ARTICLE IN PRESS

Consciousness and Cognition xxx (2016) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Consciousness and Cognition

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/concog

Encapsulated social perception of emotional expressions

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 8 July 2016
Revised 3 September 2016
Accepted 6 September 2016
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Social perception
Encapsulation
Rich content view
Emotion perception

ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that the detection of emotional expressions is, in its early stages, informationally encapsulated. I clarify and defend such a view via the appeal to data from social perception on the visual processing of faces, bodies, facial and bodily expressions. Encapsulated social perception might exist alongside processes that are cognitively penetrated, and that have to do with recognition and categorization, and play a central evolutionary function in preparing early and rapid responses to the emotional stimuli.

1. Introduction

Two debates are currently at the foreground in philosophy of perception: the debate about encapsulation and the debate about the reach of perceptual content (Hawley & Macpherson, 2011; Zeimbekis & Raftopoulos, 2015). A special case of the debate about the reach of perceptual content is the debate about *social perception.*

Social perception (Rutherford & Kuhlmeier, 2013) includes cases when perception is attuned to properties of other individuals, properties that are (in some sense) socially relevant – for example, being a goal-directed action, being an agent, being a fellow human being and so on. One particular case of social perception is emotion perception: seeing others' emotional facial and bodily expressions. Seeing emotional expressions is of obvious relevance to social cognition, because it puts the viewing subject into contact with information about the mental states of her fellow human beings. This information needs to be rapidly and automatically processed in order to allow the subject to produce reactions on the fly, depending on the emotional state of the other (run if the other is expressing fear or anger, for example).

Elsewhere, I have argued that we can perceive agents as agents, as opposed to as objects (Murez & Smortchkova, 2014), and that we can perceive emotional expressions without mindreading them (Smortchkova, 2016). In this paper I clarify the difference between two stages of social perception and argue that the detection of emotional expressions is, in its early stages, *informationally encapsulated*. This implies that there are two forms of social perception: one early and encapsulated, and the other late and possibly cognitively influenced. While most discussions of social perception have focused on the latter, the possibility that the former also exists has yet to be given proper consideration.

The central question of this paper is thus how encapsulated social emotion perception is possible. In order to answer this question, I start from a narrow definition of encapsulation, due to Pylyshyn, and argue that some social perception is encapsulated, in the relevant sense. There are already further arguments published supporting the idea of direct perception of emotions, e.g. Marchi and Newen (2015), which especially allow for cognitive penetration to be involved in the process of recognizing a basic emotion. What is missing so far is a detailed analysis of the process of social perception leading to

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2016.09.006
1053-8100/

Please cite this article in press as: Smortchkova, J. Encapsulated social perception of emotional expressions. *Consciousness and Cognition* (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2016.09.006

the recognition of an emotion. I argue that we need to distinguish two stages of social perception, encapsulated social perception and cognitively penetrated or cognitively modified social perception.

Note that the two forms of social perception are not mutually exclusive. Encapsulated social perception might exist alongside processes that are cognitively penetrated, and that have to do with recognition and categorization. The hypothesis that social perception has a dual nature, comprising both encapsulated social vision, and (sometimes) cognitively penetrated social visual recognition, is compatible with the view that I defend in this paper. A view that is incompatible, on the other hand, is the view that emotion recognition needs always to be cognitively shaped by concepts (this is the proposal suggested by Gendron, Lindquist, Barsalou, & Barrett, 2012 who argue that conceptual knowledge shapes the initial processing of emotions).

The discussion will unfold as follows. In Section 2 I briefly introduce the debate on the reach of perception. In Section 3, I introduce Pylyshyn's notion of encapsulation, and defend it from some objections. In Section 4, employing Pylyshyn's notion of encapsulation, I argue that there is encapsulated social emotion perception, which is a version of the rich content view. Finally, in Section 5, I reply to potential objections, distinguish my view from neighboring ones, and draw some consequences concerning the role of encapsulated social perception within social cognition more generally.

