

Social environment elicits lateralized navigational paths in two populations of typically developing children



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Accepted 21 July 2014

Keywords:
Laterality
Cerebral lateralization
Social environment
Children

ABSTRACT

The current study provides the first evidence of human lateralized navigation of a social space within a naturalistic environment. We employed a quantitative, observational approach and report on a detailed set of nearly 700 independent navigational routes from two separate child populations consisting of over 300 typically developing children, aged five to fourteen years. The navigational path was considered across the sagittal plane (left, right) around three distinct target types (peer, adult and object). Both child populations expressed a significant bias for choosing a rightward navigational path around a human target (e.g. peer, adult) and no lateral preference for navigation around fixed, inanimate objects. A rightward navigational path provides an advantage for the left visual field and the right hemisphere, facilitating both the production and perception of social-emotion stimuli. The findings are consistent with evidence from studies of non-human animal species demonstrating that the social environment elicits predictable lateralized behavior, and support an early evolutionary delineation of functional processing by the two hemispheres.

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1. Introduction

A growing body of evidence across a range of animal species demonstrates a bias to keep conspecifics situated on their left side. A left eye bias to monitor conspecifics is widespread across a range of vertebrates including: fish (De Santi, Sovrano, Bisazza, & Vallortigara, 2001; Sovrano, Bisazza, & Vallortigara, 2001), toads (Robins, Lippolis, Bisazza, Vallortigara, & Rogers, 1998), lizards (Deckel, 1995; Hews & Worthington, 2001), pigeons (Nagy, Àkos, Biro, & Vicsek, 2010), chicks (Vallortigara, 1992; Vallortigara & Andrew, 1991) and beluga whales (Karenina et al., 2010), and may represent a common evolutionary behavioral manifestation reflective of a right hemisphere dominance for processing social stimuli and arousing situations (for a review, see Rosa Salva, Regolin, Mascalonzi, & Vallortigara, 2012). The findings from these studies support a hypothesis that lateralized perceptual behaviors may have derived from an early delineation of a right hemisphere dominance for responding to unexpected and behaviorally relevant stimuli (e.g. predator) and a left hemisphere dominance for well learned sequences of actions (e.g. feeding) (MacNeilage, Rogers, & Vallortigara, 2009; Rogers, 2000a; Rogers, Vallortigara, & Andrew, 2013). This type of asymmetric behavioral activity might have an

adaptive value, facilitating simple reflexive and automatic responses to increase the survival of individuals (Rutherford & Lindell, 2011). The appropriation of specialized processing to operate in parallel within the left and right hemispheres is thought to facilitate neural efficiency: allowing different functions to operate in parallel, decreasing the duplication of functioning across hemispheres and eliminating the initiation of simultaneous and incompatible responses (Rogers, Zucca, & Vallortigara, 2004; Tommasi, 2009; Vallortigara & Rogers, 2005).

Right hemisphere dominance patterns have been reported for face perception and social recognition in a range of animal species. For example, a left gaze bias for face perception (e.g. looking time of centrally presented faces) has been reported in: sheep (Peirce, Leigh, & Kendrick, 2000), dogs and rhesus monkeys (Guo, Meints, Hall, Hall, & Mills, 2009), chimpanzees (Morris & Hopkins, 1993), and humans (behavioral study: Burt & Perret, 1997; neuro-imaging: Kanwisher, Tong, & Nakayama, 1998). A left motor bias (right hemisphere dominance) has also been reported for the production of facial expressions in marmosets (Hook-Costigan & Rogers, 1998) macaques (Hauser, 1993), baboons (Wallez & Vauclair, 2011) and in chimpanzees (Fernández-Carriba, Loeches, Morcillo, & Hopkins, 2002), indicating that both the perception and production of emotions may be preferentially controlled by the right hemisphere.

