**First Year Project**

**Covert Attention Introduces Hierarchical Interference in the Neural Representations of Contrast and Motion Coherence.**

**Or**

**Neural Substrates of Attention and Awareness.**

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**Abstract**

How does a prior expectation about

**Introduction**

In everyday life we feel a direct and undeniable connection between attending to something and our clear awareness of it. Despite this there exist a variety of laboratory situations in which attention and awareness appear to diverge. This apparent disconnect between experience and experimental findings has fueled a debate about whether *selective attention* and *awareness* are dissociable (Koch & Tsuchiya, 2007). In scene recognition experiments participants are able to identify the content of peripheral stimuli despite attending to a demanding fixation task (Li, VanRullen, Koch, & Perona, 2002). In contrast, a many studies have found that participants are unable to respond about unattended stimuli (Mack, Arien & Rock, Irvin, 1998). One possible explanation that would unify the variety of results in this literature is to take into account individual stimulus features.

We propose to test the prediction that attention and awareness will interact only when their neural substrates interfere. One way to assess this is to use a dual task paradigm in which one task’s neural substrate has a variable overlap with the neural substrate of the other task. In vision, tasks that rely on assessing different perceptual features are thought to engage different neural substrates. For example, contrast is represented by early visual cortex (CITE) while the signal to noise ratio of an objects in a scene are represented by later visual areas (Tjan, Lestou, & Kourtzi, 2006). One object feature, the gender of faces, has shown a dissociation of attention and awareness in dual task paradigms (Reddy, Wilken, & Koch, 2004). Gender is known to be represented by cortical regions that overlap with the signal to noise ratio response, but not the contrast response (Freeman, Rule, Adams, & Ambady, 2010). By varying a main task between contrast and noise discrimination we can therefore adjust the overlap of neural responses with gender categorization. We predict that when both the attentional task and categorization task require similar neural substrates they will interfere with each other. But when the neural substrates diverge we expect to find results similar to previous work on recognition in dual-task settings (Li et al., 2002; Reddy et al., 2004).

To quantify how the neural substrates of attention and awareness overlap and diverge we will expand on previous work for contrast discrimination (Pestilli, Carrasco, Heeger, & Gardner, 2011). The authors of this study used computational modeling to show that a downstream mechanism pooling the neural responses in early visual cortex can account for the behavioral effect of selective spatial attention. We will replicate this result but also extend similar computational models to account attentional modulation in the noise discrimination task. Our prediction, based on evidence dissociating the neural substrates of contrast and noise, is that that performance on the noise discrimination task is best modeled from neural responses in late visual cortex. These computational models can then be used to investigate how awareness depends on neural responses. If the same neural activity can explain how focal attention modulates both behavioral performance and awareness, then this is evidence that attention and awareness are not dissociable processes. On the other hand if the impact of attention on discrimination performance and awareness can only be explained using different models, this is evidence that the underlying computational processes, at the neural level, also diverge.

**Methods**

**Subjects**

Four human subjects (all male, ages 24-34) participated in the experiment. All subjects performed the behavioral experiment and one participant performed the functional MRI experiment.

**Experimental Task**

Subjects performed a two-alternative forced choice discrimination task. On each block participants reported which of two dot patches had higher apparent contrast or motion coherence. The dot patches appeared left and right of fixation, extending from 3.5 to 11 degrees horizontally and from -5 to 5 degrees vertically. The patches were displayed on a gray background (50% luminance) on a monitor with a linearized luminance scale. Each patch contained 1000 dots, half of which were darker than the background and half of which were equally brighter. The luminance difference between the dots and the background was defined as C / 2, where C is the contrast on the current trial. The dots moved horizontally either right or left (randomly chosen on each trial)

**fMRI Imaging**

**Dissociable Neural Substrates of Attention for Contrast and Noise Discrimination**

We will first replicate and extend previous findings on contrast discrimination (Hara, Pestilli, & Gardner, 2014; Pestilli et al., 2011). Hara et al. and Pestilli et al. showed that focal spatial attention modulates neural responses in early visual cortex and that downstream pooling of these responses is sufficient to explain changes in behavioral performance. We will use the same experimental structure as Pestilli et al., but grating stimuli will be replaced with faces that vary both in contrast and phase coherence. Participants will be presented with four face stimuli each at a random contrast and noise level. During a single block of trials participants will be asked to focus their attention on changes in contrast or noise. Within a single trial they will be asked to either distribute their attention across all four stimuli or to focus on a single stimulus. Participants will perform a change discrimination task, identifying which of two intervals had a higher contrast or noise level. The task will be performed inside of an fMRI scanner to acquire neural responses. In addition, retinotopic and functional localizers will be used to locate important visual regions (V1-V4, FFA).

