

Emotion recognition processing in bipolar and unipolar depression: Does the ability to process and identify facial emotions vary according to the diagnosis?

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Objective: The decoding of emotional changes from non-verbal cues is a fundamental aspect of human communication. Patients with mental disorders, such as bipolar disorder and depression, have been shown to present difficulties in facial emotion recognition. This study aims to investigate whether there are differences in emotional recognition processing between patients with bipolar depression and patients with unipolar depression, and if these potential differences could, therefore, facilitate differential diagnosis.

Methods: A total of 47 patients, who have visited the Mental Health Center (aged 20-45 y.o., right-handed, educational level > 9 y.o.), participated in this study. 1st Group: History of Bipolar disorder at a depression phase (14), 2nd Group: History of Unipolar depression in depression (17) and 3rd Group: Healthy controls (16). Participants were clinical interviewed, completed the Hamilton Depression Rating Scale, the Montgomery-Asberg Depression Scale and the Emotion Recognition Task (ERT), which is a computer-generated paradigm for measuring the recognition of six facial emotional expressions: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise.

Results: Compared to healthy controls, patients with bipolar depression presented impairment in recognizing all expressions, except sadness, whereas patients with unipolar depression overestimated fear and sadness, and underestimated happiness.

Conclusion: It seems that the overestimation of fear in patients with unipolar depression compared to patients with bipolar depression, who underestimate fear, may contribute to differential diagnosis. However, the sample size is small, therefore, further research is needed.

