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Levels of Processing Affect Perceptual Features in Visual Associative Memory

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Abstract

The levels of processing (LOP) account has inspired thousands of studies with verbal material. The few studies investigating levels of processing with nonverbal stimuli used images with nameable objects that, like meaningful words, lend themselves to semantic processing. Thus, nothing is known about the effects of different levels of processing on basic visual perceptual features, such as color. Across four experiments, we tested 187 participants to investigate whether the LOP framework also applies to basic perceptual features in visual associative memory. For Experiments 1 and 2, we developed a paradigm to investigate recognition memory for associations of basic visual features. Participants had to memorize object–color associations (Experiment 1) and fractal–color associations (Experiment 2, to suppress verbalization). In Experiments 3 and 4, we extended our account to cued recall. All experiments revealed reliable LOP effects for basic perceptual features in visual associative memory. Our findings demonstrate that the LOP account is more universal than the current literature suggests.

Keywords
levels of processing, memory, perception, color, abstract stimuli, open data

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The levels of processing (LOP) account posits that deeper processing during encoding (e.g., semantic processing) is more beneficial than superficial processing (e.g., perceptual processing) for subsequent memory retrieval (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). Over the past 50 years, it has inspired thousands of studies with verbal material (e.g., visually presented words). Despite the importance of memory based on visual impressions in everyday life, studies investigating levels of processing with nonverbal material (e.g., visual images) are remarkably scarce (e.g., Baddeley & Hitch, 2017; D'Agostino, O'Neill, & Paivio, 1977; Intraub & Nicklos, 1985; Xu, Zhao, Zhao, & Yang, 2011). Even more, nothing is known about the effects of different processing levels on basic visual perceptual features, such as color. Here, we used an innovative approach—using shape–color associations—and assessed, in a series of four experiments, whether the LOP account also applies to basic visual perceptual features.

Extending the findings from the LOP literature to basic visual perceptual features bears the potential to provide important insights into the extent and universality of this important framework. Foremost, it will inform us whether the LOP framework applies only to verbal stimuli, as the lack of studies on LOP effects with visual stimuli might suggest, or whether the LOP framework is much more universal than several decades of empirical evidence currently suggests. That is, there is general agreement in the LOP literature that deeper processing is concerned with semantic processing (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). Unsurprisingly, research has almost exclusively focused on stimuli that are easy to verbalize, even when visual stimuli were used (e.g., Baddeley & Hitch, 2017; D'Agostino et al., 1977; Intraub & Nicklos, 1985; Xu et al., 2011). LOP effects on basic visual perceptual features would provide strong evidence that the LOP framework is much more universal with regard to human cognition

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than is currently realized by cognitive scientists and psychologists more generally.

To corroborate the effects of LOP manipulations on basic perceptual features in visual memory, we conducted four memory experiments based on two different paradigms with monochrome colors as an integrative feature of different shapes. In all experiments, deep encoding required a pleasantness judgment, and shallow encoding required a judgment on the presence of straight lines. In Experiment 1, we investigated LOP effects on recognition memory for object–color associations (concrete shapes). In Experiment 2, we applied the same paradigm to fractal–color associations (abstract shapes) to suppress verbalization. Experiments 1 and 2 provide insight on whether a shape–color association, particularly the perceptual features, in memory representations is accessed (i.e., if levels of processing affect the quantity of accessed representations).

In Experiments 3 and 4, we extended our approach and investigated LOP effects in a recall task with a continuous response space. Here, we took advantage of the continuous nature of the dependent measure and applied a computational-modeling approach (Brady, Konkle, Gill, Oliva, & Alvarez, 2013; Zhang & Luck, 2008) to estimate whether potential LOP effects are based on access to memory or enhanced quality of memory representations. In Experiment 3, we used object–color associations, and in Experiment 4, we used fractal–color associations. Experiments 3 and 4 provide insight on whether levels of processing affect not only the quantity of accessed memory representations but also their quality. Note that investigating the quality of memory representations is not possible with verbal categorical stimuli alone but only with basic visual perceptual features that are based on continuous representations. Consequently, this is something that has not been addressed in previous research on LOP effects and thus critically contributes to the literature on the LOP framework. Overall, the continuous nature of the response measure has the advantage that the magnitude of LOP effects can be estimated on a more fine-grained level than previously attempted in empirical studies on LOP effects.

To anticipate our findings, we observed extremely reliable LOP effects in all of our experiments. Consistent with the notion that abstract fractals are hard to verbalize, performance was consistently lower for fractal–color associations (Experiments 2 and 4) in comparison with object–color associations (Experiments 1 and 3). Computational modeling (Experiments 3 and 4) revealed that LOP effects for basic visual perceptual stimuli are based on access to memory rather than enhanced precision of memory representations. Overall, our findings demonstrate that the LOP account is significantly more universal than previous research implies. Collectively, our results provide strong evidence that LOP effects can also be observed for basic visual perceptual features.

Statement of Relevance

Long-term memory is usually assumed to critically depend on meaning. The more meaningfully stimuli can be processed during encoding, the more likely it is that they can be retrieved later. This notion is reflected in the levels of processing (LOP) account. Over the past 50 years, the LOP account has been studied almost exclusively with verbal material, and it is not known whether it also applies to basic visual perceptual features (e.g., color). In four experiments, we tested the LOP account on perceptual features in visual associative memory. We obtained evidence that the LOP account also applies to visual associative memory. This was the case for associations not only between concrete objects and colors but also between abstract fractals and colors, even though the stimuli were very hard to verbalize in the latter case. This provides evidence that the fundamental principle of the LOP account also applies to visual mental representations and that it is much more universal than the current literature suggests.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants. Sample-size determination was based on the observation of medium-size LOP effects for images (Cohen's d = 0.50; Baddeley & Hitch, 2017). Estimating on the basis of the results for door images across experiments in Baddeley and Hitch (2017), we used a mean proportion of .75 correct responses for the deep conditions, a mean proportion of .65 correct responses for the shallow conditions, and the common standard deviation of .3 to perform the a priori power analysis with Superpower's Exact Shiny App (https://arcstats.io/shiny/anova-exact/; Lakens & Caldwell, 2019). Moreover, we assumed a medium average correlation (r = .50) and aimed for a power level of 95%. The calculations included the within-subjects factors level of processing (shallow, deep) and lure (shape, color, control). It revealed that 40 participants were required to achieve a 95% probability of detecting a true main effect for levels of processing.