The data from this experiment will be used to generate separate computational models for contrast discrimination and noise discrimination for each of the visual processing regions (V1->FFA). Each model will account for the role of attentional modulation in that range and characterize that region’s involvement in changes in behavioral performance. We expect to see a dissociation in which responses in early visual cortex are important for contrast discrimination (Pestilli et al., 2011) while responses in late visual cortex and FFA will be important for coherence discrimination (Tjan et al., 2006). This is based on evidence showing that the BOLD response in FFA is invariant to the level of contrast (Loffler, Yourganov, Wilkinson, & Wilson, 2005). These separate computational models will therefore characterize dissociable neural substrates responsible for behavioral performance in contrast and noise discrimination tasks.

*Details*

Participants will perform a change discrimination task (see Figure 1) while cortical responses are recorded from visual areas (V1-V4, FFA, ?). During a single scan session participants will perform several blocks of trials. During each block participants will perform either contrast discrimination or noise discrimination. On each individual trial a participant will be cued (1s) to attend to either one of four circular locations (focal) or to all four locations (distributed). Two stimulus presentations will follow the cue (1000 ms each) each followed by a short break (500 ms). At each of the four spatial locations a random face will be presented whose contrast and noise level vary randomly across several “pedestal” levels. During one of the two stimulus presentations one of the faces will have a small increase in its pedestal level. Participants will be given a short window at the end of the trial to report during which window the level was higher (1200 ms). Each participant will therefore experience four different trial types: noise vs. contrast combined with focal vs. distributed. To avoid any confound of difficulty we will adjust the size of the change in pedestal level to maintain 76% correct performance.

Using the data recorded from the scan sessions we will construct behavioral performance functions for each of the four trial types, plotting the discrimination threshold necessary to achieve 76% performance at each pedestal level. In addition we can use the localized ROIs to generate a neural response function for each region and trial type, at each of the pedestal levels. Using the same approach as in Pestilli et al. on contrast discrimination (Pestilli et al., 2011) we can then perform a model fit analysis to understand how focal attention modulates the neural response to either contrast or noise level to improve behavioral performance.

*Results*

Following on the work by Pestilli et al. we expect to find a neural response function and behavioral performance function for each task across the pedestal levels. We will use computational models to show that relative differences in neural response for different contrast or noise levels can be used to solve the task, and that the BOLD signal in specific brain regions is likely responsible for behavioral performance. For contrast discrimination we expect that early retinotopic regions will be involved, while for noise discrimination we expect later regions that represent faces as a whole will show increased activity (Figure 2). We also expect that a computational model of efficient selection (i.e. downstream weighted pooling of early visual activity) will best explain the behavioral performance during contrast discrimination (Pestilli et al., 2011). During noise discrimination we expect that multiplicative response gain, noise gain, efficient selection, or an alternative model will fit the results.

**Replicating the Dissociation of Attention and Awareness**

Although there is considerable evidence that awareness of natural scenes exists in the absence of “top-down attention” (Li et al., 2002) there is only limited evidence that face gender processing occurs in the absence of attention (Reddy et al., 2004). To replicate these results we will add an additional task to the main discrimination paradigm, to assess awareness of face stimuli in the periphery. This dual task design mimics the approach used in Li et al. and Reddy et al. In our experiment the peripheral task will be a gender categorization task. We will assess awareness by manipulating the performance of participants on each task independently. Our prediction is that the main task and peripheral task will have less interference when their neural substrates are dissociable. We will test this by asking participants to perform contrast discrimination as a main task while simultaneously performing gender categorization in the periphery. Our prediction is that there will not be a large change in performance when performing the tasks together or separately, replicating the result of Reddy et al.

