

EFFECTS OF GAZE ON HIRING, CREDIBILITY, ATTRACTION AND RELATIONAL MESSAGE INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT: Two competing models of the social meaning and effects of eye gaze exist. One holds that different levels of eye gaze have clearly identifiable meanings that will yield main effects on such communication outcomes as hiring and interpersonal evaluations. The other holds that deviant levels of eye gaze are ambiguous in meaning and that interpretation depends on contextual cues such as the reward value of the violator. An experiment required 140 Ss to serve as interviewers during a structured interview in which six confederate interviewees systematically varied three levels of eye gaze (high, normal, low) and two levels of reward (highly qualified, highly unqualified for the advertised position). Results favored a social meaning model over a violations of expectations model: Subjects were more likely to hire and rate as credible and attractive interviewees who maintained a normal or high degree of gaze than those who averted gaze. Interpretations given to higher amounts of gaze were more intimacy and similarity, more immediacy and involvement, and more composure, informality and nonarousal.

"The eyes of men converse as much as their tongues, with the advantage that the ocular dialect needs no dictionary, but is understood the world over."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

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"These lovely lamps, these windows of the soul."

—Guillaume de Salluste

"And I have known the eyes already, known them all—

The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase . . ."

—T.S. Eliot

Perhaps no element of human communication has captured the imagination like the eyes. Poets, philosophers and empiricists alike have written about their alleged powers—to reveal true, inner feelings; to heal; to spark sexual attraction; to dominate, threaten and frighten; to calm, soothe and placate; to arouse attention and signal involvement; to promote friendship and affiliation, and to probe lies and deceptions.

To separate fact from fiction, researchers have conducted wide-ranging experimental field studies. One of the prevailing conclusions that has emerged from this effort has been that eye gaze has a number of recognizable social meanings. This is exemplified by Argyle and Cook's (1976) enumeration of different functions of gaze behavior (e.g., signalling interpersonal attitudes and emotions, initiating greetings) and an experiment by Burgoon, Buller, Hale and deTurck (1984), which found that eye contact was perceived to convey relational messages of intimacy and attraction, immediacy and involvement, arousal or composure, and dominance and persuasiveness. Numerous other treatises and studies have arrived at similar conclusions (e.g., Andersen, Andersen & Jensen, 1979; Argyle, 1972; Beebe, 1980; Exline, 1963; Fromme & Bean, 1974; Goldberg, Kiesler & Collins, 1969; LaFrance & Mayo, 1978; Mehrabian, 1971; Moore & Gilliland, 1921; Patterson, 1976; Snyder & Sutker, 1977; Thayer, 1969; Thayer & Schiffe, 1974).

An alternative view is expressed in the work of Ellsworth and Langer (1976), who argue that eye gaze is a nonspecific activator whose meaning is highly dependent on contextual cues. This view is consistent with one taken by Burgoon and her associates for a related nonverbal behavior, conversational distance. In her violations of expectations model (Burgoon, 1978a, 1983; Burgoon & Jones, 1976; Hale & Burgoon, 1983), it is proposed that proxemic variations are themselves ambiguous in meaning, having multiple interpretations that could be given to proximal and distal positioning. Selection of meaning depends on the nature of the individual adopting an unexpectedly close or far distance, the direction of the proxemic adjustment (closer or farther than expected) and the extremity of the adjustment.