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The influence of emotion and empathy on gaze patterns when exploring controlled static and ecological dynamic faces


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Introduction

The influence of facial emotions on gaze patterns when exploring faces is still debated. Previous research reported that the relative proportion of fixations on the different face areas is (1,2) or is not (3,4) modulated by the expression processed. While most previous studies used static face images or simulated dynamic facial expressions (3), we propose to test how these findings generalize to more ecological spontaneous dynamic expressions of emotion.

Methods

We recorded the eye movements of 170 participants, while they categorized the valence of static and dynamic emotional faces. Static emotions were performed by actors from the classic Karolinska Directed Emotional Faces database (5), while dynamic emotions were genuine natural facial expressions from ordinary people, filmed in natural but standardized conditions (DynEmo database, (6)). Participants completed a questionnaire to evaluate their empathy profile. We used the Questionnaire of Cognitive and Affective Empathy (7) and clustered participants into four empathy profiles: Mature (N=55, 15 males), Affactive (N=45, 25 males), Cognitive (N=44, 30 males), and Low (N=22, 15 males).

Results

We found strong similarities between the gaze patterns in static (Fig 1) and dynamic (Fig 2) conditions. We used Linear Mixed Models with fixation rate in ROI as response, gender, emotion, and empathy profile as fixed effects and participants id as random effect. We found a main effect of emotion on fixation rate on all facial regions of interest (left and right eye, nasion, nose, mouth, rest of the face).

In both static and dynamic stimuli, participants in the Mature empathy group gazed more at the left eye than participants in the Low empathy group. In static stimuli Hedge’s g = 0.50, 95%CI=[0.43 0.56], in dynamic stimuli Hedge’s g = 0.34, 95%CI=[0.22 0.46].

Conclusions

Our results suggest that moderate differences in gaze behavior like the ones associated with the observer’s empathy profile can generalize from a classic and well controlled static dataset, to a more ecological and dynamic dataset. Furthermore, we did not find any effect of gender on fixation rates. This suggests that the previously reported stronger left eye bias in females (8,9) may well be the due to women being on average more empathetic than men.

References

[9] Soklin et al. A left eye bias for female faces. IEEE Knowledge and Smart Technology