

Abstract

Introduction: The function of gaze aversion for those with higher social anxiety remains unknown. We hypothesized that it serves an anxiety-reduction mechanism.

Method: Participants completed a self-report packet and a social interaction with another participant. Partway through interaction, participants were told to increase or decrease their eye contact, or continue as before.

Results: Participants higher in social anxiety who were told to decrease their eye contact reported the highest state anxiety, the greatest decrease in positive affect, and were least liked by their partners.

Discussion: If gaze aversion is employed as an anxiety-reduction mechanism, it is an ineffective strategy.

Introduction

- Some evidence links higher social anxiety to gaze aversion (Daly, 1978; Farabee et al., 1993)
- However, the function of this behavior remains unknown.
- Gaze aversion may be employed to:
 - Communicate submissiveness (Gilbert, 2001)
 - Avert attention away from signs of social threat (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997)
 - Hide signs of anxiety (McManus et al., 2008)
- These theories suggest that gaze aversion serves anxiety-reduction mechanism
- In the current study we:
 - Tested this theory during short social interactions
 - Manipulated eye contact through instructions to participants to increase or decrease their eye contact, or continue as before.
- Hypotheses:
 - Being asked to increase eye contact will be the most anxiety-provoking condition, particularly for those with higher social anxiety
 - Being asked to increase eye contact will result in the greatest decrease in positive affect over the course of the interactions, particularly for those with higher social anxiety.

Participants

- Participants were 127 undergraduates at Washington University. Majority were:
 - Women ($n = 79$; 63.2%) and White ($n = 73$; 59.3%)
 - Mean age of 18.92 ($SD = 1.74$)

Measures

- **Straightforward Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (S-SIAS;** Mattick & Clarke, 1998; Rodebaugh et al., 2004)
- 20-item measure of anxiety across a variety of social situations.
- **Brief State Anxiety Measure (BSAM;** Berg et al., 1998)
- 6-item measure of state anxiety
- **Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS;** Watson et al., 1988)
- 20-item measure of positive and negative activated affect
- Only 10-item positive affect (PA) subscale reported on
- **Post-task Questionnaire**
- 17-item measure of eye contact for self and partner
 - Assessed with three questions: overall, first interaction and second interaction
- Also assessed perceptions of the partner