Nonhuman primates demonstrate an excellent animal model for understanding the evolutionary emergence of lateralized behaviors related to the social environment. There is little

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naturalistic evidence from field studies to align with those from other animal species discussed earlier. However, studies that consider spontaneous naturalistic, species-specific encounters in non-human primates have reported a left visual preference (right hemisphere dominance) during aggressive encounters in gelada baboons (Casperd & Dunbar, 1996) and in a zoo-housed group of mangabeys during spontaneous approach behaviors (Baraud, Buytet, Bec, & Blois-Heulin, 2009), suggesting that rudimentary primitive avoidance behaviors controlled by the right hemisphere may have contributed to the emergence of negative emotions (Vallortigara, Chiandetti, & Sovrano, 2011; Vallortigara & Rogers, 2005).

Evidence from great ape studies has highlighted the importance of the social environment in modulating behavior during social interactions and situations involving increased arousal. High-ranking chimpanzees were approached significantly more frequently from their left visual hemifield suggesting the facilitation for the rapid identification of facial expressions and predictability of behaviors by the right hemisphere (Fernández-Carriba et al., 2002). Left biased motor asymmetries have also been associated with self-directed behaviors. For example, rehabilitated orangutans exhibited a significant group-level lateralized preference for left-handed scratching and for the fine manipulation of parts of the face (Rogers & Kaplan, 1996), and while self-directed scratching showed no hand preference in chimpanzees, there was a significant bias for scratching on the left side of the body (Hopkins, 2006). Forrester, Leavens, Quaresmini, and Vallortigara (2011), Forrester, Quaresmini, Leavens, Spiezio, and Vallortigara (2012) noted an increase in left hand (right hemisphere) activity during the observation of naturalistic unimanual hand actions for self-directed behaviors and hand actions directed towards social partners compared with hand actions directed towards objects. In all cases, the authors postulated a right hemisphere dominant role in the processing of emotive and arousal-increasing stimuli.

A recent study by Quaresmini, Forrester, Spiezio, and Vallortigara (2014) aligns most closely with the evolution of social lateralization studies that indicate a preference to keep conspecifics proximally situated with a left visual field advantage during spontaneous natural behaviors. Observational focal sampling of spontaneous social behaviors in a family group of western lowland gorillas (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*) and in a colony of captive zoo-living chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*), revealed group-level biases in both gorillas and chimpanzees (trend) for keeping conspecifics proximally situated to the left side of the focal individual compared with the right side. The authors suggest that lateral positioning is likely to reflect a right hemisphere specialization for a heightened state of arousal associated with the detection of faces and facial expressions. These studies support the evolutionary perspective that the right hemisphere retains dominant control for behaviors associated with individual recognition, decoding other's intentions, and navigating the social hierarchical system (for a review, see Rosa Salva et al., 2012). Moreover, findings from these studies suggest that the social environment may have been a critical pressure in aligning population behavior for predator defense and for cooperation (Ghirlanda, Frasnelli, & Vallortigara, 2009; Ghirlanda & Vallortigara, 2004; Vallortigara & Rogers, 2005).

The study of human emotion processing has a long history in the literature, dominated by two prevailing theories of cerebral lateralization. The right hemisphere hypothesis (e.g. Borod et al., 1998; Campbell, 1982) proposes that the right hemisphere is solely responsible for the processing of emotion. Alternatively, the valence hypothesis (e.g. Davidson, 1995) purports that both the right and the left hemispheres are involved in affect processing, such that the left hemisphere is dominant for positive affect and the right hemisphere is dominant for negative affect. Although animal studies do not contradict the right hemisphere theory from an

evolutionary perspective, evidence from non-human animal approach/avoidance behaviors tend to be more parsimonious with the valence theory. For example, birds (Franklin III & Lima, 2001; Koboroff, Kaplan, & Rogers, 2008; Rogers, 2000b), lizards (in the laboratory: Bonati, Csermely, & Sovrano, 2013; in the wild: Martín, López, Bonati, & Csermely, 2010), and toads (Lippolis, Bisazza, Rogers, & Vallortigara, 2002), have all been shown to manifest a left eye preference for well-learned sequences of actions (e.g. predator monitoring), but conversely, they demonstrate a rightward preference for responding to urgent situations (e.g. escaping from the dangerous stimulus). Additionally, in great apes, a recent eye preference study found a left visual field/right hemisphere advantage for negative stimuli and right visual field/left hemisphere advantage for positive stimuli for viewing pictures (Braccini, Lambeth, Schapiro, & Fitch, 2012).

