Domain-specific working memory loads selectively increase negative interpertations of surprised facial expressions

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# Introduction

## Facial expressions and individual differences

Facial expressions are a mechanism for communicating emotion during social interactions. While the use of facial expressions for information exchange may be universal (Izard, 1994), there are notable differences in interpretations of facial expressions (Green & Guo, 2018; Neta, Norris, & Whalen, 2009). One such difference is in valence judgments of emotional facial expressions. The affective circumplex model posits that two independent systems give rise to emotional experience; these are known as valence and arousal (Posner, Russell, & Peterson, 2005). Valence is the inherent positive (i.e., pleasant) or negative (i.e., unpleasant) qualities of a stimulus, feeling, or state, whereas arousal is…. Importantly, individuals differ in their tendency to interpret ambiguously valenced stimuli, such as a tempting food item or a surprised facial expression, as either positive or negative. This is attributable to such stimuli’s predictive value for both positive and negative outcomes in an individual’s previous experience. For instance, a surprised expression could signal positive (e.g., winning the lottery) or negative (e.g., a car accident) events. This affective bias is known as one’s *valence bias*, and a growing body of work has used both facial expressions and scenes to better understand this individual difference (Neta, Kelley, & Whalen, 2013; Neta et al., 2009; Neta & Whalen, 2010).

Previous work shows that valence bias is both a stable, trait-like measure (Neta et al., 2009), but also malleable due to its susceptibility to laboratory manipulations (Brown, Raio, & Neta, 2017; Neta & Dodd, 2018; Neta et al., 2018). The trait-like nature of valence bias is useful for understanding chronic affective biases. Negativity biases, which may be adaptive in the short-term (e.g., heightened attention to negative stimuli in a potentially dangerous situation), can undermine healthy psychological functioning over time. For instance, negativity biases in memory and attention are related to an increased risk for psychopathology, such as depression and anxiety (Mathews & MacLeod, 2005). Alternatively, the malleability of valence bias offers insight into mechanisms or interventions that may be capable of shifting bias. Several brief, laboratory interventions are known to shift bias. For example, instructing participants to deliberate will lead to more positive interpretations of ambiguity (Neta & Tong, 2016). Alternatively, manipulating participant gaze to match that of extremely negative (or positive) individuals modulates individuals’ bias (Neta & Dodd, 2018). In short, valence bias offers insight into both state- and trait-like components of individuals behavior, but there remain open questions regarding the specific mechanisms that might be used when an individual arrives at a positive versus a negative interpretation.

## Initial negativity hypothesis

Myriad factors contribute to an individual’s bias, but research suggests the initial interpretation is negative across people. Data supporting this initial negativity hypothesis come from many studies. As mentioned above, reaction times are faster for negative interpretations of ambiguous stimuli (Neta & Tong, 2016). If negative interpretations occur faster than positive interpretations, then there may be an initial, default process resulting in the negativity. In turn, positive interpretations would require some override or regulation of this initial process, putatively through some type of emotion regulation, and more specifically reappraisal, mechanism. Supporting this idea, presentation of surprised facial expressions as low spatial frequency images, which are processed more readily than high spatial frequency images, biases interpretations towards negativity (Neta & Whalen, 2010). Again, this supports the automaticity of negative interpretations, and suggests that high spatial frequency components, which are processed more slowly, may be helpful for overriding negativity. Evidence from the neuroimaging literature supports the initial negativity hypothesis as well; more positive individuals showed more activity for surprised faces in emotion regulation-related brain regions (Petro, Tong, Henley, & Neta, 2018).

## Cognitive loads and task interference

Executive functions, including working memory, are related to successful self-regulation, and in turn emotion regulation (Hofmann, Schmeichel, & Baddeley, 2012). Directly comparing working memory and emotion regulation, Schmeichel and colleagues (2008) reported that individuals with higher levels of working memory capacity demonstrated improved emotion regulation. This suggests a connection–perhaps through some shared resource pool–between mitigated emotional responding and larger working memory resource availability.

Other work has focused on the effects of moods or affective states on working memory performance. For instance, some reports claim that both positive and negative mood interfere with working memory (Eyesenck and Calvo, 1992); however, others suggest benefits of positive mood on working memory (Yang, Yang, & Isen, 2013). Similarly, active working memory processes may alter concurrent affective processes. For instance, actively engaging working memory can mitigate indices of emotional arousal, particularly to negative stimuli (MacNamara, Ferri, & Hajcak, 2011). Recent neuroimaging work reports that negative emotional responses decrease as the cognitive demands of a working memory task increase (Van Dillen, Heslenfeld, & Koole, 2009). Additionally, following an anger induction, those with low trait rumination show faster blood pressure recovery when provided with a distractor task (Gerin, Davidson, Christenfeld, Goyal, & Schwartz, 2006). Together, these studies suggest a resource competition between cognitive and emotional processes; in other words, when cognitive load demands are high (e.g., during active working memory maintenance), there are fewer resources available for other (i.e., affective) processes.

