Social Anxiety and Gaze Aversion: Relating Self- and Partner-Reported Eye Contact

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Abstract

Introduction: Previous research suggests link between higher social anxiety and gaze aversion (Horley et al., 2004; Hietanen et al., 2008) yet this has been difficult to capture in observational studies (e.g., Walters & Hope, 1998)

Method: Participants completed a self-report packet and a social interaction with another participant.

Results: Higher social anxiety related to less eye contact by self- and partner-report.

Discussion: Individuals with higher social anxiety make less eye contact during a casual conversation and this is detected by conversation partners.

Introduction

• Evidence for relationship between gaze aversion and social anxiety from eyetracking and brain imaging studies (Horley et al., 2004; Moukheiber et al., 2010)

• Behavioral observation studies have produced mixed results (Farabee et al., 1993; Walters & Hope, 1998; Weeks et al., 2011)

• The Gaze Aversion Rating Scale (GARS; Schneier et al., 2011) was created to measure gaze aversion within social anxiety

• Previous research indicates gender differences in eye contact (Exline et al., 1965).

• In the current study we:
 • Tested the relationship between social anxiety and self- and partner-report of eye contact during two short social interactions
 • Tested the predictive validity of the GARS

• Hypotheses:
 • Higher social anxiety and higher GARS scores will relate to lower levels of eye contact by self- and partner-report
 • Gender differences in eye contact

Participants

• Participants were 127 undergraduates at Washington University. Majority were:
 • Women (n = 79; 63.2%)
 • White (n = 73; 59.3%)
 • Mean age of 18.92 (SD = 1.74)

Measures

Straightforward Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (S-SIAS; Mattick & Clarke, 1998; Rodebaugh et al., 2004)
• 20-item measure of anxiety across a variety of social situations.

Gaze Aversion Rating Scale (GARS; Schneier et al., 2011)
• 34-item measure of amount of anxiety and avoidance related to eye contact across various situations.
• 17 situations; anxiety and avoidance subscales highly correlated (r = .68, p < .001).
• Similar format to Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale

Post-task Questionnaire
• 17-item measure of eye contact for self and partner
 • Assessed with three questions: overall, first interaction, and second interaction
• Also assessed perceptions of the partner

Procedure

• Two participants per session
• Participants completed self-report questionnaires
• Participants completed two 5 minute *get-to-know-you* conversations with each other. Eye contact was manipulated through instructions at halfway point.
• Rated self and partner's eye contact.
• Due to the interdependency in the dataset, analyses focus on one participant from each dyad.

Results: Gender Differences

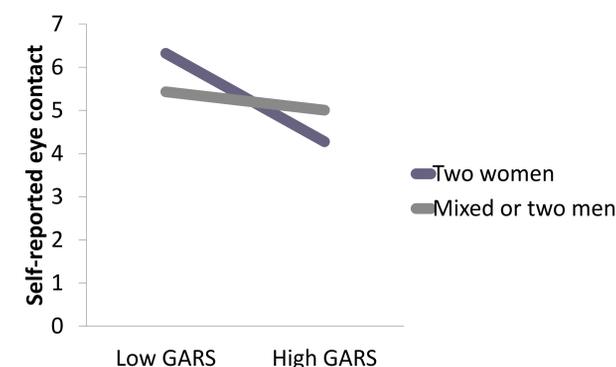|	Self-report	Partner-report	Report on partner
Men	M = 4.88 SD = 1.31	M= 4.46* SD= 1.30	M = 4.52* SD = 1.33
Women	M = 5.23 SD = 1.03	M= 5.38* SD = 1.15	M = 5.44* SD = .96

*= Significant difference, p < .01

• Significant interaction between dyad type and GARS in predicting self-reported eye contact, p = .03.
• Dyads with two women tended to differ in eye contact by GARS score, whereas other dyad types did not (figure at right).

Results: Intercorrelations among Eye Contact and Social Anxiety

	GARS	S-SIAS	EC SR	EC SR 1st	EC SR 2nd	EC PR	EC PR 1st	EC PR 2nd	KB PR	L PR
GARS	.90									
S-SIAS	.67***	.91								
EC SR	-.28**	-.37**	n/a							
EC SR 1st	-.24*	-.24**	.40***	n/a						
EC SR 2nd	-.20	-.26**	.81***	-.02	n/a					
EC PR	-.08	-.30**	.38***	.30**	.23*	n/a				
EC PR 1st	.01	-.14	.12	.23*	.06	.62***	n/a			
EC PR 2nd	-.07	-.26**	.26**	.26*	.40***	.66***	.19	n/a		
KB PR	-.12	-.34***	.09	-.09	.11	.18	.07	.28**	n/a	
L PR	-.30**	-.40**	.19	-.01	.18	.26**	.17	.32**	.77***	n/a

Note. GARS = Gaze Aversion Rating Scale; S-SIAS = Straightforward Social Interaction Anxiety Scale; EC SR = overall eye contact self-report; EC SR 1st = eye contact self-report in first interaction; EC SR 2nd = eye contact self-report in second interaction; EC PR = overall eye contact partner's rating; EC PR 1st = eye contact partner rating in first interaction; EC PR 2nd = eye contact partner rating in second interaction; KB PR = want to get to know better partner's rating; L PR = liking partner's rating. Internal consistency is listed on the diagonal.*p<.10; **p<.05; ***p< .01. **As hypothesized; Against hypothesis.**

Results: Gender Differences

Discussion

• Found support for an association between social anxiety and self-report of overall eye contact and partner-report of overall eye contact.
• Predictive validity of GARS partially supported
• Both the GARS and the SIAS were related to the partner's liking
• Women reported more eye contact than men
• Self-report of gaze anxiety and avoidance may relate more strongly to eye contact behavior when two women interact compared to two men or mixed gender
• Next steps:
 • Use independent observer coding of eye contact
 • Investigate influence of different types of interactions or partners.