Procedure

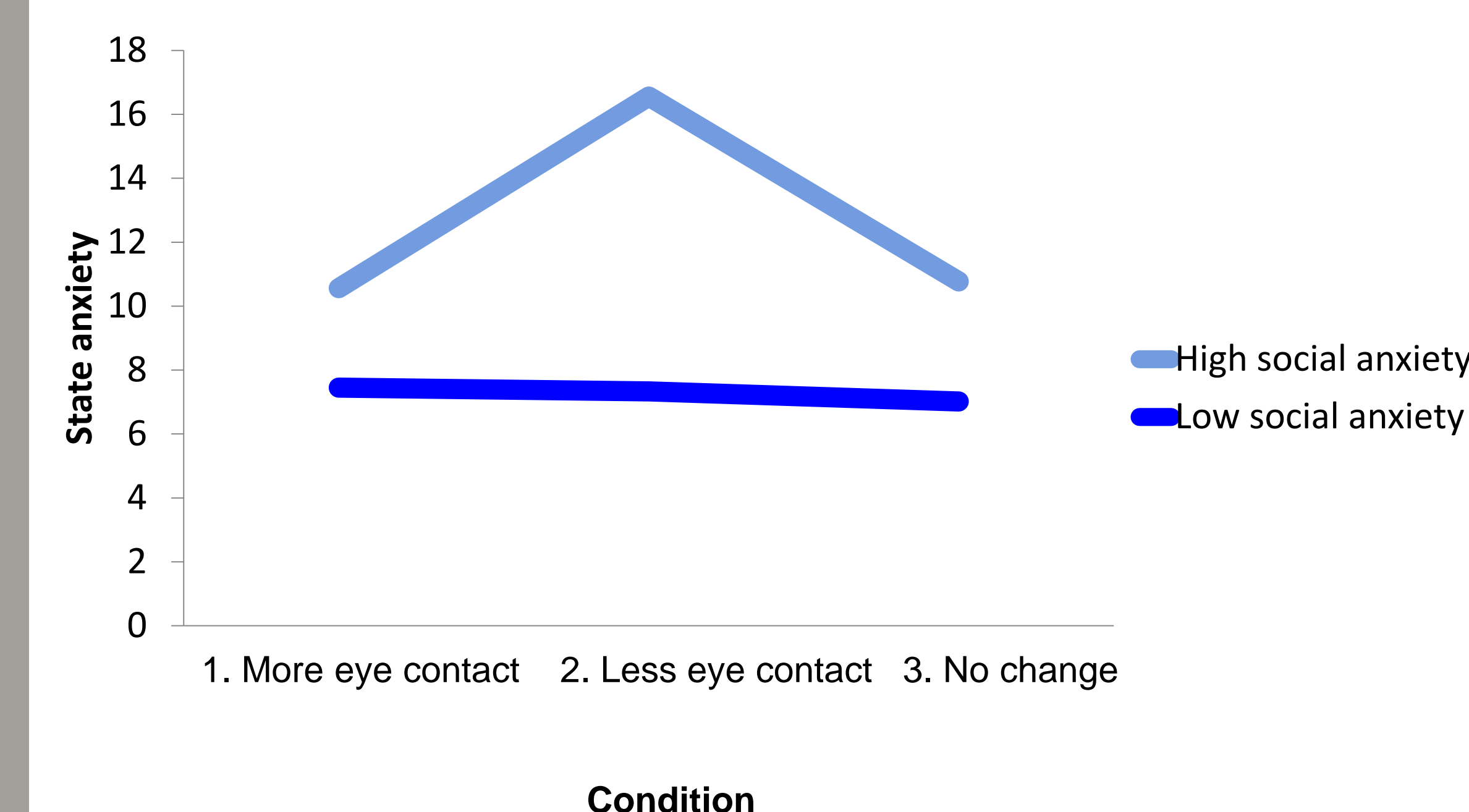
- Two participants per session
- Participants completed self-report questionnaires and two 5 minute “get-to-know-you” interactions with each other.
- After first interaction, participants received instructions:
 - Condition 1: *increase eye contact*
 - Condition 2: *decrease eye contact*
 - Condition 3: *continue as before*
- Rated self and partner’s eye contact.
- When only one participant attended the session, the participant interacted with an experimenter.
- Due to the interdependency in the dataset, analyses focus on one participant from each dyad.