In humans, the valence theory model has gained some support from laboratory investigations. For example, the right hemisphere demonstrated greater activation than the left hemisphere in the region of the superior temporal sulcus associated with the processing of an approaching stranger with directed mutual gaze (Pelphrey, Viola, & McCarthy, 2004). Additionally, right-handed people have been shown to respond more quickly to unexpected stimuli with their left hand compared with their right hand (e.g. Fox, Corbetta, Snyder, Vincent, & Raichle, 2006 reference). And, nonverbal, emotional vocalizations (e.g. cries and shouts) have demonstrated a right-hemisphere activation dominance in contrast to emotionally neutral vocalizations, which were biased to the left hemisphere (for a review see, Scott, Sauter, & McGettigan, 2009). Moreover, studies of brain damaged individuals suggest that people who incur left hemisphere trauma are more likely to become depressed than those who incur injury to the right hemisphere (e.g. Machale, O'Rourke, Wardlaw, & Martin, 1998). One theory is that the right hemisphere possesses a sensitive attentional system that responds selectively for novel and dangerous stimuli in the environment (for a review see Fox et al., 2006).

Social laterality has been little studied in the naturalistic behaviors of humans. The data that exists in this area suggest that mothers and fathers prefer to position their offspring on left side of their bodies (Nakamichi & Takeda, 1995; Scola, 2009; Scola & Vauclair, 2010a, 2010b). While it is not proven that left arm cradling is associated with cerebral lateralization for the perception of emotion, the physical positioning is thought to enable social-emotional feedback stimuli (e.g. gaze, facial expression) to maintain a direct route to the right hemisphere (for a review, see Scola & Vauclair, 2010b). This interpretation gains support from a study that indicated that children who were held with a left arm preference demonstrated a typical left visual field (right hemisphere) bias for faces on chimeric face tests, whereas individuals who were held with a right-arm lacked a visual field bias (Vervloed, Hendriks, & van den Eijnde, 2011). The ramification of hemispheric bilateralization for social-emotional processing has yet to be explored within the scope of cognitive development.

The influence of the social environment on lateralized behaviors has now been investigated across a wide variety of animal species. New evidence suggests that the social environment elicits lateralized motor behavior. Currently, there is a paucity of data relating to how humans navigate their environmental space, and investigations that consider the naturalistic context of the individual are rare. The current study provides the first report of lateralized social behaviors elicited by two populations of human children during naturalistic play. Extending upon human and animal studies of social laterality, this study observed the natural and spontaneous lateral navigational routes of children around adults, peers and objects in order to consider cerebral lateralization and lateralized motor action within the social environment.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

All of the participants were observed unobtrusively in a naturalistic environment using an opportunity sampling method. Data relating to gender, age and handedness were not recorded. Only children were included in the study because it limits the influence of learnt social and cultural conventions. The procedures for this study involving human participants were in accordance with ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the spirit of the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000.

2.1.1. Participants C-Population

C-Population consisted of 101 individuals. Individuals were observed within a public play area, which contained equipment suitable for children up to a maximum of fourteen years of age.

2.1.2. Participants M-Population

M-Population consisted of approximately 200 children aged between four and eleven years. Individuals were observed within a school playground, (St Catherine's Primary School, Kent) which contained equipment suitable for children school children aged between 5 and 11 years.

2.2. Data capture

The study considered the observed naturalistic play behaviors of two separate populations of children (C-Population and M-Population) at different sites on different dates and independently coded by two different raters (C and M). Data for C-Population were collected between March and April in 2013, while data for M-Population were collected between the January and February 2014.

Children were observed during naturalistic play for the assessment of navigational behaviors within the social environment. C-Population data were recorded over 3 visits for an average of 60 min visit, equalling a total of approximately 180 min and 340 events. M-Population data were recorded over 7 visits for an average of 25 min per visit equalling a total of 175 min and 348 events.

