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How Automatic is the Processing of Emotional Facial Expressions?

We investigated the question whether the processing of emotional facial expressions proceeds automatically or whether it requires central attention. In a first series of experiments different tasks were performed on faces that displayed smiling, threatening, or neutral facial expressions. In a second series, the availability of central attention was limited by temporal overlap with a primary task. Effects of emotion were assessed by recording event-related brain potentials. Surprisingly, early emotional effects were observed when processing of the face was either extremely easy or when the availability of central attention was scarce.