

Hypervigilance for faces, but typical gaze following in social anxiety

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A hypervigilance-avoidance theory has been proposed to explain early attentional biases towards faces followed by their subsequent avoidance, in social anxiety (SA) (Mogg et al., 1997). This theory has arisen from data obtained from dot probe-type tasks presenting static images which lack in ecological validity. Moreover, whilst the gaze of others is considered a threatening cue in SA and is typically avoided, the gaze *following* mechanism has not been examined in SA. We analysed eye movements, including gaze following in 39 participants, who were either high or low in SA (HSA and LSA respectively) as they watched an emotionally-neutral dynamic social scene. Contrary to the hypervigilance-avoidance hypothesis, whilst HSA participants directed significantly more early fixations towards the face than the LSA group, both groups fixated the face equally after this time. There were no group differences in gaze following. Results suggest that when viewing a neutral social scene, HSA individuals are initially biased towards the face but when threat is not perceived a typical viewing strategy is adopted. Furthermore, although direct gaze may be avoided in SA, the gaze following mechanism may be so automated that it is impervious to higher level socio-cognitive factors such as fear of social evaluation.