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INFANT GAZE AVERTING  
DURING SOCIAL INTERACTION

A Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science in Psychology  
at Massey University

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ABSTRACT

The general aim of the present research was to investigate infant gaze averting during social interaction. Two preliminary hypotheses were examined: first, that infant gaze averting would occur spontaneously during social interaction, and second that any gaze averting would increase alongside developmental progress.

A short-term (nine week) longitudinal case-study approach with home visits was planned. Conducting the research in the participants' homes was novel for this area of study. Prior studies had all been conducted in a laboratory setting. Six mother-infant dyads agreed to participate. The primiparous mothers were all full-time caregivers with an age range of 21-26 years. The healthy, full-term infants were all aged approximately three months at commencement. There were three of each gender.

Visits to each pair occurred every nine/ten days. The following three sources of data collection were implemented: interview, observation and daily diary recording by the mother. Target behaviours noted were: episodes of active gaze averting and new developmental milestones (according to a developmental checklist formulated for the present study). Other relevant qualitative information was also gathered at each visit.

Although basically a qualitative study, quantitative data was incorporated in the form of graphs of each infant's gaze averting frequency and developmental progress. The main findings here were:

infant gaze averting did occur during interaction with mother and other caregivers for all six cases; the prediction that there is a relationship between gaze averting and developmental progress was not supported. Descriptive data provided an interesting and unexpected outcome. This was the discovery of three separate styles of gaze averting. These were described, their various criteria identified, and a classification system developed.

The results of the present study have important practical implications. They present a challenge to one current theory of psychopathology which maintains that gaze averting is abnormal and may be a precursor of autism. This has ramifications for the present diagnostic system and treatment of some childhood psychopathologies. The findings of the present study indicate that a re-think of perspectives regarding gaze averting (of all styles) may be required.

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