

Visuomotor Behavior in Schizophrenia

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Summary

The diagnosis of "positive" schizophrenia relies heavily on reported symptoms. Behavioral signs, however, play an important role in "negative" schizophrenia. Their advantage is that they can be assessed objectively and quantitatively. Thus, their measurement can improve both the precision of the diagnostic process and the phenomenological basis of biologically oriented research. The assessment of various types of visuomotor behavior (e.g., eye fixations, saccades, smooth-pursuit eye movements) with different functions and anatomic organization, and of their trait- and state-related disturbances in schizophrenia are an example of this kind of research. Whether analyzed from an interactional or an individual perspective, visuomotor behavior is best understood within a broader neurobiological frame of reference. In combination with brain imaging techniques it is an important tool with which to explore brain behavior relationships in schizophrenia and other related psychoses.

Visuomotorisches Verhalten schizophrener Patienten

Die Diagnostik schizophrener Erkrankungen stützt sich auf Erleben und Verhalten. Deren relatives diagnostisches Gewicht variiert jedoch im Hinblick auf nosologische Unterformen, die eher durch Plus- bzw. Minus-Symptomatik gekennzeichnet sind. Die Erfassung objektiver und quantifizierbarer Verhaltensmerkmale bedeutet generell für den diagnostischen Prozeß und eine biologisch orientierte psychiatrische Forschung eine wesentliche Bereicherung. Die Untersuchung verschiedener Arten visuomotorischen Verhaltens (z. B. Fixation, Sakkaden, Augenfolgebewegungen) mit unterschiedlicher Funktion und anatomischer Organisation stellt ein Beispiel dieses Forschungsansatzes dar. Das Verständnis interaktioneller wie individueller Störungen visuomotorischen Verhaltens erschließt sich am ehesten in einem neurobiologischen Bezugsrahmen. In Kombination z. B. mit modernen bildgebenden Verfahren stellt die Analyse visuomotorischen Verhaltens eine wichtige Strategie zur Aufklärung patho- und syndromgenetischer Mechanismen der Schizophrenie und anderer Funktionspsychosen dar.

Introduction

The diagnosis of schizophrenia is based on psychopathologic signs (nonverbal behavior) and symptoms. However, the weighting of these cross-sectional elements in the diagnostic process varies from one classificatory system to the other. While, for instance, *Bleuler's* (1911) "basic symptoms" of schizophrenia ("the 4 A's": affect, autism, ambivalence, association) pertain to observable signs, *Schneider's* (1950) first-rank symptoms pertain to reported symptoms (e.g., delusional perceptions). Symptoms in particular have become an integral part of modern day diagnostic classification systems, e.g., DSM-III (*APA*, 1980); a development which has been criticized by *Alpert* (1985). He states that "greater emphasis could have been placed on efforts to develop objective measures in areas in which they are clinically important and technologically feasible". Most psychopathologic rating instruments, on the other hand, comprise both signs and symptoms. The former are considered extensively in the Scale for the Assessment of Negative Symptoms (*SANS*, *Andreasen*, 1982). These signs (e.g., unchanging facial expression, decreased body movements, paucity of gestures,

poor eye contact, vocal inflexions, poverty of speech, latency of response) are prevalent in so-called type II (negative) schizophrenia as opposed to type I (positive) schizophrenia, which is characterized by the prevalence of self-reported symptoms (*Crow*, 1985). For both types, there is some evidence of differences in structural brain deficit, involvement of DA-mechanisms, neuroleptic response, and prognosis (e.g., *Andreasen* and *Olsen*, 1982), which underscores the clinical and theoretical value of subtyping schizophrenia according to the prevalence of signs or symptoms.

Generally, the advantage of signs is that they are "objective, observable, and at least potentially accessible to measurement... Measurement of the behavior that are the sign of the disorder will improve diagnostic precision and, potentially, understanding of their underlying processes" (*Alpert*, 1985). Thus, objectively measured behavioral signs can give access to "the neurology of schizophrenia" and its underlying brain mechanisms (*Nasrallah* and *Weinberger*, 1986).

