

Abstract

Social functioning impairments are one of the established hallmarks and a key aspect of recovery in schizophrenia. Meanwhile, recent research findings have identified social motivational deficits in schizophrenia using self-reported measures, with mixed results suggesting its possible contribution towards social functioning impairments observed. This study aimed to investigate the behavioral tendencies towards emotional faces and the impact of gaze direction on these tendencies using an implicit approach-avoidance task among 69 patients with first-episode psychosis (FEP). Additionally, the study explored the cross-sectional and longitudinal relationship between these behavioral tendencies and social functioning over six months.

The key findings revealed effects of averted gaze in amplifying initial behavioral tendencies towards angry and happy faces at baseline, contributing to an avoidance bias towards happy faces with averted gaze, and a consistent implicit tendency to approach angry faces with averted gaze. The behavioral biases correlated with cross-sectional depressive symptoms at baseline, yet no significant relationship between social motivation and social functioning was found either cross-sectionally or longitudinally. Limitations of methodological design and possible implications of results were also discussed.

Keywords: social motivation, social functioning, schizophrenia, first-episode psychosis, approach-avoidance task