2.3. Data coding

Two independent raters recorded observational data (C, M). Only information specifically related to lateral direction on a sagittal plane was recorded. A pen and paper recording method was adopted using a preformatted spread-sheet indicating variables to be recorded. The lateral path (left, right) that the observed child chose to navigate around stationary target (peer, adult, object) in order to reach a position accessible by a clear path on both sides and of approximately equal distance achieved by a left or right path was noted (Fig. 1).

Navigation around both peers and adults was considered. Additionally, a control condition was employed utilizing fixed, inanimate objects (e.g. large rubbish bin) in order to create the following 2×3 factor design: navigate left (adult), navigate left (peer), navigate left (object), navigate right (adult), navigate right (peer), navigate right (object). To control for confounding factors, each navigational path of an observed child began at a neutral point (approximately equidistant left or right from the desired location), and proceeded around (left or right) one of the target categories (adult, peer, object). The observed child and the target (peer, adult) were required to have directed gaze. If the observed child was navigating around a peer or adult that was facing away

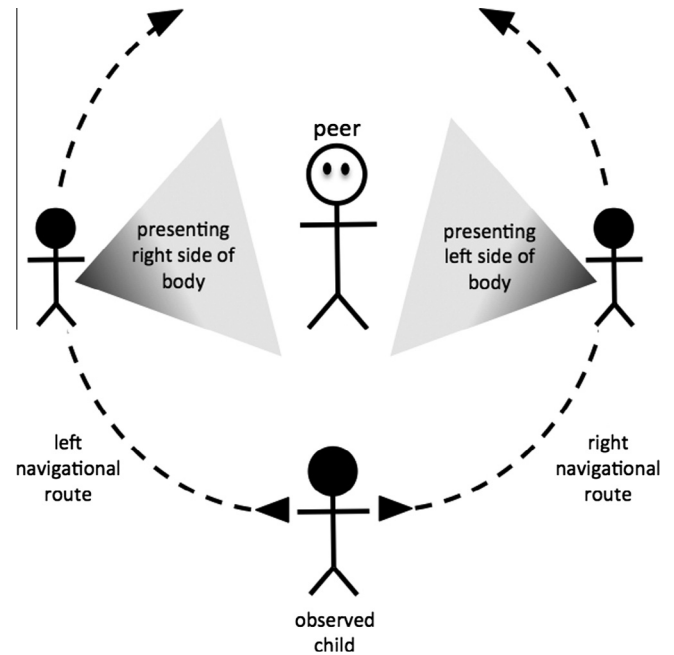


Fig. 1. The two possible navigational paths (left, right) of the observed child around a target (in this case a peer). A left or right navigational path inherently dictates the side of the body that will be presented to the individual around which the observed child navigates. A left navigational path presents the right side of the body and right visual field to the peer. A right navigational path presents the left side of the body and the left visual field to the peer.

(gaze averted or obscured), the trial was excluded. Additionally, if a child began navigation from an ambiguous position (i.e. not equidistant from the desired goal location), the event was excluded from the analysis. Each navigational path was equal to one frequency point. In line with Quaresmini et al. (2014), to ensure that the relative presence of the social partner was influencing the positioning of the focal subject, we adopted an approximate distance of less than 3 m or less between the child being observed and the social partners.

Data collection method varied slightly between the two populations of children. For C-Population, a focal sampling approach was employed. Each focal follow lasted 2 min in duration. Data were included to the dataset if 2 min of continuous observation was completed. Stationery object targets consisted of a tree, a rubbish bin and an ornamental rock and remained consistent across all data collection visits. These objects were fixed at the entry point of the playground and required lateral navigation to access the playground equipment. These fixed items were chosen because they presented equal opportunity for navigation around both sides.

