

GAZING AS A DETERMINANT OF EARLY SOCIAL REFERENCING

Hildie Cohen, Jane Yang, Tricia Striano, & Philippe Rochat

Psychology Department, Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322

Episodes of shared attention, or joint engagement, first begin to appear at around 6-months (e.g., Bakeman & Adamson, 1984). These behaviors become more common toward the end of the first year as does the proclivity for infants to orient their gaze toward adults when they encounter ambiguous situations (i.e., social referencing). Whereas the purpose of looking toward the adult in joint engagement may be to share attention with an object, social referencing is commonly thought to provide infants with emotional cues about uncertain situations, events, or objects. The aim of this study was to determine how adults' gaze direction determines the infants' inclination to share attention or demonstrate social referencing to an adult.

Seven month-old (N=20) and 10-month-old (N=20) infants participated in the study. Infants were seated in a highchair facing an experimenter. The experimenter (E) placed a stuffed toy dog on the highchair tray for 3 minutes. The dog barked at 30 second intervals for 1-2 seconds via a remote control operated by E. After placing the dog on the tray, for half of the infants of each age group, E's head was turned 45 degrees away from the infant as she read a book that was placed on a table next to the infant (Gaze Away Condition). In this condition, E did not acknowledge the dog's bark and remained focused on the book. For the other half, E gazed toward the infant throughout the study (Gaze Toward Condition). In the Gaze Toward Condition, E acknowledged the dog's bark with a simple comment, such as "wow" or "yes" only after the infant had achieved eye contact with her.

Results show that overall, infants of both age groups tend to look more toward the experimenter when the dog barked in the Gaze Toward Condition compared to the Gaze Away Condition. However, only the 10-month-olds in the Gaze Away Condition tended to look more toward the book the experimenter was focused on. We conclude that between 7 and 10-months of age, there is a progressive differentiation in the attention infants pay to adults depending on their gazing which specifies reciprocity. Therefore, by 10-months gazing clearly becomes a determinant of social referencing.