Visuomotor behavior – general principles

Major areas of research in nonverbal behavior are facial action, gaze, vocal communication, gestures, and body motion (overview in *Scherer* and *Ekman*, 1982). Depend-

ing on the researcher's perspective, visuomotor behavior (gaze) as well as the other behavior types can be analyzed from an individual or an interactional point of view. Neither form of analysis is exclusive, but differs in the way it deals with intervening variables of the social context of the behavior. The differences in defining subunits of behavior are intimately related to these differences in perspective. While in the study of interpersonal relationships gross measures of eye contact (molar behavior) might be sufficient, the research focus of a neurophysiologist might be on such behavioral subunits (molecular behavior) as fixations and saccades (Scherer and Ekman, 1982a). Since visuomotor behavior has many functions, such as exploration of the environment, participation in body movements, and postural stabilization, communicative characteristics, such as effect on people (Levy-Schoen, 1981), are only part of its functions and are more determined by the receiver than by the sender's intentions (Wagner et al., 1981). Therefore, different aspects of visuomotor behavior have to be assessed separately under varying and standardized experimental conditions.

Types of visuomotor behavior

Socially significant visuomotor behavior, characterized by an individual's tendency to look at (into) the eyes, eye region (face), or away from his interaction partner, has been termed gaze (Exline and Fehr, 1982). Gaze, more generally defined, means the position of the eye in space, which under natural conditions is the result of the position of the eye in its orbit, and the position of the head in space (Leigh and Zee, 1983). Consequently, Exline and Fehr (1982) state that "regardless of how we label our variable, what we actually record are eye fixations, their duration, and the point or points of fixation-time and location, such are the raw materials of our measures".

Together with interspersed eye fixations, repetitive saccades, i.e., in direction, amplitude and velocity pre-programmed conjugate eye movements, form a "scanpath", which actively guides the intake of visual information. Thus, as defined above, gaze is always part of a scanpath, which varies interindividually and intraindividually under different viewing conditions (Yarbus, 1967; Noton and Stark, 1971).

Eye movements can be best understood by considering their functions. Vestibulo-ocular reflex and optokinetic nystagmus act to hold images of the perceived world steady on the retina. With the evolution of the fovea and frontal vision, saccadic, smooth pursuit, and vergence eye movements became necessary. These eye movements are partly under voluntary control and—working together—acquire and hold images of objects of interest on the fovea (Leigh and Zee, 1983).

Functional and anatomic organization

Time and location of eye fixations (corresponding to gaze duration and gaze direction) subserve monitoring (channel) as well as regulatory and expressive (signal) functions in social interaction (Kendon, 1967). Although both functions are intimately related (Wagner et al., 1981), their involvement differs according to the experimental situation (e.g., visual search task vs. social interaction). With respect to

the monitoring function of gaze, an eye fixation at a particular location is a natural observable unit of behavior (Russo, 1978), which approximately corresponds in timing to the simultaneously occurring perceptual-cognitive process. Therefore, fixation duration varies with the computation-to-acquisition ratio, i.e., the relationship between stimulus computation time and stimulus acquisition rate of a task: the lower the computation-to-acquisition ratio, the briefer the duration, as for instance in a search task (Russo, 1978). On the other hand, prolonged fixation durations occur in tasks, where the computation-to-acquisition ratio is high (e.g., problem solving, decision making) or where anticipation strategies based on stored structures, completed computations, and peripheral perception are dysfunctional (Russo, 1978). Thus, durations of eye fixations are not related to cognitive processes per se (Just and Carpenter, 1976) but are determined by the task-specific interaction of top-down and bottom-up processes as well as by intervening variables such as attention.

In terms of the underlying anatomic structures, voluntary saccadic eye movement commands are mediated by parallel pathways from the frontal eye fields (Brodmann's area 8) and superior colliculus that converge in the brain stem (pontine paramedian reticular formation, PPRF). While the frontal eye fields are more concerned with shifts of gaze that voluntarily direct visual attention, the superior colliculi mediate involuntary, reflexive shifts of gaze for orientation toward visual stimuli that suddenly appear within the environment (Zee, 1984). The frontal eye fields are reciprocally connected with the posterior parietal cortex (area 7), which is modulated by limbic influence (Mesulam and Geschwind, 1978) and is functionally related to selective visual attention (Lynch et al., 1977; Bushnell et al., 1981; Mountcastle et al., 1984). The cerebellum functions in the control of saccade metrics.