We tested 40 participants with an average age of 21 years (SD = 3). Eight participants were men, and five participants were left-handed. All participants were psychology students at the University of Bern who earned course credit in return for participation. The inclusion criterion was normal (or corrected-to-normal) vision.

The study was approved by the local ethics committee of the University of Bern. Before they consented to participate, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the experiment at any time.

Apparatus. The tasks were presented with MATLAB (The MathWorks, Natick, MA) in the Psychophysics Toolbox 3 (Brainard, 1997; Pelli, 1997) on a flat 21-in. Sony Trinitron CRT monitor (85-Hz refresh rate). The monitor was driven by a GeForce GTX970 graphics card (NVIDIA, Santa Clara, CA) and had a spatial resolution of 1,280 × 1,024 pixels and a color resolution of 8 bits per channel. The monitor was calibrated and the stimulus materials rendered to keep the average luminance of individual stimuli during the task isoluminant with the background of the monitor (40.7 cd/m^2). A more detailed description of monitor calibration and stimulus rendering is provided by Ovalle Fresa and Rothen (2019). To ensure a constant viewing distance of 100 cm, we used a chin and forehead rest. To shield peripheral vision and to ensure that the participants adapted to the computer monitor, we installed a black cardboard tunnel from the monitor to the chin and forehead rest, overlapping the rest by 20 cm at the top and both sides.

Design. The recognition task followed a 2 × 3 within-subjects design, manipulating LOP condition (shallow, deep) and lure (color, object, control). The entire task consisted of one block per experimental condition (total of six blocks). Each block consisted of an encoding and a recognition phase. Each LOP condition consisted of three blocks (i.e., one per lure condition).

Material. Stimuli consisted of a total of 192 distinct and identifiable objects from the Bank of Standardized Stimuli (Brodeur, Dionne-Dostie, Montreuil, & Lepage, 2010) and a total of 96 colors equidistantly sampled on an isoluminant color wheel in Commission Internationale de l'Éclairage 1976 L^*, u^*, v^* (CIELUV) color space. Table 1 shows how the stimuli were assigned to the different conditions. Objects were randomly assigned to two sets (A and B). The objects of one set (A) were randomly assigned to six lists of 16 objects each (i.e., one list per LOP condition and lure condition). The objects of the other set (B) were randomly assigned to two sets of 48 objects each, to serve as lures for the control condition. Sets and lists were counterbalanced between participants. An additional set of 16 objects served as a practice list. Colors were assigned to six lists. Each color list was associated with one of the object lists. Colors within each list were as distinct from each other as possible. An additional set of four colors served as a practice list.

Procedure. Participants were individually tested. First, we tested visual acuity (Landolt ring test; www.optikschweiz.ch/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/W51-OS_SehtestVisus.pdf; see Wesemann, Schiefer, & Bach, 2010) and assessed demographic data. Then the room was completely darkened for the rest of the experiment, with the monitor as the only source of light. Afterward, we assessed color vision with an online version of the Farnsworth Dichotomous Test (www.color-blindness.com/color-arrangement-test). Thereafter, participants completed the recognition task, including LOP manipulations. Next, we conducted a contrast-sensitivity task that is not relevant for the purposes of the current study and hence not further reported. At the end of the session, a posttest interview was conducted to assess potential strategies and subjective task difficulty.

The recognition task consisted of the two LOP conditions (shallow, deep). Each LOP condition was further divided into three lure conditions (shape, color, control). The order of LOP conditions was counterbalanced across participants. The order of lure conditions within LOP conditions was also counterbalanced across participants. Each of the six conditions consisted of a practice block with four encoding trials, immediately followed by four recognition trials. The practice block was followed by the experimental block, including an encoding phase consisting of 16 trials and an immediately following recognition phase of 16 trials. During encoding, participants were instructed to memorize the object–color associations for a subsequent memory test. Object–color associations were randomized between participants. The order of object presentation during encoding and recognition was randomized for each participant.

Each encoding trial (Fig. 1a) started with a central fixation cross (1 s), followed by a colored object (1 s) and the respective encoding question. Deep encoding required a pleasantness judgment (Y key = pleasant, N

Table 1. Stimulus Lists

	Objects		
LOP condition and lure	Set A	Set B	Colors
Shallow			
Color	16		16
Object	16		16
Control	16	48	16
Deep			
Color	16		16
Object	16		16
Control	16	48	16
Total	96	96	96

Note: Two sets of objects and one set of colors were assigned to the different task conditions. One set of objects was used for the different lure conditions (color, object, control), and the objects of the other set were used as novel stimuli in the control condition (see Material section of Experiment 1). The sets were counterbalanced across conditions. LOP = levels of processing.