M-Population data collection consisted of an opportunity sampling of an entire school population. Each data point was collected based around a stationary target (adult, peer, object) used as a reference location. It was necessary that animate targets remained stationary throughout the observed child's navigational path to their desired location. Stationery object target was a rubbish bin. This object and its location remained consistent throughout all seven data collection visits. The bin was located at the intersection of two discrete segments of the playground, such that it was circumnavigated by the majority of the children during any given play session.

2.4. Data analysis

A laterality index (LI), binomial tests, z-scores approximations of the binomial scores and a chi-square test were performed to assess population-level lateral biases. Additionally, peer and adult

frequencies were collapsed within and between the two populations in order to consider the influence of animate and inanimate targets (e.g. Forrester, Leavens, Quresmini, & Vallortigara, 2011; Forrester, Quresmini, Leavens, Mareschal, & Thomas, 2013; Forrester, Quresmini, Leavens, Spiezio, & Vallortigara, 2012). LI scores were calculated using the formula $[LI = (R - L)/(R + L)]$, with R and L being the frequency counts for right and left navigational path frequency counts. LI values vary on a continuum between -1.0 and $+1.0$, where the sign indicates the direction of hand preference. When $R = L$, then LI is zero. Positive values reflect a right navigational path preference while negative values reflect a left navigational path preference. The absolute value depicts the strength of hand preference. The directional strength of navigational path for each population was calculated using z-scores such that a population were left navigational path biased when $z \leq -1.96$, right navigational path biased when $z \geq 1.96$ and ambi-preferent for path direction when $-1.96 < z < 1.96$. All statistical tests were two-tailed ($\alpha < .05$).

3. Results

Raw frequencies, binomial approximations of z-scores for each population and LI scores are presented in Table 1 by population

Table 1
Raw frequencies, binomial approximations of z-scores and LI scores of unimanual lateralized hand actions.

Navigation path	C-Population	M-Population	Combined
Left around peer	39	32	71
Right around peer	122	65	187
Laterality index	.52	.34	.45
z-Score	6.46	3.25	7.16
Binomial	* $p < .000$	* $p = .001$	* $p < .000$
Left around an adult	32	36	68
Right around an adult	77	58	135
Laterality index	.42	.23	.33
z-Score	4.21	2.17	4.63
Binomial	* $p < .000$	* $p = .029$	* $p < .000$
Left around an object	34	75	109
Right around an object	38	82	120
Laterality index	0.06	0.05	0.05
z-Score	0.35	0.48	0.66
Binomial	$p = .724$, ns	$p = .632$, ns	$p = .509$, ns

B = binomial approximation of z-score, z = z-score, LI = laterality index.

* Significant, $p < .05$, two-tailed.

(M Population, C Population and populations combined). Factors are displayed by target condition (peer, adult, object) and side (left, right).

Because the binomial tests indicated that children navigated around both peers and adults with a significant bias of presenting their left side, in both populations, these two levels were collapsed for further statistical tests. A 2×2 chi-square test was conducted on each population to consider target (human, object) and side (left, right). The M-Population revealed a significant interaction between target and side such that the children were biased towards a rightward navigational path around a peer, where as navigation around an object did not elicit a lateral bias $\chi^2(1, N = 101) = 5.27, p = .022$. Likewise, the C-Population revealed a significant interaction between target and side such that the children were biased towards a rightward navigational path around a peer, where as navigation around an object did not elicit a lateral bias $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 11.7, p = .001$ (Fig. 2).

Since both populations resulted in a significant bias for children choosing a right path to navigate human targets, a further chi-square test was conducted on the pooled data from both populations to demonstrate the robustness of the pattern, $\chi^2(1, N = 301) = 20.22, p < .000$ (Fig. 3).

4. Discussion

The present study considered the lateral navigational paths of children within a naturalistic setting to align with investigations of social lateralization in observational animal studies. Two populations of children were assessed by different observers at different locations, and at different times. Analyses revealed that both populations expressed a significant population-level bias for choosing a rightward navigational path around a human compared with a leftward navigational path. Additionally, neither population expressed a significant bias for a lateral preference when navigating around an object. These findings are to be considered in light of evolutionary theories for cerebral lateralization.

