

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

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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.