
When in doubt, let's avoid ! General avoidance of faces, postures and neutral objects in social anxiety.

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Abstract

Numerous studies have highlighted the role of attentional biases towards facial stimuli in social phobia. Paradoxically, although body postures may represent cues indicating social threat, the cognitive processing of human bodies in social anxiety has not yet been investigated. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to compare the neural processing of happy, angry and neutral faces, bodies (in postures typical of neutrality, anger or happiness) and neutral objects (vases or chairs), in 16 participants reporting social phobia and 16 healthy participants. To this aim, an attention-shifting paradigm was used in which faces, bodies or objects were cues presented at fixation for 600ms. Participants had to stare at these cues and then identify a target appearing randomly for 50ms at four possible locations. The behavioural data show that highly socially anxious participants were slower to respond to targets, regardless of which stimulus category they belonged to. These longer reaction times in socially anxious participants were correlated with diminished P1 amplitudes for all cues. These results suggest that the slower response latencies in highly socially anxious participants might result from an attempt to avoid processing the cues, as indicated by the reduced P1 amplitude. Moreover, the extent of this pattern (which was observable for not only facial and postural stimuli, but also for common objects), disconfirms the theory of specific cognitive biases for emotional or social stimuli in social anxiety. Rather, it may suggest the deployment of a global avoidance strategy in performing tasks involving social stimuli.

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