

Autistic traits modulate conscious and nonconscious face perception

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Many people with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) describe the process of recognizing emotions as challenging. In this study, we looked at conscious and non-conscious perception of emotion by individuals who did not have diagnosed ASD but reported some level of autism traits. In order to do this, we observed participants' brain activity while showing them emotional faces too quickly to be consciously observed or slow enough to be consciously observed. We found that non-consciously perceived emotional faces brought on stronger, faster brain responses, regardless of a person's level of autism traits. Additionally, we discovered that individuals with higher levels of autism traits were less efficient in perceiving faces. These data suggest that difficulty in processing emotions may relate to level of autistic traits, even among those who do not meet criteria for an ASD diagnosis. Understanding the importance of conscious versus non-conscious perception in relation to autistic traits may inform development of new techniques to teach emotion perception in individuals experiencing difficulty in this area.