Data Analytic Procedure

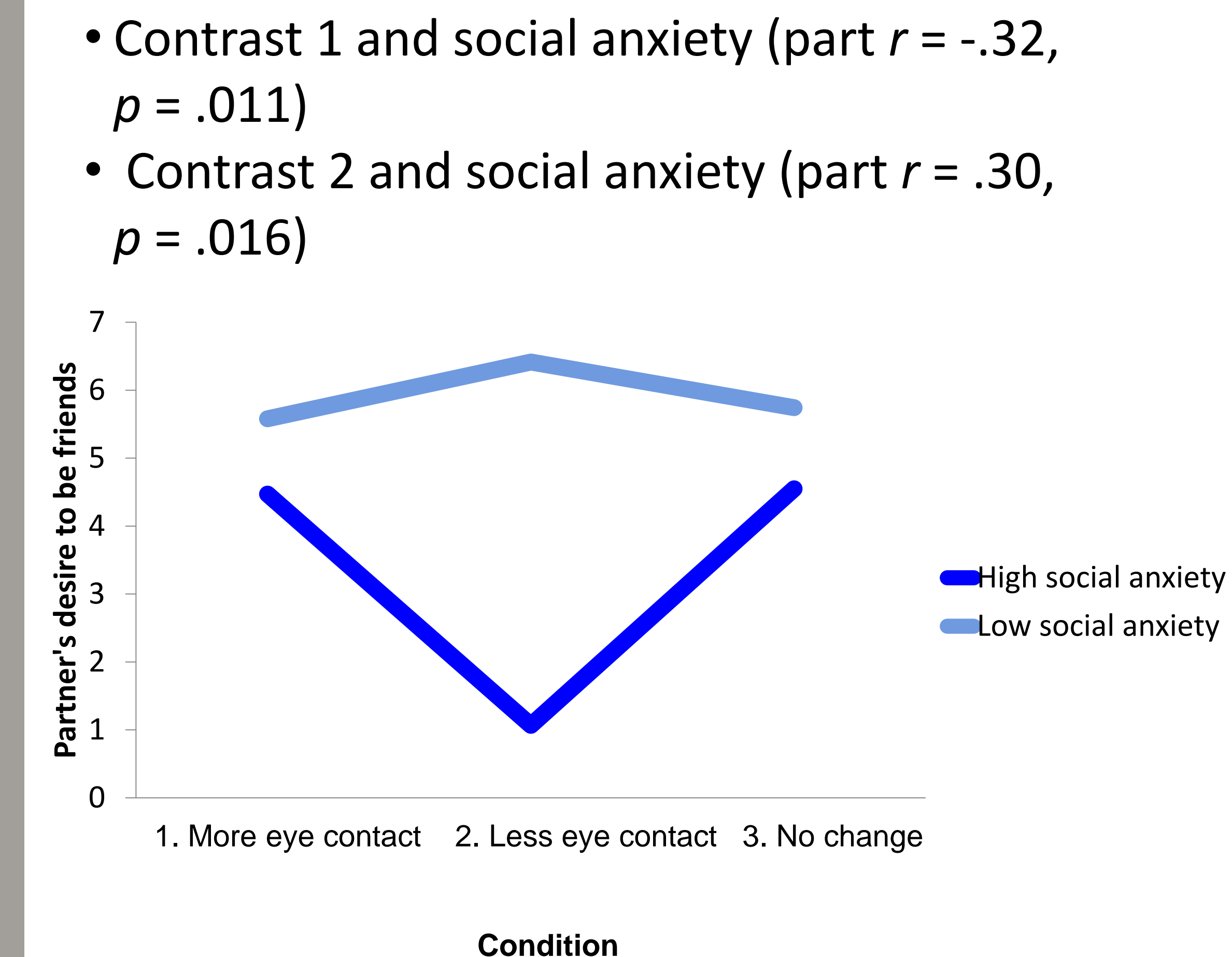
- Represented variable of condition in multiple regression with two dummy-coded variables:
 - Contrast between Condition 1 and 2 vs. 3 (*Contrast 1*)
 - Contrast between Condition 1 vs. 2 and 3 (*Contrast 2*)

Results

- **Regression with Condition and social anxiety predicting BSAM at end of second interaction:**
- Significant interactions between Condition and social anxiety (S-SIAS) predicting BSAM at end of second interaction:
 - Contrast 1 and social anxiety (part $r = -.22$, $p = .048$)
 - Contrast 2 and social anxiety (part $r = .21$, $p = .057$)
- Results equivalent with:
 - BSAM change from beginning to end
 - BSAM at mid-point of second interaction