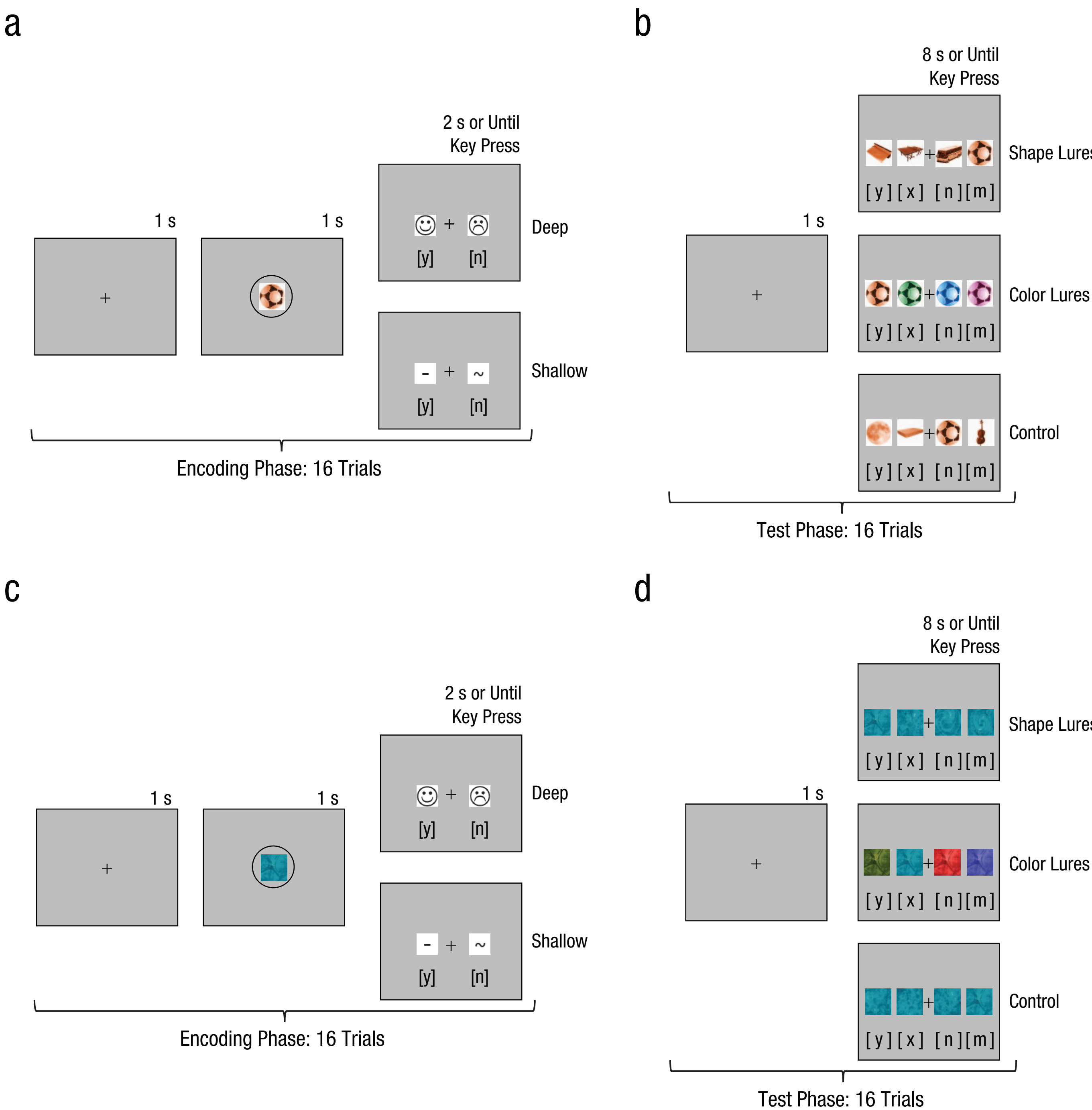

Fig. 1. Example trial sequences from the encoding phase (a, c) and recognition phase (b, d) of Experiment 1 (top row) and Experiment 2 (bottom row). Experiments 1 and 2 differed only in whether stimuli were objects or fractals, respectively. In the encoding phase, participants first saw a stimulus and then made either a pleasantness judgment (deep encoding) or a judgment on the presence of straight lines (shallow encoding). In the subsequent recognition phase, participants saw a target and three lures. Participants were instructed to choose which of four object–color associations was identical to an object–color association from the encoding phase (i.e., target). The lures in the recognition phase involved shapes, colors, or control objects. In the shape-lure condition, the four different shapes had an identical color. Only one of the shapes had been presented in the specific color during encoding (target). The other three shapes (lures) had also been presented during encoding but in a different color. In the color-lure condition, the four shapes were identical but had different colors. All colors were part of the corresponding encoding phase, but three were associated with different shapes from those during encoding (lures), and one was associated with the same shape as during encoding (target). In the control condition, different shapes had the same color, but only one shape had been part of the encoding phase (target); the remaining shapes were novel and had not been part of the encoding phase (lures). The novel objects were taken from Set B (see Table 1) and not otherwise used for a given participant.

key = not pleasant). Shallow encoding required a perceptual judgment (Y key = object includes a straight line, N key = object does not include a straight line). The next trial was initiated by a response or after 2 s had elapsed. Responses were given on a QWERTZ keyboard (different from the QWERTY keyboard commonly used in the United States and United Kingdom in that the "Y" and the "Z" are interchanged). The recognition phase followed the logic of a four-alternative forced-choice task. During each trial, participants were instructed to choose which of four object–color associations was identical to an object–color association from the encoding phase (i.e., target). A recognition trial (Fig. 1b) started with a central fixation cross (1 s) followed by a simultaneous presentation of a target and three lures, each in one of four predefined positions (i.e., at 25%, 37.5%, 62.5%, and 75% on the x-axis of the screen) corresponding to the response keys (Y, X, N, M, respectively). The positions for the target and lures were randomized for each trial. The next trial was initiated by a response or after 8 s had elapsed.

There were three different types of lures. In the shape-lure condition, the four different objects had an identical color. Only one of the objects had been presented in the specific color during encoding (target). The other three objects (lures) had also been presented during encoding but in a different color. In the color-lure condition, the four shapes were identical but had different colors. All colors were part of the corresponding encoding phase, but three were associated with different shapes from those during encoding (lures), and one was associated with the same shape as during encoding (target). The four colors were always maximally different from each other (i.e., distance of 90° on the color circle). In the control condition, different shapes had the same color, but only one shape had been part of the encoding phase (target); the remaining shapes were novel and had not been part of the encoding phase (lures). The novel objects were taken from Set B (see Table 1) and not otherwise used for a given participant.

Analyses. Raw data are available on OSF (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/6DE2B). Data were analyzed in the R programming environment (R Core Team, 2019). Alpha was set to .05 for all analyses. Effect sizes of the analyses of variance (ANOVAs) are reported as η_p^2. In cases of violation of sphericity, Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied. For t tests concerning LOP effects, effect sizes (Cohen's d_z) with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were calculated using the R package *rstatix* (Kassambara, 2019).

Results

Performance (proportion of correct responses) in Experiment 1 is depicted in the top row of Figure 2. We observed a ceiling effect in the control condition, making a reasonable interpretation of the results in this condition impossible. Therefore, the control condition was excluded from all further analysis. We conducted a 2 × 2 ANOVA for repeated measures with the factors LOP condition (shallow, deep) and lure (shape, color). It revealed a significant main effect of LOP condition, $F(1, 39) = 20.39$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .34$, based on significant LOP effects for shape lures, $t(39) = 3.02$, $p = .004$, $d_z = 0.41$, 95% CI = [0.18, 0.79], and for color lures, $t(39) = 4.68$, $p < .001$, $d_z = 0.74$, 95% CI = [0.44, 1.10]. However, the main effect of lure, $F(1, 39) = 0.00$, $p = .972$, $\eta_p^2 < .01$, and the LOP Condition × Lure interaction were not significant, $F(1, 39) = 0.89$, $p = .351$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Overall, the analysis indicated a clear LOP effect for object–color associations but no significant influence of different types of lures.

The results from the posttest interview were in line with the behavioral findings: 63% of the participants indicated that the deep LOP condition was easier than the shallow LOP condition. Moreover, across LOP conditions, 65% of the participants indicated that they verbalized the colors, and 63% indicated that they verbalized the objects.