A bias for a right navigational path inherently implies that the navigating child is presenting the stationary target with the left side of the body. This social positing could impact upon both the production and perception of emotion processing. In the first instance, a bias to keep conspecifics on the left side inherently provides an advantage for viewing social stimuli with the left visual field. The left visual field would provide the most efficient route to the right hemisphere for processing identity, intention and

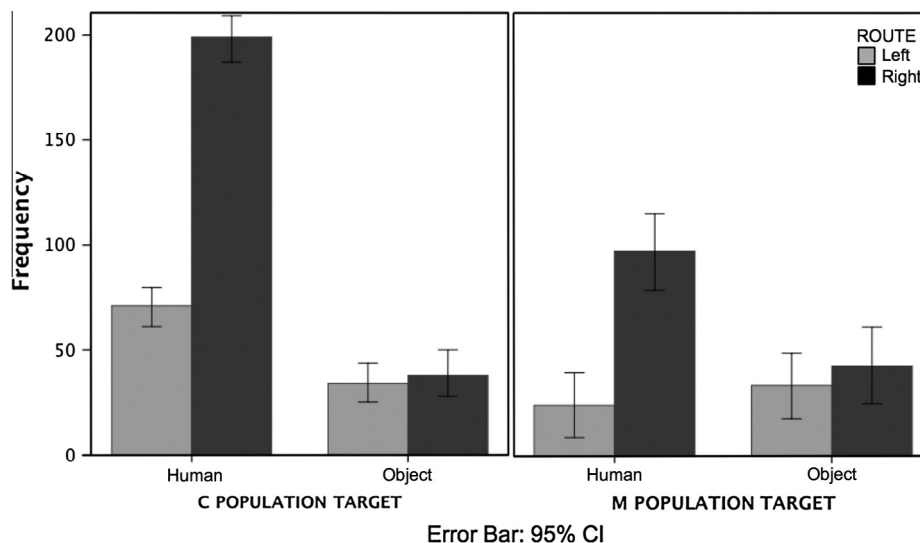


Fig. 2. The total frequencies by each population for target type (human, object) and navigation path (left, right).

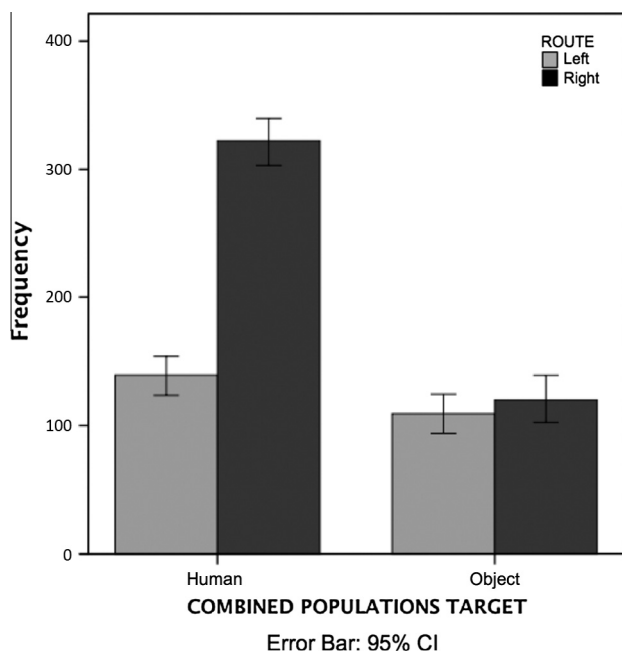


Fig. 3. The total frequencies by the combined population for target type (human, object) and navigation path (left, right).