Smooth pursuit eye movements are controlled by the parieto-occipital association cortex and the cerebellar flocculus; the frontal eye fields are probably not directly involved with these eye movements. Intact vestibulo-ocular reflex is related to intact labyrinths, and the optokinetic nystagmus is controlled by brain stem, cerebellum, and cortex (partial field optokinetic nystagmus).

Measurement

Gaze variables such as direction, frequency, and duration are normally assessed by the receiver or an observer, either in live or recorded form (Exline and Fehr, 1982). The accuracy with which the direction of gaze can be judged seems to depend on gaze duration, head position, distance between sender and receiver, etc. (Krüger and Hückstedt, 1969). Although the reliability and validity of observer ratings in interaction research may be sufficient and can even be raised by rater training (Exline and Fehr, 1982), objective measurement is desirable for more detailed analysis of gaze variables under experimental task conditions. Since, in this kind of research, it is of interest to know the fixation point of the subject as it falls in space rather than the position of the eye with respect to the head, "point of regard measurement" can be applied, which records corneal reflection and pupil centre position by means of an external infrared light source and a video camera (Young and Sheena, 1975). This method is sufficient with respect to spatial and temporal resolution ($0.5^\circ - 1^\circ$, 20 msec), and allows

the additional measurement of pupil diameter as a way of assessing task-evoked processing load (Beatty, 1982).

Methods for measuring eye movements relative to head position are electro-oculogram and infrared reflection techniques with a head-mounted device or with the head fixed in a chin rest. Strengths and weaknesses of the different methods have to be evaluated with respect to the specific research purposes (Young and Sheena, 1975; Meinenberg, 1987).

Visuomotor behavior in schizophrenia

Various motor abnormalities in schizophrenia, specifically related to thought disturbances, have been reported by Manschreck (1986). In particular, visuomotor abnormalities have been observed already in the pre-neuroleptic era. Stevens (1978) reports on signs of ocular disturbance, such as staring with or without gaze aversion, eye-head synkinesia, episodic unexplained lateral glances, grossly interrupted ocular pursuit movements, defective convergence, and spontaneous lateral saccades in almost 80% of 44 (minimum one month medication-free) schizophrenics. Various visuomotor abnormalities are thus a frequent finding in schizophrenics, possibly related to the underlying disease process. Systematic findings will be given in more detail in the following chapters.

Saccadic eye movements

Diefendorf and Dodge (1908), who were the first to report on disturbed smooth pursuit eye movements in schizophrenia, reported that saccadic eye movements were intact. More recent studies also report unimpaired saccadic latencies and velocities (Iacono et al., 1981; Levin et al., 1981, 1982; Mather and Putchat, 1982/3), which contrast with prolonged manual reaction times (Nuechterlein, 1977). However, Levin et al. (1981) found that schizophrenics' saccadic latencies increased relatively more and saccadic velocities relatively less than those of normal controls in case of stimulus displacements greater than 10° to the right periphery. Although these effects were slight and nosologically unspecific, they may shed light on asymmetrically dysfunctional cerebral mechanisms of attention.

Conjugate lateral eye movements (CLEMs) are interpreted as a concomitant of contralateral hemisphere activation during hemisphere-specific cognitive task performance (Kinsbourne, 1972). Although the paradigm for eliciting these eye movements as well as the supposed underlying brain mechanisms are a matter of debate (Ehrlichman and Weinberger, 1978), the finding that (paranoid) schizophrenics exhibit more frequently right-sided CLEMs has been related to left-hemisphere dysfunction and overactivation in schizophrenics with positive symptoms (Gruzelić, 1983). On the other hand, the findings of Cegalis et al. (1977) concerning the selectivity of attention in the functional visual field demonstrate that stimulus detection in the (right) periphery of the visual field is especially reduced in chronic schizophrenics. Since attention to the periphery is related to contralateral parietal cortical structures (see above), the finding of impaired saccades to the right periphery might also be related to left-hemisphere dysfunction.

