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A new look at past, present and future investigations of human attention

The eyes of others are important to us, and we care about where they are directed. In recent years a number of studies have sought to examine social attention in the lab. These studies demonstrate that people attend automatically to where other people are looking. They also reveal fundamental limitations in our past conceptualizations of human attention. But do these studies reflect social attention as it naturally occurs? I suggest that they do not because the lab studies are so simple and controlled that the situational complexity that is critical to social attention is lost. A new research approach, called cognitive ethology, may help to close the gap between lab experimentation and natural behaviour. Some very recent instances of this approach are presented and discussed.

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