angry or fearful facial expressions. This is consistent with animal studies that have demonstrated a left eye/right hemisphere preference bias for monitoring familiar versus unfamiliar conspecifics (domestic chick: [Deng & Rogers, 1997](#); [Vallortigara & Andrew, 1991](#); [Vallortigara, Cozzuti, Tommasi, & Rogers, 2001](#); fish: [Brown, Western, & Braithwaite, 2007](#); [Sovrano, 2004](#); chimpanzees and gorillas: [Quaresmini et al., 2014](#)). Additionally, a bias of the left visual field/right hemisphere has been reported in recognizing faces and facial expressions in both apes ([Morris & Hopkins, 1993](#)) and humans ([De Renzi, Perani, Carlesimo, Silveri, & Fazio, 1994](#); [Kanwisher et al., 1998](#)). Within this context, exposing the left side of the body to conspecifics might be advantageous during novel or urgent situations to execute physical behaviors for protection and locomotion escape behaviors. In the second instance, the left side of the face in non-human primates has been reported to display emotive expression both earlier and more intensely than the right side of the face ([Fernández-Carriba et al., 2002](#); [Hauser, 1993](#); [Hook-Costigan & Rogers, 1998](#)). This lateral positioning may reflect a strategy to clearly display arousal status in order to inhibit extreme aggressive behavioral responses ([Baraud et al., 2009](#)).

Although approaching and withdrawing behaviours are well documented across animal species ([Davidson, Ekman, Saron, Senulis, & Friesen, 1990](#); [Quaranta, Siniscalchi, & Vallortigara, 2007](#); [Siniscalchi & et al., 2013](#)), little is still known about how this behavior manifests in modern humans. Modern humans represent an animal species with an extremely complex social system. Many of our conscious motor actions related to approaching individuals are shaped and influenced by culture and social convention (e.g. hand shakes, kissing, etc.). However, our automatic motor actions may still represent evolutionary primitive patterns of behavior that are underpinned by cerebral specialization of the two hemispheres. Moreover, the display of these population-level lateralized behaviors (e.g. bias for keeping conspecifics in the left visual field) may be rooted in social species and facilitates the social communication and the prediction of social responses ([Ghirlanda & Vallortigara, 2004](#); [Vallortigara & Rogers, 2005](#)).

Studies of cerebral lateralization indicate that the dominant functions are not solely processed by a single hemisphere. For

example, studies of processing social stimuli also indicate small contributions from the left hemisphere: [Meng, Cherian, Singal, & Sinha, 2012](#)), monkeys ([Broad, Mimmack, & Kendrick, 2000](#); [Guo et al., 2009](#); [Hamilton & Vermeire, 1988](#); [Pinsk, DeSimone, Moore, Gross, & Kastner, 2005](#)), dogs ([Guo et al., 2009](#)), and sheep ([Peirce & Kendrick, 2002](#); [Peirce et al., 2000](#)). Therefore, there are limitations to the extent with which we can attribute a single function to a single hemisphere. Additionally, more detailed studies on lateralized motor biases are necessary at the individual level to shed further light on the association between cerebral lateralization of function and contralateral motor action. Nevertheless, evidence from a wide range of animal species of hemispheric dominance for specific functions has proven to be an informative behavioral marker of brain organization (e.g. [MacNeilage et al., 2009](#)).

Understanding how individuals navigate social networks may shed light on how and which environmental pressures helped to shape modern human social behavior. Specifically, the environment may have been a critical pressure in aligning population behavior for social actions requiring cooperation ([Ghirlanda & Vallortigara, 2004](#); [Ghirlanda et al., 2009](#); [Vallortigara & Rogers, 2005](#)). Additionally, future studies may consider the evaluation of the cognitive abilities of individuals with lateralized social navigation behaviors compared with individuals who do not express lateralized social navigation behaviors. It has been reported that stronger lateral motor dominance (e.g. handedness) correlates with the successful hemispheric specialization for language ([Toga & Thompson, 2003](#)). The present findings suggest that the environment elicits predictable behavior for social navigation that facilitates both the production and perception of social-emotion stimuli in typically developing children. Therefore, the identification of individuals lacking lateralized social navigations behaviors may allow for the early targeting of individuals with cognitive delays and/or disorders.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the parents, teachers and children of St. Catherine's Primary School, Kent, for their participation in this investigation. Additionally, we gratefully acknowledge funding support provided in part the University of Westminster's Psychology Publication Stimulus Scheme.

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