*Details*

Participants will perform the contrast discrimination portion of the task outlined above with an additional secondary peripheral task. We use “main task” to refer to the attention task at fixation, and “peripheral task” to reference the new gender categorization task. During one, both, or neither, of the two stimulus presentations of the main task (Figure #) an additional stimulus face will appear in the periphery. The face presentation time will be short and subsequently masked. Participants will use one hand to perform the main task and their other hand to respond after seeing the peripheral face stimulus, identifying it as male or female. To control task difficulty between the main and peripheral tasks we will change the length of peripheral face presentations to maintain performance at 76%. To assess whether this dual task configuration impacts performance participants will perform blocks of the main task and peripheral tasks in isolation, as well as the dual task.

*Results*

Our hypothesis is that contrast discrimination and gender categorization rely on neural substrates that are largely held in different regions. This predicts that when a neural modulation, induced by focal attention to contrast level, occurs in early visual cortex, this will not have a major impact on gender representations held in the FFA. In turn, behavioral performance for both the main task and peripheral task will be similar during the dual task condition compared to the isolated tasks.

**Testing the Neural Substrates of Attention and Awareness**

Our hypothesis is that when the neural substrates of two tasks overlap, attending to one task will suppress performance on the other task. In our full experiment participants will perform either contrast or noise discrimination at fixation, at varying levels of attentional load (focal vs. distributed). Simultaneous to the fixation task participants will perform the peripheral gender categorization task designed to assess awareness.

*Details*

The experiment will be identical to that outlined above, but participants will perform both the gender and noise discrimination tasks during separate blocks. The experiment will be performed in the scanner. Anatomical and localizer scans will be recorded to identify visual cortex ROIs. The data will be analyzed in the same way as above by replicating the computational models linking neural response to behavioral performance. In addition, we will analyze whether awareness of gender in the peripheral task can be predicted as a function of the neural modulation, due to attention, occurring within different regions.

*Results*

We predict two effects on the awareness of the peripheral stimuli. First, we expect there to be a task specific effect. We do not expect contrast discrimination to disrupt attention to peripheral stimuli in either focal or distributed attention conditions (see previous results). In contrast, we expect that performing a noise discrimination task that requires the use of a neural population that is shared with the gender categorization task will cause a reduction in awareness. Furthermore, we predict that the neural modulation induced by attending to the level of noise will be sufficient to predict the level of awareness in the peripheral task. Specifically: the change in neural response due to focal attention will be sufficient to explain both the performance increase in the main task and the drop in awareness in the peripheral task.

**Discussion**

Our main manipulation will have tested whether the impact of focal attention on neural activity in task-relevant regions is sufficient to explain the reduction in awareness for a secondary task. Importantly we predict that the reduction in awareness will depend precisely on which specific regions were modulated by attention. During a contrast discrimination task where focal attention modulates early visual cortex we do not expect a parallel reduction in awareness for a task that relies on representations held in late visual areas such as FFA. In contrast, during a noise discrimination task where focal attention modulates cortical regions that are shared by both tasks we expect a reduction in awareness that will parallel the increase in noise discrimination performance. Our hypothesis states that this tradeoff is a fundamental property of local neural processing: as attention boosts the signal to noise ratio (SNR) for one representation this guarantees a decrease in the signal to noise ratio for other representations. If awareness is a process that relies on these SNRs then the impact on awareness will be a function of the change in SNR.

Observing a clear association between attention (the modulation of neural responses to specific features in specific cortical regions) and awareness (the ability to read-out information about a stimuli, e.g. verbal report) is essential to disambiguating the role of each of these processes. There is a considerable reliance in the literature on operational definitions that are not informed by the underlying neural processes. Our approach is one method to clarify whether attention and awareness can in fact be separated as two computational processes that solve distinct problems for organisms, as is speculated by other authors (Koch & Tsuchiya, 2007). We expect that this intuition is in fact a mistake and that attention and awareness cannot be clearly disambiguated at a neural level.