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Social Indexing: How the People Around Us Aid Cognition

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Abstract: We hypothesise the existence of a specific attentional mechanism, social indexing, that directs gaze towards people in our environment who are relevant to moment by moment cognitive processing. Whilst Festinger (1954) proposed that individuals will depend upon and conform to similar others in times of uncertainty, the social indexing hypothesis posits that individuals will actively seek out information from those we perceive to be able to provide socially relevant information. Such an attentional mechanism would allow cognition to be situated in both the physical and social world (Hutchins, 1995). In an early demonstration, Crosby, Monin and Richardson (2008) showed that gaze is directed towards the target of potentially offensive remarks when they might provide an informative response. We discuss whether these results extend to both positive and negative remarks, and whether participants' confidence in their ability to interpret social situations will result in more or less social indexing behaviour.