Angry Soldiers, Fearless Doctors: The Influence of Outfits on the Perceived Emotion

Christian Mumenthaler, David Sander

University of Geneva

The study of isolated emotional faces dominated emotion perception research since the second half of the 20th century (Barrett, Mesquita, & Gendron, 2011). In recent decades, numerous lines of research have shown that congruent contextual information that is physically presented along with the face facilitates the recognition of emotional facial expressions, while incongruent information interferes with it. Based on the premise that emotional facial expressions are seen as indicators of the ongoing cognitive appraisal process (de Melo, Carnevale, Read & Gratch, 2014), we hypothesize that face-context integration process relies on the congruency between the appraisal outcomes supposed by the emotional facial expression and the contextual information. Therefore, in this study, we investigated how contextual information reflecting a high ability to deal with a situation influences the recognition of emotional facial expressions that share similar physical features but suppose different coping potential. Participants were asked to judge facial expression blends of anger and disgust, and of fear and surprise. These faces were combined with four body outfits, two representing a profession with high coping potential (a grey swiss military uniform and a white doctor coat), and two outfits that serve as control conditions (a grey and white t-shirt). Results of Experiment 1 revealed that facial expression blends of fear and surprise were perceived as expressing less fear (which suppose a low coping potential) when they were combined with a military uniform or a doctor coat than with a grey or white t-shirt. However, facial expression blends of anger and disgust were only perceived as expressing more anger (which suppose a high coping potential) when they were combined with the military uniform. We replicated these effects in Experiment 2, where facial expression blends of fear and surprise were less often categorized as expressing fear when they were combined with the two outfits representing a high coping potential. Moreover, facial expression blends of anger and disgust were more often and more rapidly categorized as expressing anger when they were combined with the military uniform than with the control condition. Our findings suggest for the first time that the face-context integration process relies on the detection of appraisal dimensions.