Experiment 2

The primary goal of Experiment 2 was to replicate the LOP effect on the basic visual perceptual feature of color. We ran the same recognition task as in Experiment 1 with abstract fractals instead of concrete objects to suppress verbalization. This put additional weight on visual perceptual processing in comparison with the task in Experiment 1. Experiment 2 was thus expected to further corroborate whether levels of processing can affect perceptual features in visual associative memory.

Method

Participants. The same a priori power analysis as in Experiment 1 revealed that 23 participants were required to replicate the finding with shape lures in Experiment 1 with a 95% probability. We aimed for 24 participants and tested a total of 27 participants; three had to be replaced because of missing data. The average age of the final sample was 21 years ($SD = 1.81$). Five participants were men, and all participants were right-handed.

Material and procedure. Experiment 2 was identical to Experiment 1, with the following exceptions. We used abstract shapes to suppress verbalization. Stimuli consisted of 196 abstract fractals, randomly selected from an initial pool of 400 fractal pictures, originally collected from the Internet (search string: "fractals"). Fractals of the initial pool were in gray scale, resized to 380 × 380 pixels,

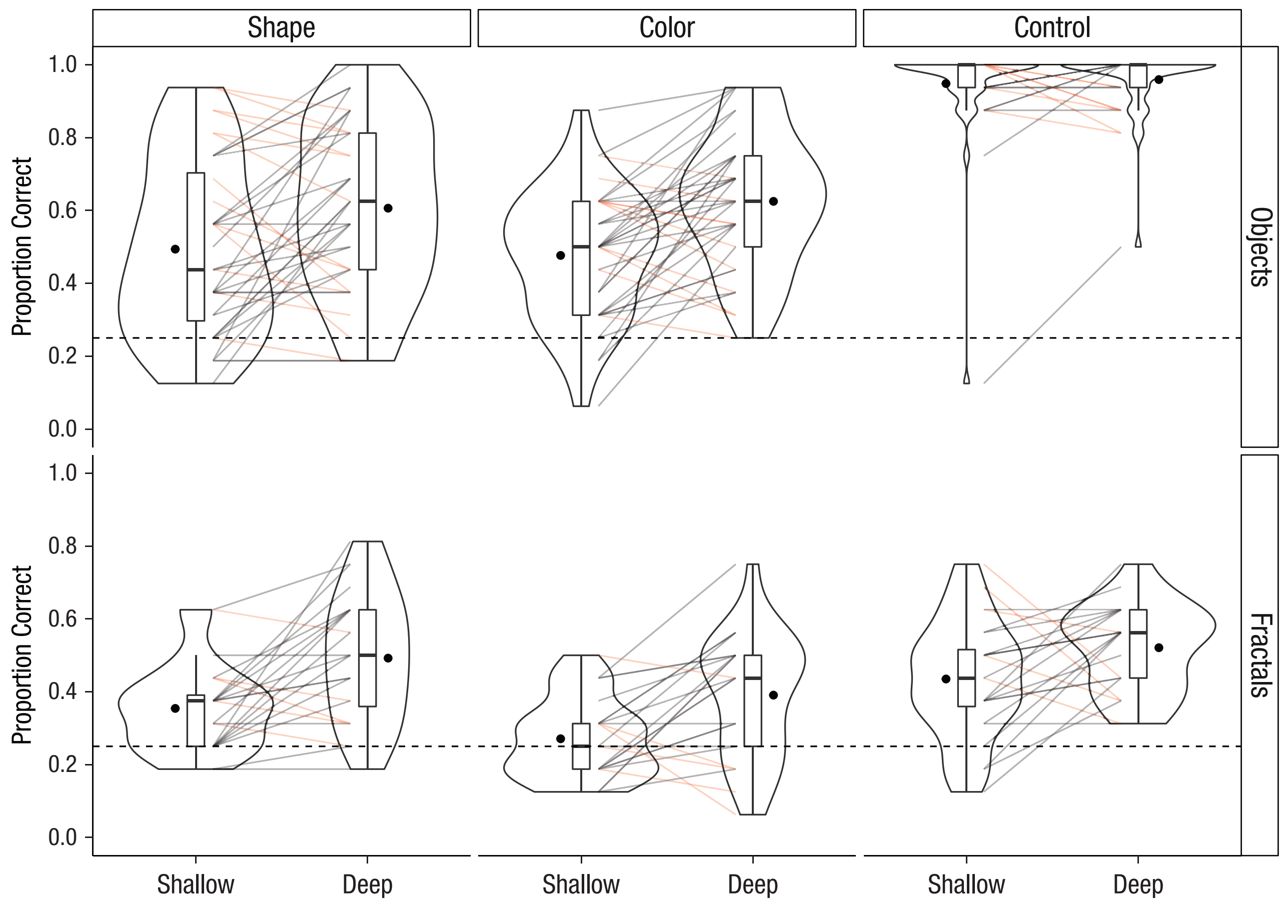

Fig. 2. Proportion of correct responses as a function of level of processing (LOP) condition (shallow, deep) and lure (shape, color, control), separately for Experiment 1 (objects; top row) and Experiment 2 (fractals; bottom row). The horizontal line inside each box plot indicates median performance (i.e., 50th percentile), and the dot next to each box plot represents average performance. The lower and upper ends of each box represent the 25th and 75th percentiles, enclosing the interquartile range. The whiskers extend to 1.5 times the interquartile range from either end of the box. The violin plots indicate the density of the data. The colored lines indicate change in performance of individual participants between the two LOP conditions. Light gray lines represent participants whose performance improved from the shallow to the deep condition. Light red lines represent participants whose performance decreased from the shallow to the deep condition. The dashed line represents the guess rate.

and finally equalized with regard to average spatial frequency and luminance with the spectrum, histogram, and intensity normalization and equalization (SHINE) toolbox (Willenbockel et al., 2010). The pool of 400 fractals and their normative values is provided on OSF at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/CKFMV. Examples of isoluminant colored fractals can be found on OSF at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/6DE2B.