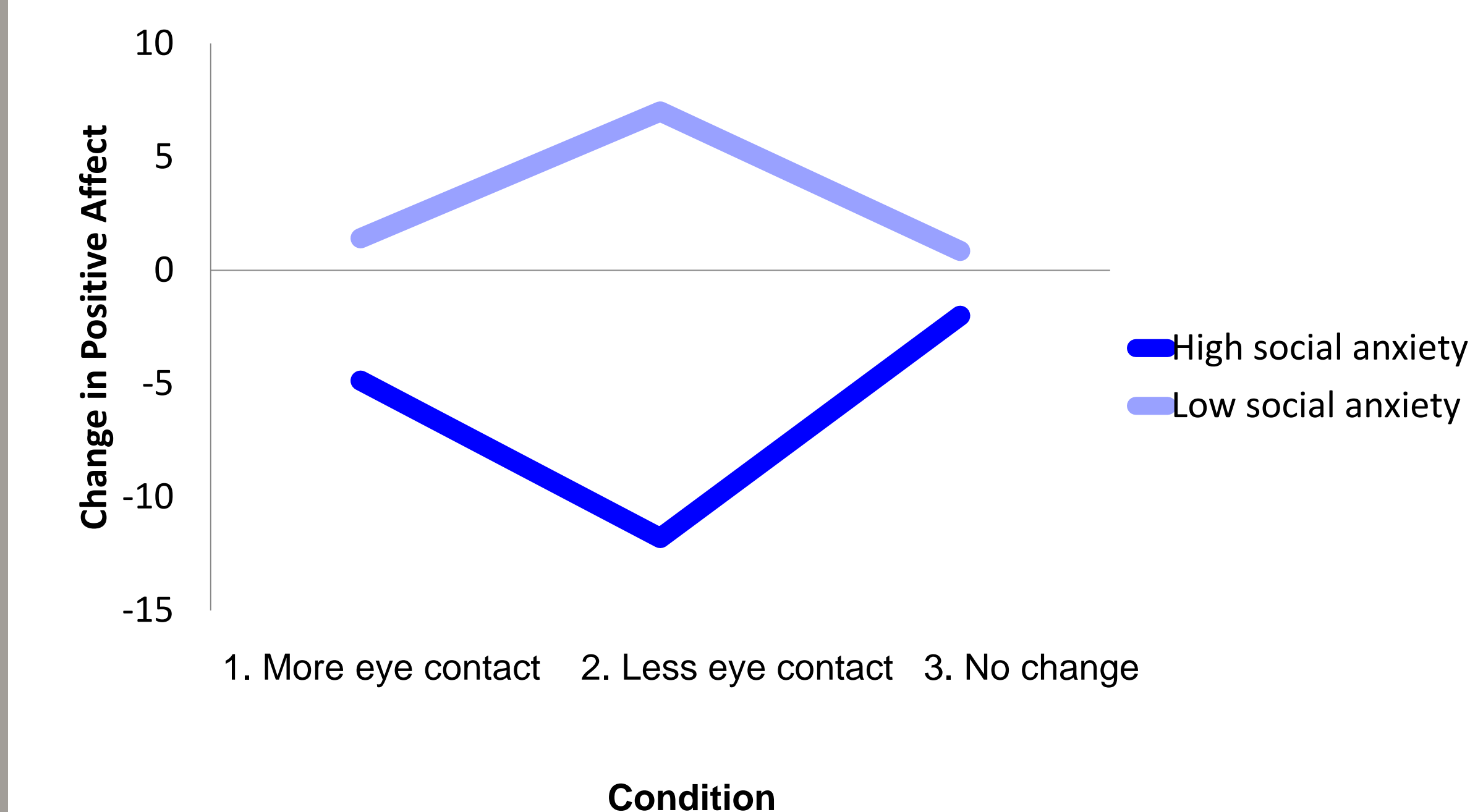


- **Regression with Condition and social anxiety predicting partner’s desire to be friends:**
- Significant interactions between Condition and social anxiety (S-SIAS) predicting partner’s desire to be friends:
 - Contrast 1 and social anxiety (part $r = -.32$, $p = .011$)
 - Contrast 2 and social anxiety (part $r = .30$, $p = .016$)



Results

- **Regression with Condition and social anxiety predicting change in positive affect:**
 - Calculated as PA at end of second interaction minus PA at beginning of first interaction
- Significant interactions between Condition and social anxiety predicting change in PA:
 - Contrast 1 and social anxiety (part $r = -.33$, $p = .007$)
 - Contrast 2 and social anxiety (part $r = .24$, $p = .045$)



Discussion

- Against hypothesis, Condition 2 (*decrease eye contact*) was the most anxiety-provoking condition for those with higher social anxiety.
- Condition 2 was also related to lower desire to be friends from the partner and a greater decrease in PA for those with higher social anxiety
- If gaze aversion is used to reduce anxiety, it appears to be an ineffective strategy
 - In line with research on the ineffectiveness of safety behaviors (McManus et al., 2008)
 - Participants with higher social anxiety in Condition 2 may have experienced increased state anxiety and decreased positive affect after sensing a negative reaction from their partner.
 - The negative reaction from the partner could have resulted from the combination of decreased eye contact and visible anxiety.