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Eye gaze behavior during a face-to-face conversation: effects of anxiety, conversational role and partner gaze direction?

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Objectives

Social anxiety has long been related to reduced eye contact. The present study aimed to determine whether gaze avoidance by more socially anxious individuals is a habit (related to social anxiety) or a momentary effect of state anxiety in a face-to-face conversation. Meanwhile, this study investigated the effect of conversational role and partner gaze direction on gaze behaviour during the conversation.

Methods

Participants (N = 61, age-range 17-30 years, 89% female) had a getting acquainted conversation with a same-sex confederate for approximately 10 minutes. We alternated conversational roles (talking vs. listening) and manipulated the confederate's gaze direction (direct vs. averted). Participants' gaze behaviour was registered with eye-tracking glasses. Their social anxiety and state anxiety were measured using questionnaires.

Results

The results revealed greater state anxiety was associated with reduced eye gaze throughout the conversation whereas no effect of social anxiety was found. Furthermore, the results showed that the negative association between state anxiety and eye gaze was particularly strong when the confederate directly looked at the participant and also when the participant was talking. In addition, the study found main and interaction effects of conversational role and partner gaze direction on eye gaze behaviour during the conversation.

Conclusions

Together, the current results shed light on factors that influence eye gaze behaviour in a face-to-face social setting and provide initial evidence that, in the general population, eye gaze avoidance is more related to heightened state anxiety than to social anxiety.

Keywords:

Social anxiety; State anxiety; Eye gaze; Eye-tracking; Face-to-face conversation