Results

To analyze performance (Fig. 2, bottom row), we entered the data in a 2 × 3 ANOVA, including the within-subjects factors LOP condition (shallow, deep) and lure (shape, color, control). Raw data are available on OSF at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/6DE2B. The ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of LOP condition, $F(1, 23) = 26.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .53$, indicating better performance after deep encoding than shallow encoding in all lure conditions—shape: $t(23) = 3.83$, $p = .001$, $d_z = 0.78$, 95% CI = [0.46, 1.25]; color: $t(23) = 3.50$, $p = .002$, $d_z = 0.71$, 95% CI = [0.32, 1.31]; control: $t(23) = 2.26$, $p = .033$, $d_z = 0.46$, 95% CI = [0.07, 1.09]. Also, the main effect of lure was significant, $F(1, 46) = 12.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .36$ (Greenhouse-Geisser correction applied), because of better performance in the control condition than the color condition, $t(23) = 5.82$, $p < .001$, $d_z = 1.19$, 95% CI = [0.76, 1.97], and the shape condition, $t(23) = 2.14$, $p = .044$, $d_z = 0.44$, 95% CI = [0.04, 0.98], and better performance in the shape condition than the color condition, $t(23) = 2.60$, $p = .016$, $d_z = 0.53$, 95% CI = [0.15, 0.99]. The LOP Condition × Lure interaction was not significant, $F(2, 46) = 0.58$, $p = .566$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$ (Greenhouse-Geisser correction applied). Average performance did not differ from chance in the shallow color condition, $t(23) = 0.94$, $p = .357$, $d = 0.19$, but was above chance in the deep color condition, $t(23) = 4.07$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.83$. The analyses indicate that medium to large LOP effects were observed in recognition performance for abstract stimuli but that the LOP effect was not influenced by the type of the lures.

In line with the behavioral results, the results of the posttest interview revealed that more participants (63%) experienced the deep LOP condition as easier than the shallow LOP condition. Sixty-five percent of the participants indicated that they verbalized the colors, and 61% indicated that they verbalized the fractals during encoding.

Experiment 3

The primary goal of Experiment 3 was to assess the universality of the previous findings (i.e., LOP effects for basic visual perceptual features in recognition memory). Therefore, we investigated whether these LOP effects also apply to basic visual perceptual features in cued recall. We used the same LOP manipulations during encoding as in Experiments 1 and 2. Thereafter, the color of an object had to be recalled and reproduced in a continuous response space, and the difference between the recalled color and the original color at encoding was measured.

Method

Participants. Because of the implementation of a novel paradigm, sample-size determination was again based on the observation of medium-size LOP effects for images (Cohen's $d = 0.50$; Baddeley & Hitch, 2017) and an a priori power analysis with G*Power 3 (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). The calculations included the within-subjects comparison of LOP condition (shallow vs. deep; two-tailed; $\alpha = .05$). We aimed for a power level of 95%. The analysis revealed that 54 participants were required to achieve a 95% probability of detecting a true main effect of LOP condition.

We tested a total of 60 participants. Two participants had to be excluded because of incomplete data. The remaining 58 participants had a mean age of 22 years ($SD = 3.38$, minimum = 19, maximum = 42); 44 participants were women, and 52 were right-handed.

Apparatus. Hardware and software were the same as used in Experiments 1 and 2. Also, the laboratory setting was identical to that in Experiments 1 and 2.

Material. Stimuli consisted of 243 unique pictures of objects taken from the BOSS database (Brodeur et al., 2010). Stimuli were prepared following the same procedure as in Experiment 1. All stimuli fitted into 4° × 4° of visual angle and were surrounded by a black circle (representing the color wheel) with a radius of 2.5° of visual angle. Each stimulus was randomly assigned to a practice list of three stimuli or one of two sets of 120 stimuli each, to be used in the shallow or deep condition, respectively. The stimuli of each set were used to create 12 stimulus lists of 10 stimuli. Correspondingly, a practice list of three colors and two sets of 120 colors each were created. The colors of both sets were equidistantly sampled on an isoluminant color wheel in CIELUV color space. The colors of the two sets differed by 1° on the color wheel. The colors of each set were further assigned to 12 lists of 10 colors each. The colors in each list were always as distinct as possible.

Procedure. The overall procedure was identical to that in Experiments 1 and 2. In the memory task, we manipulated LOP conditions as in the previous experiments. In the shallow condition, participants were instructed to indicate whether a stimulus contained a straight line. In the deep condition, participants were instructed to indicate whether the stimulus was pleasant. The order of the LOP conditions was controlled across participants. The stimulus sets were counterbalanced across LOP conditions. Each condition consisted of 12 blocks with 10 unique objects per block (i.e., objects from one of the stimulus lists). Object–color associations were randomized within each block. Each block consisted of an encoding phase and an immediately following recall phase. During encoding, all 10 objects of a given stimulus list were presented in random order. Each object was presented for 3 s. During the recall phase, all 10 objects from the preceding encoding phase were presented again in random order, one at a time. Encoding trials were identical to those in Experiment 1 (Fig. 3a). Recall trials (Fig. 3b) started with a central fixation cross for 1 s. Then, an object was presented in gray scale, surrounded by a black circle representing a color wheel. Participants were instructed to adjust the color of the object to the original color of the object as it had been presented during encoding. A dot on the color wheel corresponded to the position of the mouse. Moving the dot with the mouse changed the color of the presented object. A color was selected by mouse click, which also initiated the next trial. If no response was submitted after 8 s had elapsed, the next trial was initiated. For each recall trial, feedback indicating "good," "very good," or "perfect" was provided if the deviation of the response was less than or equal to 10°, 5°, and 0°, respectively.

Design and analysis. The task followed a within-subjects design with two LOP conditions (shallow, deep). We measured the response error as the deviation between the original color at encoding and a given response on the

