

# Labelling faces as ‘Autistic’ reduces the inversion effect

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In this report, we investigated university students’ ability to recognize images of faces labelled as “autistic”. To assess face recognition, we measured the face inversion effect. This refers to how it can be difficult to recognize inverted (upside down) faces relative to upright faces. This is thought to be because inversion (turning the face upside down) disrupts what is referred to as configural perceptual processing (i.e. processing relationships among different features of the face). A reduced inversion effect is found when objects (e.g., buildings or cars), rather than faces, are used, suggesting more featural perceptual processing (i.e., processing of individual parts) for objects. In this study, we performed two experiments. In Experiment 1, one group of university students was instructed to memorize, and later recognize, a set of upright and inverted faces labeled as “regular”, whereas another group of university students was given the same instructions for faces labeled as belonging to individuals with “autism”. Critically, the face inversion effect was found to be reduced for faces labelled as “autistic” compared to (identical) faces labelled as “regular”. We suggest that the faces labelled as “autistic” were processed more featurally – in a manner similar to processing of objects rather than faces. In Experiment 2, we tested an intervention providing humanizing information (e.g., information about reduced prejudice, increased trustworthiness and higher integrity in autistic people) vs. dehumanizing information (e.g., information about problems with communication, difficulties with social skills and lack of empathy) prior to exposure to the faces labelled as “autistic”, to see if this had an effect on the face inversion effect. Importantly, we found a larger inversion effect when humanizing vs. dehumanizing information was presented, providing some evidence in support of the de-stigmatization effects of pairing autism with humanizing information.