2. The reach of perceptual content

While there is widespread agreement that low-level properties (such as colors, shapes and orientations) are represented in perceptual content, and computed by early visual processes, it is controversial whether high-level properties (broadly those properties that are not obviously sensory, for example causation, meaning, or emotional expressions) are also part of perceptual content (Hawley & Macpherson, 2011). According to the *poor content view* only low-level properties can be represented in perception; according to the *rich content view* also high-level properties can be represented in perception. There is no uncontroversial way to draw the line between the two sorts of properties, and an array of intermediate positions on the issue are possible.

The debate about the reach of perceptual content is primarily a debate about the reach of conscious perceptual *experience* (Siegel, 2011) or *phenomenal* content (Briscoe in Zeimbekis & Raftopoulos, 2015). The debate, however, can also be framed as concerning the contents of perception *tout court*, conscious and non conscious, and the properties that can, consciously or non consciously, be represented in perceptual contents. Indeed, one question that is asked in the debate is whether perceptual content is restricted only to low-level sensory properties, or whether it can also include higher-level properties. Thus, I prefer not to restrict the debate to conscious experience, but focus on the properties that can be *represented* in perception (see also Burge, 2010). Indeed, the debate about the reach of perception is properly understood to be about which properties can enter into perceptual *content*. *De facto* this leaves open the possibility that both conscious and unconscious perceptual representations are concerned. Unconscious perceptual representations might play a central role in social perception by guiding fast reactions in response to perceptual stimuli, without conscious access to the contents of the representations (see Section 5).

Therefore, we can distinguish between two versions of the debate: a debate about the reach of perceptual conscious experience and a debate about the reach of perceptual content *tout court,* conscious and non conscious. I will be concerned with the question of perceptual content in general and the properties that are represented by it (this opens the possibility that there might be a disconnection between the outputs of early vision and the conscious contents of perception, an issue to which I return in Section 5). For this reason, I will freely appeal to experimental evidence that taps both into the subject's conscious visual experiences and into the subject's unconscious perceptual representations.

If one adopts an extreme poor content view, the only properties represented in perception are those whose processing results from direct stimulation of the sensory organs (Lyons, 2011). Bayne (who is himself a partisan of the rich content view) introduces what may be the mainstream view:

> *Proponents of what I shall call the conservative view hold that the phenomenal character of visual experience is exhausted by the representation of low-level properties – color, shape, spatial location, motion, and so on. Conservatives give similar accounts of other perceptual modalities: the phenomenal character of audition is exhausted by the representation of volume, pitch, timbre, and so on; the phenomenal character of gustation is exhausted by the representation of sweetness, sourness, and so on. The phenomenal world of the conservative is an austere one.*
>
> [Bayne in Hawley & Macpherson, 2011, p. 16]

Tye, who also endorses the poor content view, writes: "Thereby, it seems plausible to suppose, they [the output representations of visual processing] represent those features, they become sensations *of* edges, ridges, colors, shapes, and so on. Likewise for the other senses." (Tye, 1995, p. 103). This kind of view is similar to a poor content theory that states that the only properties that enter perceptual visual content are those represented by Marr's 2 and ½ -D sketch (Marr, 1982): shape, color, spatial disposition, and movement, but not depth; for example, Prinz claims that the upper limit for perceived conscious states are attended 2 and ½ -D representations (2006a) (also Raftopoulos, 2009).

According to a richer approach, 3-D properties are also represented, even if they are not in plain view, such as the occluded part of a cup and depth-properties in general. These representations are complex and Marr says they are in a format that is available for recognition (Marr, 1982, Chapter 5). This approach is intermediate between the poor and the rich content view.

Please cite this article in press as: Smortchkova, J. Encapsulated social perception of emotional expressions. *Consciousness and Cognition* (2016), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2016.09.006