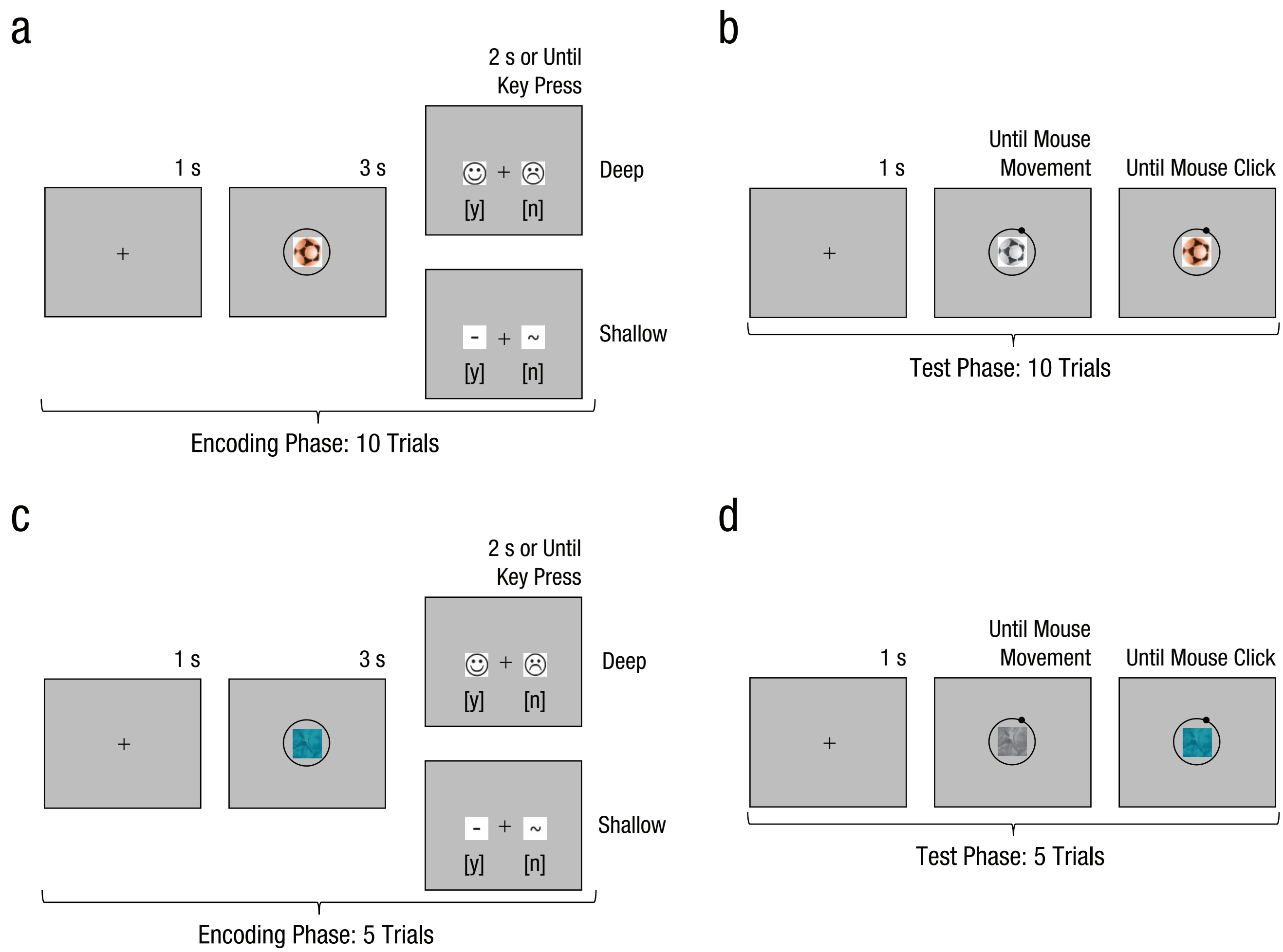

Fig. 3. Example trial sequences from the encoding phase (a, c) and recall phase (b, d) of Experiment 3 (top row) and Experiment 4 (bottom row). Experiments 3 and 4 differed only in whether stimuli were objects or fractals, respectively. During encoding, all 10 objects of a given stimulus list were presented in random order, and participants made either a pleasantness judgment (deep encoding) or a judgment on the presence of straight lines (shallow encoding). During the recall phase, each of the 10 objects from the encoding phase was presented again in random order, one at a time. For each object, participants had to adjust a color wheel so the object's color matched how they recalled it originally appearing during encoding.

color wheel (range = 0° to ±180°). Lower values reflect better memory performance. Medians of the absolute response errors were calculated per participant and condition because aggregation with the median is less sensitive to outlier responses than aggregation with the mean (see Leys, Ley, Klein, Bernard, & Licata, 2013).

In an additional analysis, we took advantage of the continuous distribution of the response errors to explore whether the LOP effect was based on enhanced access to memory or more precise memory representations in the deep LOP condition. Thus, we fitted the standard mixture model to the data (Brady et al., 2013; Zhang & Luck, 2008) to estimate two parameters: the guess rate g, reflected by a uniform distribution, and precision SD, reflected by the standard deviation of a Gaussian-like distribution. We fitted the data from both LOP conditions simultaneously with the factorial design method provided in the R package *CatContModel* (Hardman, 2017). The model-fitting procedure implemented a Bayesian hierarchical framework, using Markov chain Monte Carlo sampling in three chains of 10,000 iterations. The first 500 iterations were considered burn-in and removed. Noninformative priors were used (see Hardman, Vergauwe, & Ricker, 2017). We report mean posteriors and 95% credible intervals (CrIs) for the model parameters g and SD. Comparison of LOP conditions was based on 1,000 iterations; the effects are reported as Bayes factors (BFs) with 95% Bayesian CrIs. BF_{10} indicates the likelihood ratio for evidence for the alternative hypothesis over the null hypothesis. According to Jeffreys (1961, cited in Wetzels et al., 2011), BFs are regarded as anecdotal if they range from 1 to 3, moderate if from 3 to 10, strong if from 10