In chronic schizophrenics, too, prolonged saccadic latencies have been reported (Schmidt-Burgk et al., 1982; Schmid-Burgk, 1984). Done and Frith (1984) observed longer latencies in strategic (voluntary) but not in automatic (reflexive) saccades, which points to possible dysfunctions of frontal cortical command structures. Mackert (1988) found a positive relationship between negative symptoms and saccadic latencies. All of these results underline the necessity of paying greater attention to intervening variables, such as stimulus conditions, syndrome, and illness phase. Similarly, the influence of neuroleptic medication has to be considered, since it seems to transitorily lower saccade velocity under acute treatment conditions (Schmidt-Burgk et al., 1982; Schmid-Burgk, 1984).

A relatively consistent finding in schizophrenia is an increase of dysmetric saccades, mostly under-shooting the target with correcting saccades (Levin et al., 1981; Schmid-Burgk et al., 1982; Mather and Putchat, 1982/3; Schmid-Burgk, 1984), as well as a higher rate of nonfixation, i.e., deviation of the gaze from a stationary target (Mialet and Pichot, 1981; Schmid-Burgk et al., 1982; Mather and Putchat, 1982/3; Schmid-Burgk, 1984). Instability of fixation, which is related to certain psychopathologic symptoms such as tension (Gaebel et al., 1986), is considered by some authors to be a nosologically unspecific characteristic of psychiatric inpatients, whereas saccadic dysmetria is considered to be related to a schizophrenia-specific attentional deficit (Schmidt-Burgk, 1984). Mather (1986) was able to show that normals without visual context information (in the dark) showed an increase in saccadic dysmetria similar to schizophrenics. She concludes that schizophrenics suffer from a general deficit of attention and information processing rather than from a pure oculomotor disturbance. Since brain stem and cerebellar mechanisms in schizophrenia seem to be intact (Levin et al., 1982a; Levin, 1983), these eye movement dysfunctions have been related to deficits in tuning of cortical (e.g., frontal and parietal) functions.

Smooth-pursuit eye movements

The early observations of disturbed smooth-pursuit eye movements in schizophrenia by Diefendorf and Dodge (1908) were confirmed by Couch and Fox (1934) and White (1938), but were forgotten until the late 1960s, when Holzman rediscovered the phenomenon (Holzman, 1983). Since then, disturbed smooth-pursuit eye movements in schizophrenia have been confirmed with different recording techniques (electro-oculography, infrared reflection technique) and different target characteristic and scoring methods (Lipton et al., 1983). Evidence supporting the suggestion that smooth-pursuit eye movement disruption is a biological marker for the liability to schizophrenia, can be summarized as follows (Erlenmeyer-Kimling, 1987). Smooth-pursuit eye movements have been found to be disrupted in some 50–85% of schizophrenic patients in contrast to about 8% of the general population; eye tracking performance has been shown to be stable over time in normal and psychiatric samples and to be dysfunctional in remitted schizophrenics; about 40–50% of the first-degree relatives of schizophrenic patients show the dysfunction; concordance for eye tracking dysfunction in monozygotic twins who are discordant for schizophrenia is about double the concordance rate for dysfunction

in dizygotic twins who are clinically discordant for schizophrenia; the dysfunction is more frequent in high-risk children of schizophrenic mothers (Mather, 1985); occurrence of the dysfunction in "normals" is more frequently related to schizotypal personality disorder (Siever et al., 1984); the occurrence of the dysfunction in 30–50% of patients with manic psychosis is related to treatment with lithium, with only about 10–13% of the first-degree relatives of patients with major affective disorders having eye tracking dysfunction. Since eye tracking dysfunctions occur in relatives of schizophrenics, who themselves do not show the dysfunction, Matthysse et al. (1986) have suggested that both schizophrenia and deviant eye tracking may be expressions of a "latent trait".

Since neuroleptic medication, motivational factors, and attentional factors do not play a significant role in eye tracking dysfunction (Lipton et al., 1983), the question arises as to "what eye tracking dysfunctions tell us about schizophrenia" (Holzman, 1983). Levin (1984), using the infrared reflection technique, suggests that distinguishable eye-tracking dysfunctions (saccadic intrusions), which cannot be suppressed by attention-enhancing procedures, are the result of frontal disinhibition of the saccade system. While lesions restricted to the frontal eye fields of trained monkeys cause only subtle changes in saccadic performance, frontal lesions in man are associated with difficulties in voluntary contralateral saccades, in voluntary visual search, and in suppression of unwanted saccades to a contralateral visual stimulus (Leigh and Zee, 1983).

