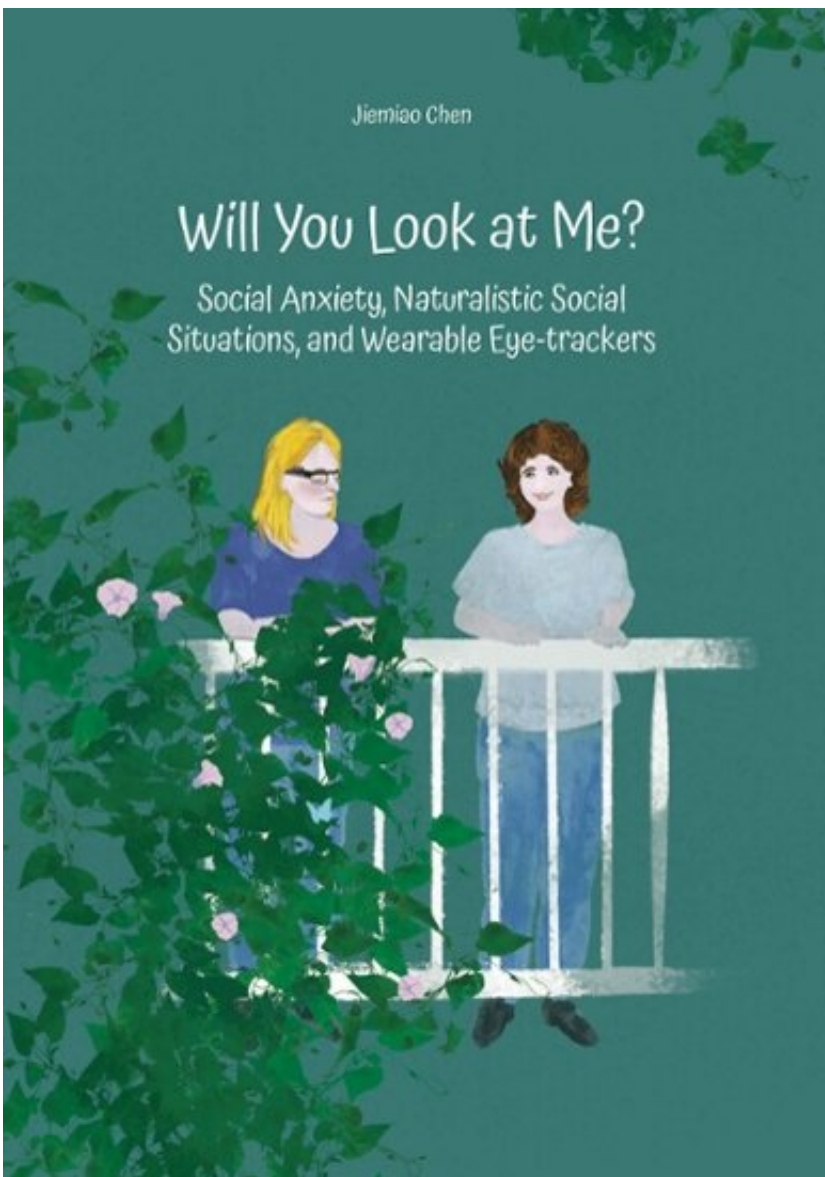


'Will you look at me?' How socially anxious people avoid eye contact

April 24 2023, by Hilje Papma



Credit: Leiden University

Individuals suffering from social anxiety disorder (SAD) consistently avoid eye contact. However, in a non-clinical population, gaze avoidance in socially anxious individuals depends on social situations, Jiemiao Chen saw in a series of experiments, for which she used wearable eye-trackers. On April 25, she'll defend her Ph.D.

Social [anxiety](#)—anxiety about scrutinization and negative evaluation by others—is common. The most extreme form is SAD, which strikingly impairs your daily life. "But it is a [continuum](#)," says developmental psychologist Jiemiao Chen. "Some people hardly suffer from [social anxiety](#), others suffer a lot."

During her Master's studies in Shanghai, friends of hers struggled with it, and she saw how difficult it was for them. "It was just never talked about, while it can get in your way enormously, for example at a job interview." To further investigate social anxiety, she came to Leiden for her doctoral research.

Gaze avoidance

One of the overt marks often associated with social anxiety is avoiding [eye contact](#). Chen says, "This is interpreted as a safety-seeking strategy during social interactions. And it works counterproductively: By using such strategies you expect to be liked and accepted by others, but people will actually find your behavior peculiar, confirming your anxiety."

However, the relationship between social anxiety and making eye contact was not straightforward, Chen's research revealed. People with SAD may avoid eye contact across all situations, but this is not so clear for someone who "just" scores high on social anxiety. She therefore decided to focus on the non-clinical population and compare high and low scoring individuals, using state-of-the-art technology to measure eye movements very precisely: wearable eye-trackers. "The big advantage is

that you can use them in natural [social situations](#)."

'When was the last time you cried in public?'

The first experiment, in front of a projection screen with a pre-recorded audience, revealed that socially anxious individuals avoided looking at the audience only when delivering a speech (or, giving a pitch) but not when simply looking at the audience without speaking. In contrast, persons suffering from SAD are known to avert their gaze even when looking at a picture.

The second experiment was a face-to-face conversation on topics ranging from comparatively impersonal ("What is your favorite holiday?") to intimate ("When was the last time you cried in public?") subjects. Participants also took turns listening and narrating.

Chen says, "We found, for example, that all participants looked less at the interlocutor when telling about personal matters. But also that those scoring high on social anxiety made less eye contact than the others throughout the conversation."

Who may be at risk?

The main conclusion of Chen's thesis is that socially anxious people do indeed avoid eye contact in real life situations, and their gaze behavior is flexible. "So we can use gaze behavior to detect early who may be at risk for [social anxiety disorder](#). Moreover, it is important to consider situational factors while investigating [gaze](#) behavior."

Jiemiao Chen is now working as a postdoc in the same research group, to study eye contact in children as well. "We still know very little about the development of making eye contact in general."

Provided by Leiden University

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