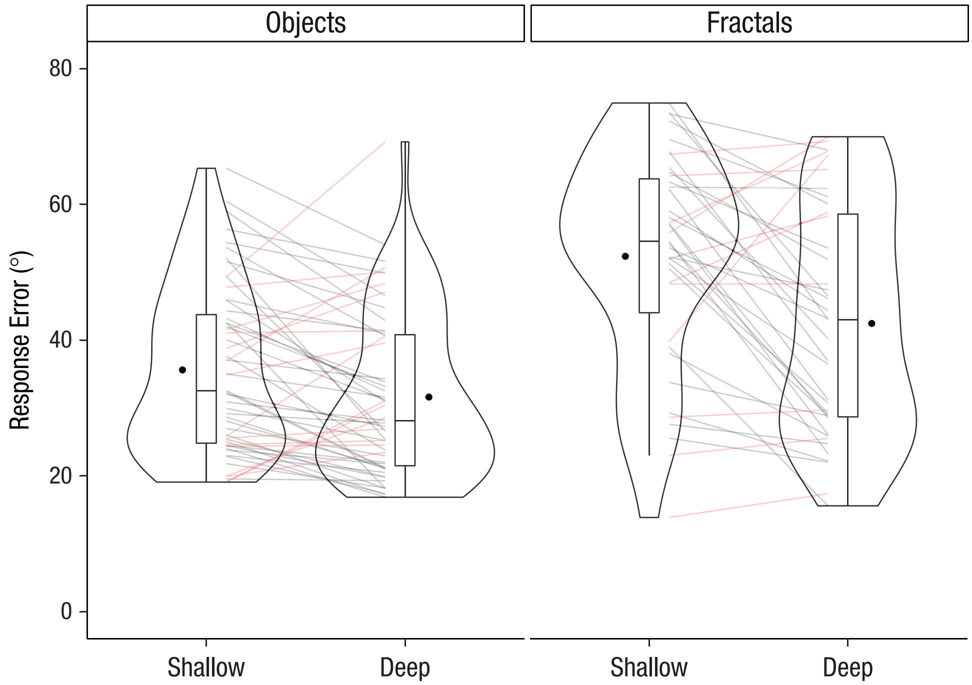

Fig. 4. Response error as a function of levels of processing (LOP) condition (shallow, deep), separately for Experiment 3 (objects; left) and Experiment 4 (fractals; right). Lower values represent better performance. The horizontal line inside each box plot indicates median performance (i.e., 50th percentile), and the dot next to each box plot represents average performance. The lower and upper ends of each box represent the 25th and 75th percentiles, enclosing the interquartile range. The whiskers extend to 1.5 times the interquartile range from either end of the box. The violin plots indicate the density of the data. The colored lines indicate change in performance of individual participants between the two LOP conditions. Light gray lines represent participants whose performance improved from the shallow to the deep condition. Light red lines represent participants whose performance decreased from the shallow to the deep condition.

to 30, very strong if from 30 to 100, and extreme evidence in favor of the alternative hypothesis if higher than 100.

Results

Average medians of the absolute response errors as a function of LOP condition are depicted on the left-hand side of Figure 4. Three participants were excluded because the distribution of their responses was not significantly different from a uniform distribution in either of the LOP conditions (reflecting random guesses; see Haberman, Brady, & Alvarez, 2015). For the remaining 55 participants, a t test for paired samples revealed significantly greater response errors in the shallow compared with the deep condition, $t(54) = 3.20$, $p = .002$, $d_z = 0.43$, 95% CI = [0.16, 0.77].[1] This indicates a clear LOP effect for cued recall of the color of concrete objects.

Next, we fitted the standard mixture model to estimate the parameters reflecting guess rate and precision (Hardman et al., 2017; Zhang & Luck, 2008). For parameter g, a BF_{10} of 5,187 (95% CrI = [4,868, 5,520]) indicated extreme evidence for an LOP effect with a lower guess rate in the deep condition ($M = .34$, 95% CrI = [.29, .39]) than in the shallow condition ($M = .42$, 95% CrI = [.48, .37]). For parameter *SD*, no evidence for either hypothesis was indicated ($BF_{10} = 0.37$, 95% CrI = [0.28, 0.48]); the mean posterior was 28.69° (95% CrI = [27.18, 30.35]) for the deep condition and 28.81° (95% CrI = [27.16, 30.60]) for the shallow condition. Thus, level of processing seems to affect recall on the basis of access to memory representations but not precision of memory representations.

Experiment 4

Experiment 3 provided strong evidence for an LOP effect on associations between basic visual perceptual features (i.e., color) and concrete objects in a cued-recall paradigm with a continuous response space. In Experiment 4, we aimed to replicate and extend these findings with abstract stimuli because abstract stimuli are hard to verbalize. Experiment 4 was expected to thus again further corroborate whether level of processing can indeed affect perceptual features in visual associative memory. We conducted the same task as in Experiment 3 but with abstract fractals instead of concrete objects. Where not otherwise mentioned, methods and analyses were identical to those in Experiment 3.

Method

Participants. Because the effects observed in Experiment 3 were close to medium size (Cohen's d_zs = 0.43 and 0.47, respectively), we based our sample-size determination on the a priori power analysis of Experiment 3 and tested another 60 participants. The data of one participant were lost because of a technical error. The remaining 59 participants had a mean age of 23.53 years (*SD* = 3.52, minimum = 19, maximum = 34); 33 participants were women, and 48 were right-handed.

Material. Stimuli consisted of 243 abstract patterns randomly chosen from a pool of 400 fractal patterns. Stimuli were prepared following the same procedure as in Experiment 2. All stimuli fitted into 3.5° × 3.5° of visual angle and were surrounded by a black circle (representing the color wheel) with a radius of 2.5° of visual angle. Each stimulus was randomly assigned to a practice list of three stimuli or one of two sets of 120 stimuli each, to be used in the shallow or deep condition, respectively. The stimuli of each set were used to create 24 stimulus lists of five stimuli each. Correspondingly, a practice list of three colors and two sets of 120 colors each were created. The colors of both sets were equidistantly sampled on an isoluminant color wheel in CIELUV color space. The colors of the two sets differed by 1° on the color wheel. The colors of each set were further assigned to 24 lists of five colors each. The colors in each list were always as distinct as possible.

Procedure. The procedure was identical to that in Experiment 3. Because fractals are more difficult to memorize than objects, blocks were reduced to five encoding and recall trials to prevent floor effects. Example encoding and recall trials are depicted in Figures 3c and 3d. Both LOP conditions (deep, shallow) consisted of 24 blocks each. That is, the number of stimuli per condition was the same as for Experiment 3.

Design and analyses. The design was identical to that in Experiment 3. We conducted the same analysis as for Experiment 3.

Results

Average medians of absolute response errors as a function of LOP condition are depicted on the right-hand side of Figure 4. Twenty participants were excluded because the distribution of their responses was not significantly different from a uniform distribution in either of the LOP conditions (reflecting pure guesses; see Haberman et al., 2015). For the remaining 39 participants, a *t* test for paired samples revealed significantly greater response errors in the shallow compared with the deep condition, $t(38) = 4.25$, $p < .001$, $d_z = 0.68$, 95% CI = [0.35, 1.10]. When one also considers the slightly lower effect sizes when all participants were included,[2] this indicates a medium to large LOP effect for cued recall of the color of abstract fractals.

Next, we fitted the standard mixture model to estimate the parameters reflecting guess rate and precision (Zhang & Luck, 2008), using the same approach as in Experiment 3. For parameter *g*, the BF_{10} of 69,706 (95% CrI = [65,347, 74,142]) indicated extreme evidence for an LOP effect in the given data set, with a lower guess rate in the deep condition (*M* = .58, 95% CrI = [.51, .64]) than in the shallow condition (*M* = .68, 95% CrI = [.62, .74]). For parameter *SD*, the BF_{10} of 1.08 (95% CrI = [0.83, 1.44]) indicated no conclusive evidence for a difference in precision of the remembered items between LOP conditions; the mean posterior was 23.64° (95% CrI = [21.88, 25.71]) in the deep condition and 24.87° (95% CrI = [22.69, 27.28]) in the shallow condition. Thus, also for abstract fractal–color associations, level of processing seems to affect recall on the basis of access to memory representations but not precision of memory representations.

