced from Huang et al. (2005).	
Figure 3.1	90
The body posture images making up the two categories: (a) the aggressive postures and two similar neutral postures; (b) the pleasant postures and the two similar neutral postures. (c) Sequence of events on a standard trial. (d) Coordinates (in degrees of visual angle from fixation) of each participant's phosphene location.	
Figure 3.2	95
Group mean categorisation performance (d') for each stimulus type (emotive and neutral) at each stimulus location (phosphene or control location).	
Figure 3.3	96
Group mean categorisation performance (d') as a function of stimulus location, stimulus type, and pulse onset time.	
Figure 3.4	97
Relation between overall categorisation performance and the size of the interaction depicted in Figure 2: interaction contrast = (phosphene location emotive – phosphene neutral) – (control location emotive – control location neutral).	
Figure 4.1	106

Examples of the stimuli used (a), the location of the phosphenes reported by participants (b), and a standard trial outline (c).

Figure 4.2.....111

Group mean categorisation performance (d') for each time, stimulus type and stimulus location.

Figure 4.3.....112

Group mean categorisation performance (d') for each stimulus location, stimulus type and time, for version 1 (left) and version 2 (right) of the experiment. Version 1 represents angry male and happy female faces, version 2 happy male and angry female faces.

Figure 4.4.....113

Group mean categorisation performance (d') for each of the conditions (stimulus type, stimulus location and time) split across quarters of each time set.

Figure 4.5.....114

Group mean categorisation performance (d') for each condition for participants who noticed the emotional expressions (left) and those who did not (right).

Figure 4.6.....115

Group mean categorisation performance (proportion correct) for each condition for the angry (left) and happy (right) emotions and equivalent neutral images.

Figure 4.7.....116

Mean categorisation performance (d') for the right (top) and left (bottom) hemisphere participants who completed versions 1 (left) or 2 (right) of the experiment. Each graph represents data from 4 participants.

Figure 5.1.....124

Experiment 3: (a) examples of the target stimuli (top happy, bottom angry, left young, right old), (b) examples of mask stimuli used as backwards and forwards masks, (c) standard trial outline.

Figure 5.2	128
<p>Group mean discrimination accuracy for Experiment 3, for all 5 tasks at all SOAs (a), the emotion and orientation tasks at 10ms SOA (b), and the emotion and orientation tasks broken down by emotion type (upright trials – (c), inverted trials – d)).</p>	
Figure 5.3	131
<p>Group mean discrimination from Experiment 3 for the emotion and orientation tasks per session run, with (a) showing session one, (b) session two, and (c) session three.</p>	
Figure 5.4	135
<p>Examples of the stimuli used for the target faces (a), showing neutral (left), happy (middle) and angry (right) expressions, and examples of the mask stimuli (b), used in Experiment 4.</p>	
Figure 5.5	137
<p>Group mean categorisation performance (d') for Experiment 4, for the emotional and neutral faces, for upright (left) and inverted (right) face blocks.</p>	
Figure 5.6	139
<p>Group mean categorisation performance (proportion correct) for Experiment 4, for the upright (a & c) and inverted (b & d) faces for the angry and equivalent neutral faces (a & b) and for the happy and equivalent neutral faces (b & d).</p>	
Figure 5.7	141
<p>Group mean categorisation performance (proportion correct) for Experiment 4, for the emotional and neutral faces, for upright (a & c) and inverted (b & d) blocks, in session one (a & b) and session two (c & d).</p>	
Figure 6.1	150
<p>Examples of the prime, mask and target stimuli (top) and a standard trial outline for the priming part of the experiment (bottom) in Experiment 5.</p>	

Figure 6.2	153
Mean discrimination performance (d') for the three visibility tasks in Experiment 5. Error bars represent SEM.	
Figure 6.3	154
Congruency effects in RTs (top) and error rates (bottom) for the upright and inverted prime conditions in Experiment 5.	
Figure 6.4	155
Group mean performance at the forced choice neutral trials for Experiment 5. Error bars represent SEM for performance at each prime orientation.	
Figure 6.5	159
Mean group discrimination performance (d') for the three visibility tasks in Experiment 6.	
Figure 6.6	160
Mean congruence effects in RTs (top) and error rates (bottom) for each prime-target stimulus type in Experiment 6.	
Figure 6.7	164
Examples of the stimuli used for the prime faces (a), showing neutral (left), happy (middle) and angry (right) expressions, examples of the mask stimuli (b), examples of the target word stimuli (c), and trial outline (d) in Experiment 7.	
Figure 6.8	167
Group mean discrimination performance (d') at the visibility task (left) and the group mean subjective ratings (scale of 1-7) of visibility (right) from Experiment 7.	
Figure 6.9	168
Mean RTs (top) and error rates (bottom) for the negative (left) and positive (right) target words, shown for each prime type (angry, happy and neutral) from Experiment 7.	

Figure 6.10	169
Mean congruence effect (incongruent trials – congruent trials) between prime and target at each of the SOAs for the RTs (left) and the error rates (right).	
Figure 6.11	177
Group mean discrimination performance (d') of prime face orientation for the inner and outer target word location conditions from the visibility test in Experiment 8.	
Figure 6.12	178
The interaction between target valence and prime emotion for the RTs (top) and the error rates (bottom) from Experiment 8.	
Figure 6.13	179
The interaction between target valence and prime emotion for the inner (a & b) and outer (c & d) locations for the RTs (a & c) and error rates (b & d) from Experiment 8.	
Figure 6.14	180
The interaction between prime emotion and SOA for the inner (a & b) and outer (c & d) locations for the RTs (a & c) and error rates (b & d) from Experiment 8.	
Figure 6.15	181
Group mean discrimination performance (d') for the decision bias blocks from Experiment 8.	
Figure 6.16	182
Group mean RTs for the inner (top) and outer (bottom) locations for the decision bias blocks from Experiment 8.	