Facial emotion perception is the ability to accurately identify emotions through expressions of the face. In daily life, facial expressions are always embedded within their context, a fact that has not been adequately considered in emotion perception research. In two experiments, we investigated how multiple context cues influence how a person perceives emotions in facial expressions that look similar, or distinct from one another. Both studies (N = 142) showed evidence that context cues influence perception of target facial expressions, even when participants were asked to ignore these cues. Participants’ accuracy was affected by the congruence of target-context emotions. Contextual cues are important in emotion perception as contextual effects emerged even after participants were asked to ignore context. These results show that context processing may be spontaneous, which could help us better understand how emotions are processed and how contextual information affects real life emotion perception.

**Abstract**

**Methods**

Stimuli: middle-aged faces from FACES database 4 and scenes, rated for emotion. Participants (69 OAs, 73 YAs) were asked to view the scenes naturally (Study 1) or to ignore context (Study 2) and identify the emotion of the target facial expression. Stimuli were presented for 5 seconds (study 1) or 3 seconds (study 2), with self timed responses.

**Results**

Accuracy was higher for the congruent trials than incongruent trials when the target was angry, ps < .01, disgusted, ps < .001, and fearful, p < .001.

Accuracy was higher for the congruent trials than incongruent trials when the target was angry and disgusted, ps < .005.

**Conclusion**

Study 1 results showed that context-target congruence increased accuracy when viewing the trials naturally. Participants were more accurate in choosing the target emotion when the context was congruent. In Study 2, contextual effects also emerged even after participants were instructed to ignore context, showing that context processing in regards to emotion perception is spontaneous. These results show that context integral to emotion perception, to the extent that the perceiver cannot voluntarily ignore context when identifying the emotion of facial expressions.

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**References**