Discussion

Across four experiments, we were able to unambiguously demonstrate for the first time that different levels of processing affect memory for basic visual perceptual features (i.e., color). In Experiments 1 and 2, we showed that deeper levels of processing benefit recognition memory for concrete object–color associations and abstract fractal–color associations, respectively. In Experiments 3 and 4, we showed that deeper levels of processing benefit cued recall for both concrete object–color associations and abstract fractal–color associations. Taking advantage of the continuous response space in Experiments 3 and 4, we were further able to show by means of a computational-modeling approach that deeper levels of processing enhance access to memory representations but not their mnemonic precision. The results are also in line with subjective reports that the deep encoding condition was easier than the shallow encoding condition.

The effect sizes that we observed across our experiments (Cohen's d_zs = 0.43–0.78) seem extremely reliable in light of the fact that we assessed memory for basic visual perceptual features. From a critical viewpoint, one might argue that objects and fractals can be verbalized. This is also what the participants reported

(Experiments 1 and 2). Nevertheless, memory for abstract fractals (Experiments 2 and 4) was generally lower than memory for concrete objects (Experiments 1 and 3). This suggests that it was more difficult to verbalize abstract fractals than concrete objects. Interestingly, LOP effects tended to be numerically larger for fractals (Cohen's d_zs = 0.68–0.78) than for objects (Cohen's d_zs = 0.41–0.74). Similarly, one might argue that color can be verbalized. The German language has 11 basic color terms (the same applies to English; Berlin & Kay, 1969; Witzel & Gegenfurtner, 2018), and there were eight color terms (pink, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and brown) that could be used to refer to the colors that we sampled (gray, white, and black were not sampled). It was not possible to use attributes such as light and dark because we rendered isoluminant colors. Moreover, isoluminant colors do not have clear category boundaries (e.g., between green and blue), rendering it more difficult to attribute unambiguous labels to colors. We cannot entirely rule out the possibility that verbal strategies were applied to memorize object–color associations. However, verbal strategies are unlikely to be successful for fractal–color associations because of the low distinctiveness of the fractals. An impressive demonstration of this explanation can be observed in the color-lure condition with fractals. Performance was at chance level in the shallow condition (in which participants had to indicate the presence of straight lines during encoding) and increased above chance level in the deep condition (in which participants had to rate the pleasantness of the stimuli during encoding). LOP effects, as observed across our tasks, were thus at least partly depending on visual rather than verbal representations.

Computational modeling of the results of Experiments 3 and 4 revealed extreme evidence that deeper levels of processing enhance access to visual memory representations but revealed no clear effect on mnemonic precision. One could reasonably argue that the shallow encoding instruction in our work (i.e., to indicate whether a stimulus consists of a straight line) resulted in a narrow attentional focus on the details of a stimulus. By contrast, the deep encoding instruction (i.e., to indicate whether a stimulus is pleasant or not) resulted in a more global attentional focus. This is in line with previous explanations for LOP effects with faces: Bower and Karlin (1974) found that deep encoding questions (e.g., honesty or likability judgment) led to better memory for face stimuli compared with shallow encoding questions (e.g., gender judgment). They suggested that honesty and likability judgments, because of the vague judgment criteria, lead to a holistic focus and thus the extraction of more details. By contrast, gender judgments, because of the clear judgment criteria, can be based on one or the other salient cue and thus lead to a narrow focus and the extraction of fewer details. Notably, these explanations are closely linked to the verbal overshadowing effect, where giving a verbal description of a stimulus (i.e., accessing its salient features) impairs later recognition (Schooler & Engstler-Schooler, 1990). However, previous work manipulating the emotional context of stimuli found that emotional versus neutral context increased mnemonic precision because of a narrower attentional focus in emotionally valent contexts (Xie & Zhang, 2017a, 2017b). Thus, it will be an interesting endeavor for future research to disentangle how LOP manipulations with images might affect attentional focus and how this impacts access to memory or mnemonic precision.

Our work also has practical implications, given the importance of memory based on visual impressions in everyday life. For instance, individuals tend to focus on details of a visual scene when trying to memorize it very well. Although it seems very reasonable to focus on the details when attempting to retain detailed memories of an experience, our work indicates that this is unlikely to be the best strategy. By contrast, our findings unequivocally suggest that it is more beneficial to ask whether you like what you are seeing. This may seem counterintuitive but further indirect support is provided by studies showing that personally relevant material is better remembered than neutral material (e.g., Levine & Edelstein, 2009). The question of whether a stimulus is appealing might render it personally more relevant in contrast to an analytic question with regard to the presence of some basic features in a stimulus and will thus further support deeper levels of processing.

To summarize, we demonstrated extremely reliable LOP effects for basic perceptual features in visual associative memory across a series of four statistically well-powered experiments. Computational modeling revealed that the effects were due to enhanced access to visual memory rather than enhanced fidelity of visual memory representations. The findings indicate that the hitherto influential LOP account is much more universal than the focus on verbal stimuli in the current literature might suggest.

Transparency

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Author Contributions
R. Ovalle-Fresa and N. Rothen developed the study concept and design. R. Ovalle-Fresa programmed the tasks, supervised data collection, analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. N. Rothen performed critical revisions,

acquired the funding, and supervised the project. A. S. Uslu collected the data in Experiment 3, wrote a first draft for parts of the Method sections (Experiments 3 and 4), and provided comments on the final draft of the manuscript. All the authors approved the final manuscript for submission.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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Open Practices

All data have been made publicly available via OSF and can be accessed at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/6DE2B. The design and analysis plans for the experiments were not preregistered. This article has received the badge for Open Data. More information about the Open Practices badges can be found at http://www.psychologicalscience.org/publications/badges.

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Notes

1. A similar effect was observed when all 58 participants were included, $t(57) = 3.61$, $p = .001$, $d_z = 0.47$, 95% CI = [0.24, 0.76].
2. A similar effect was observed when all 59 participants were included, $t(58) = 3.91$, $p < .001$, $d_z = 0.51$, 95% CI = [0.27, 0.81].

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