While previous work suggests an inhibitory effect on some emotional responses during periods with high cognitive demands, researchers have primarily focused on emotional responses to clearly valenced emotional stimuli. For instance, Schmeichel and colleagues (2008) showed participants videos intended to elicit strong negative responses (e.g., disgust) or positive responses (e.g., humor), while others have focused on comparing responses to neutral compared to negative stimuli (Van Dillen et al., 2009). However, many emotional appraisals, such as interpreting the valence of emotionally ambiguous stimuli, are more nuanced and may be more susceptible to cognitive interference. One explanation for how cognitive demands affect concurrent information processing is Lavie and colleague’s (2004) cognitive load theory. Cognitive load theory posits that under a large cognitive load fewer executive resources are available to regulate incoming stimulus information. In turn, this means that more bottom-up, automatic processes (e.g., more readily processed perceptual input such as low spatial frequency information) might drive decisions under working memory loads.

## Domain-specific interference

Recently, cognitive load theory researchers have demonstrated the domain-specificity of cognitive load and distractor interference effects in visual, spatial, and phonological domains (Burnham, Sabia, & Langan, 2014). Load interference effects may also transverse other domain components, such as maintaining emotional compared to neutral memory content (CITE). Emotional stimuli readily capture attention compared to neutral stimuli, and this is true even in participants with amygdala damage (Hodsoll, Viding, & Lavie, 2011; Piech et al., 2011). Given the preference for emotional stimuli in the brain’s information processing stream, it may be that cognitive loads with emotional content, compared to neutral, differentially affect concurrent emotional appraisals. Indeed, Kensigner and colleagues (2003) showed that negative emotional content slows performance on the n-back task. Other domain-specific effects have been observed in many lines of executive functions research, including those beyond the working memory domain. For example, the Stroop task (Stroop, 1935), a common measurement tool for inhibitory control, has been modified to include both emotional and non-emotional (neutral) stimuli (Whalen, Bush, Shin, & Rauch, 2006) which has pronounced effects when the emotional words are population specific (e.g., trauma words in a PTSD sample). Other neuroimaging work also supports the notion that separate systems handle attentional biasing for domain-specific (emotional vs. non-emotional) task relevancy (Egner, Etkin, Gale, & Hirsch, 2008). Given this evidence for dissociations of emotional and non-emotional information domains in executive functions (e.g., working memory, inhibitory control), the present work aims to clarify the interaction of emotional and non-emotional visual working memory demands on concurrent interpretations of emotional stimuli with ambiguous valence.

## The present study

Given the evidence that positive interpretations of ambiguity rely on a regulatory mechanism, a demanding cognitive load could interfere with successful implementation of regulation strategies. Recently, Mattek and colleagues (2016) showed that high levels of cognitive load (i.e., holding either a single- or seven-digit number in working memory) mitigates mouse trajectory deviations to modal responses during interpretations of surprised expressions. However, there was no effect on subjective valence interpretations. Further, domain-specificity effects in both behavioral and brain data (Egner et al., 2008; Kensinger & Corkin, 2003; Whalen et al., 2006) suggest that a domain-specific (i.e., emotional) cognitive load may differentially affect emotional judgments during interpretations of ambiguity. Here, we aim to test the effects of low and high working memory loads in both emotional and neutral domains on valence bias. We expect that trials in which participants are maintaining an emotional working memory load will be more negative than neutral trials, as the high cognitive demand interferes with the regulatory mechanisms used to arrive at a positive interpretation. Further, we predict that higher working memory load trials, specifically in the emotional domain, will result in even more exaggerated negative interpretations.

# Methods

## Participants

Fifty-eight participants (*M*age = XX years, SD = XX years, XX female) were recruited from the undergraduate research pool at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The data from eight participants were excluded due to technical difficulties that prevented data from being saved (?). The final sample included the remaining 50 participants (*M*age = 18.82 years, SD = 1.19 years, XX female), and all identified as White/Caucasian without Hispanic/Latinx ethnicity). All subjects provided written informed consent in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and all procedures were approved by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board (Approval #20141014670EP). Each participant received course credit for completing the study.

## Material

### Stimuli

The stimuli included faces from the NimStim (Tottenham et al., 2009) and Karolinska Directed Emotional Faces (Lundqvist, Flykt, & Öhman, 1998) stimuli sets, as in previous work (Brown et al., 2017; Neta & Whalen, 2010). The faces consisted of 34 unique identities including 11 angry, 12 happy, and 24 surprised expressions organized pseudorandomly. The scene stimuli were selected from the International Affective Picture System (Lang, Bradley, & Cuthbert, 2008). A total of 288 scenes (72 positive, 72 negative, and 144 neutral) were selected for the image matrices. The positive and negative images did not differ in arousal (Z = -0.23, p = 0.82). The scenes were organized into low (two images) and high (six images) cognitive load of either neutral or emotional (equal number of positive and negative) images (Figure 1).

