

Avoidance of emotional facial expressions in social anxiety: The Approach–Avoidance Task

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Abstract

The Approach–Avoidance Task (AAT) was employed to indirectly investigate avoidance reactions to stimuli of potential social threat. Forty-three highly socially anxious individuals (HSAs) and 43 non-anxious controls (NACs) reacted to pictures of emotional facial expressions (angry, neutral, or smiling) or to control pictures (puzzles) by pulling a joystick towards themselves (approach) versus pushing it away from themselves (avoidance). HSAs showed stronger avoidance tendencies than NACs for smiling as well as angry faces, whereas no group differences were found for neutral faces and puzzles. In contrast, valence ratings of the emotional facial expressions did not differ between groups. A critical discrepancy between direct and indirect measures was observed for smiling faces: HSAs evaluated them positively, but reacted to them with avoidance.

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Introduction

Social phobia (social anxiety disorder, SAD) is a common and debilitating disorder, characterized by marked and persistent fear of one or more social and performance situations in which the person is exposed to unfamiliar people or to possible scrutiny by others (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Psychological models of social phobia emphasize the importance of cognitive factors for the etiology and maintenance of the disorder (Beck & Emery, 1985; Clark & Wells, 1995; Foa & Kozak, 1986; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Several authors have argued that social phobia is maintained by highly specific dysfunctional beliefs (e.g., Beck & Emery, 1985), which refer to negative self-evaluation (Stopa & Clark, 1993). Beliefs that facilitate the interpretation of social situations as threatening may lead to the extensive fear of being negatively evaluated. Consequently, social situations are avoided, or are endured with intense anxiety or distress (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

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Rapee and Heimberg (1997) integrated avoidance into their cognitive-behavioral model of the maintenance of social anxiety. They assume that confronted with a situation of possible threat, socially anxious individuals' dysfunctional beliefs activate cognitive (dysfunctional thoughts), physical (physiological arousal), and behavioral (overt avoidance) symptoms of anxiety. Anxious individuals continually scan the environment for signs of impending negative evaluation. If escape is impossible, they endure the situation, and they may engage in more subtle behavioral strategies with the intention to prevent possible negative evaluation from others (Wells et al., 1995). These strategies may become manifest in reduction of conversational participation and eye contact, aimed at drawing attention away from oneself and decreasing the risk of criticism. Avoidance of or within social situations acts as an important maintaining factor of social phobia, because it prevents effective processing of the situation and disconfirmation of negative beliefs (Turk, Lerner, Heimberg, & Rapee, 2001).

However, it is difficult for therapists and researchers to sufficiently inquire about avoidance strategies by directly asking anxious individuals, because not all elements of fear are accessible to introspection (Foa & Kozak, 1986). In some cases, in-situation safety behavior cannot easily be observed because it appears habitually and fast. Nevertheless, these behavioral aspects of social anxiety are a central component of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), which is the most efficient psychological intervention for SAD (Hofmann & Barlow, 2002). For the effectiveness of exposure training, it is important that patients pay full attention to the feared situation, including non-verbal social references (Foa & Kozak, 1986). For example, Wells and Papageorgiou (1998) could show that instructions to maintain the focus of attention on the feared situation increased the efficacy of exposure techniques.

Avoidance behaviors have been studied in several different ways. The most straightforward way is to ask highly socially anxious individuals (HSAs) about their reaction, as in the avoidance scale of the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (LSAS; Liebowitz, 1987; Mennin et al., 2002; Oakman, Van Ameringen, Mancini, & Farvolden, 2003). Questionnaires, however, are prone to self-presentation strategies, demand characteristics, and distortions based on social desirability. Moreover, they tend to address many different social situations without focusing on the processing of facial expressions, which are especially relevant to the socially anxious, because they are a major source of information in social interactions, conveying feedback about other people's reactions (Planalp, DeFrancisco, & Rutherford, 1996).

Experimental approaches to assess attentional biases for facial expressions in social anxiety support the occurrence of attentional avoidance to some extent. Using a visual probe task, Mansell, Clark, Ehlers, and Chen (1999) could demonstrate that socially anxious individuals showed avoidance of positive as well as negative emotional faces. Chen, Ehlers, Clark, and Mansell (2002), who used the same paradigm, found greater avoidance of negative, positive, and neutral faces than neutral household objects in patients with social phobia, compared with non-anxious controls (NACs). In contrast, using a modified dot probe task with facial stimuli, Mogg, Philippot, and Bradley (2004) failed to find avoidance of angry, happy, or neutral faces. Several methodological differences between the studies, such as different facial and control stimuli, may be responsible for the inconsistent results. Furthermore, to reconcile the discrepant findings, a limitation of the visual probe task has to be mentioned: Mogg and Bradley (1998) suggested that anxious individuals show an unstable attentional response pattern, which might be difficult to assess with this task, using only one or two different stimulus exposure durations. For this reason, monitoring of eye movements during attentional tasks seems to be a more appropriate measure (Rinck, Reinecke, Ellwart, Heuer, & Becker, 2005).

Since it is the eyes in particular that signal social threat in facial expressions (Öhman, 1986), in a feared social situation, SAs tend to avoid looking at other people, especially at their eyes. Empirical confirmation for this observation comes from a study by Horley, Williams, Gonsalvez, and Gordon (2004). Using an experimental approach, the authors recorded eye movements and fixations of HSAs while they looked at pictures of angry, sad, happy, and neutral faces. They found that compared with NACs, HSAs avoided salient facial features, particularly the eyes in angry faces, and fixated non-salient features instead. Results support the clinical view that HSAs avoid emotionally relevant facial features because of their potential threat value. The results argue against a general avoidance of non-verbal social stimuli in SAs; instead they support the view that SAs avoid facial expressions or facial features, because they fear the potential threat contained in faces. However, eye movements and fixations, as measured by Horley et al. (2004), are limited because to a large extent, they reflect controlled aspects of avoidance behavior.

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