Gaze and mutual gaze

With increasing complexity of visuomotor behavior, such as, for example, in social interaction and visual exploration (scanning), the perceptual-cognitive (monitoring) function of gaze becomes more involved. During interviews, for instance, eye contact (mutual gaze) in schizophrenics has been reported to be reduced in frequency as well as in duration (Rutter and Stephenson, 1972). However, this seems to be a state-dependent phenomenon related to acute symptomatology, normalizing under neuroleptic drugs in treatment responders, but not in nonresponders (Meyn and Renfordt, 1986). It is still uncertain whether this visuomotor abnormality is just part of a more general deficit in interpersonal skills, whether it is related to deficits in facial discrimination and emotional perception (Feinberg et al., 1986) as well as to dysfunctions in selective attention and information processing, or whether it is an adaptive strategy for coping with sensory overload or hyperarousal. Given the functional importance of the dopaminergic system in schizophrenia and possibly in visual attention (Matthysse, 1978), it might also be speculated that, depending on the functional state of this system (unblocked or pharmacologically blocked), the abovementioned computation-to-acquisition ratio, corresponding to the availability of anticipation strategies (e.g., peripheral vision), will be differently affected, leading to contrary changes in gaze characteristics and scanning behavior. However, these assumptions can only be tested when visual behavior is assessed under different stimulus conditions with varying attentional demands and with standardized pharmacological interventions.

The author studied the performance of schizophrenics in visual target-distractor discrimination tasks (lists

of letters) using point-of-regard measurement (Gaebel et al., 1986; Gaebel, 1987). With respect to elementary scanpath characteristics (mean duration of and distance between fixations), there was evidence of two scanning types, which were labelled "minimal scanning" and "extensive scanning" respectively (following the example of Silverman, 1964). These types were related to different types of psychopathology and attentional performance. Minimal scanning, characterized by a significantly longer duration of fixation (prolonged computation time) and a shorter mean scanpath between fixations (restricted functional visual field), was related to more pronounced negative symptoms (emotional withdrawal), poorer search performance, and more frequent anomalous eye dominance (left-eyedness). This scanning type has been described in chronic schizophrenia (Kojima et al., 1986), mentally retarded children (Reinert, 1983), and patients with lesions of the frontal lobes (Luria et al., 1966). With respect to gaze direction, minimal scanners were characterized by a stronger left-sided deviation of their gaze axis during search. Since the amount of leftward gaze deviation was significantly related to negative symptoms of the SANS (unchanging facial expression, paucity of gestures, vocal inflexions, latency of response), these findings partly confirm the hypothesis that negative symptoms might be related to right-hemisphere overactivation (Gruzelier, 1983; Alpert, 1985). Behavioral abnormalities such as "gaze avoidance" might thus be primarily related to altered brain functions in psychopathologically characterized nosological subgroups.

Conclusions

Different types of visuomotor behavior are characteristically disturbed in schizophrenia. Most researchers agree that these dysfunctions have to be interpreted with reference to a more general deficit in attention and information processing. Gaze abnormalities in social interaction might thus better be conceptualized within this broader frame of reference than within the narrow concept of interpersonal skills. Concerning the question of underlying brain dysfunctions as a clue to pathogenetic mechanisms of the disorder, the answer may come from the assessment of different visuomotor behavior types and the simultaneous application of brain-imaging techniques. Using rCBF measurement, Fox et al. (1985), for example, have demonstrated that the frontal eye fields are involved in all kinds of voluntary saccades in normals. Bartfai et al. (1985) observed that eye-tracking dysfunction in schizophrenia is related to disturbances in visual search (trailmaking). Above all, the hypothesis of frontal dysfunction in schizophrenia (Levin, 1984a) is worth testing using visuomotor behavior as a "cortical stress test" (Berman, 1987). The assessment of visuomotor behavior should be regarded as an important tool with which to further explore the brain-behavior relationship in schizophrenia and other functional psychoses.

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