## Procedure

After arriving at the lab, participants provided informed consent prior to completing the task. Participants were randomly assigned to complete one of the task versions, which included 144[[1]](#footnote-1) trials split between working memory probe and face rating trials. The task was completed using MouseTracker software (Freeman & Ambady, 2010) and participants responded with a mouse to indicate the appropriate response for the face ratings (i.e., “POSITIVE” or “NEGATIVE”) and the memory probe (i.e., “YES” or “NO”). The trials were self-initiated; that is, the participant clicked a “start” button at the bottom of the screen at the beginning of each trial at their own pace. After initiating the trial, a fixation cross appeared (1000 ms), then participants viewed an image matrix, which the participants were instructed to remember for the duration of the trial. The image matrix was presented for 4000 ms and the image was either a low or high load matrix consisting of either emotional (equal positive and negative) or neutral images. After the image matrix a happy, angry, or surprised face appeared for 1000 ms and the participants rated the face by clicking on either the positive or negative response option. After the face rating, a single image probe appeared (5000 ms), and participants indicated whether or not the image probe was present in the previous image matrix.

## Data analysis

We used R (Version 3.6.0; **???**) and the R-packages \* }dplyr\* [@ }R-dplyr], *BayesFactor* (Version 0.9.12.4.2; **???**), *broom* (Version 0.5.2; **???**), *circlize* (Version 0.4.6; **???**), *coda* (Version 0.19.2; **???**), *cstab* (Version 0.2.2; **???**), *diptest* (Version 0.75.7; **???**), *dotCall64* (Version 1.0.0; **???**; **???**), *fastcluster* (Version 1.1.25; **???**), *fields* (Version 9.8.3; **???**), *forcats* (Version 0.4.0; **???**), *foreach* (Version 1.4.7; **???**), *ggplot2* (Version 3.1.1; **???**), *jpeg* (Version 0.1.8; **???**), *lattice* (Version 0.20.38; **???**), *magrittr* (Version 1.5; **???**), *maps* (Version 3.3.0; **???**), *Matrix* (Version 1.2.17; **???**), *mousetrap* (Version 3.1.2; **???**), *openxlsx* (Version 4.1.0; **???**), *papaja* (Version 0.1.0.9842; **???**), *plyr* (Version 1.8.4; @ }R-dplyr; **???**), *pracma* (Version 2.2.5; **???**), *processx* (Version 3.3.1; **???**), *psych* (Version 1.8.12; **???**), *purrr* (Version 0.3.2; **???**), *RColorBrewer* (Version 1.1.2; **???**), *Rcpp* (Version 1.0.1; **???**; **???**), *readbulk* (Version 1.1.2; **???**), *readr* (Version 1.3.1; **???**), *readxl* (Version 1.3.1; **???**), *Rmisc* (Version 1.5; **???**), *scales* (Version 1.0.0; **???**), *spam* (Version 2.2.2; **???**; **???**; **???**), *stringr* (Version 1.4.0; **???**), *tibble* (Version 2.1.3; **???**), *tidyr* (Version 0.8.3.9000; **???**), *tidyverse* (Version 1.2.1; **???**), and *yarrr* (Version 0.1.5; **???**) for all our analyses. Data preprocessing was completed in R using the mousetrap package (**???**). First, percent negative ratings were calculated for happy, angry, and surprised faces across all trial types, as well as a percent correct score for the memory probe trials. After, trials were screened for RT outliers. Any trials that were greater than three standard deviations from the mean were removed from the analyses. Additionally, we removed the preceding face rating trial for any incorrect memory probe trials, as these trials can be considered a manipulation failure.

For the main test of our hypothesis, wPrior to completing the analyses, all data were assessed for normality using Shapiro-Wilks tests. Friedman’s test was used to assess overall differences and pairwise comparisons were completed using Wilcoxon signed rank tests using Bonferroni correction. Next, given a normal distribution, we tested for differences among maximum deviations in each working memory load condition using a Load (low, high) X Domain (emotional, neutral) repeated-measures ANOVA.

# Results

## Subjective ratings

Friedman’s test results showed significantly different rank-order distributions across the conditions (3.00) = 27.79, p < .001. Follow up Wilcoxon signed rank tests revealed that surprise is rated as more negative when holding emotional content in working memory compared to neutral content, and this was true for both low and high loads. Low emotional load ratings were significantly more negative than low neutral, Z = 3.27, p = .001, and high neutral loads, Z = 3.67, p < .001. Similarly, high emotional load ratings were also significantly more negative than low neutral, Z = 4.55, p < .001, and high neutral loads, Z = 3.81, p < .001. However, there was no significant difference between low emotional and high emotional load (Z = -1.35, p = .176) or between low neutral and high neutral load (Z = -0.06, p = .954). 

Next, we assessed differences in absolute maximum deviation (MD) across the working memory trial conditions. There was a significant effect of Load, F(1.00,196.00) = 5.51, p = .020, such that MD was larger on trials with a high load compared to those with a low load. There was no significant effect of Domain (emotional versus neutral load) on MDs, F(1.00 196.00) = 0.01, p = .912, nor a significant Load x Domain interaction, F(1.00 196.00) = 0.00, p = .960. 

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1. Some versions of the task only included 142 trials due to a programming error. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)