Humans are biased to look at eyes, not heads

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Images of people and monsters, from Dungeons & Dragons, which were used in the experiment (eyes circled here only).

New research published in *Biology Letters* today shows that humans are biased to look at eyes... even those of headless monsters!

The findings from the universities of British Columbia and Essex rule out the possibility that the well-known human bias to look at eyes is in

fact a bias simply to look at the middle of faces where the eyes happen to be.

Julian Levy, 14, who had the idea for the study at the age of 12, helped scientists to select images from the fantasy game Dungeons & Dragons, showing either people, 'humanoids' (with eyes in the middle of their faces), or 'monsters' (eyes positioned elsewhere). The focus of 22 volunteers eyes were then tracked over their first ten 'eye-fixations' while being shown each of the 36 images.

The results show that humans look early and often at the eyes- even those of monsters. For all pictures, the participants looked to the centre of the image first. Second and subsequent fixations demonstrated a preferential bias to look at the eyes. Fixations moved vertically up to the eyes of humans and humanoids. In sharp contrast, they remained centralised for monsters. Thus the eyes are being selected, and not the head. This bias allows observers to follow gaze. Thus the human brain seems specialized for social, behaviourally relevant information.

More information: Study online: dx.doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2012.0850

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