



Audrey Nelson Ph.D.
He Speaks, She Speaks

The Politics of Eye Contact: A Gender Perspective

Eye contact is the strongest form of nonverbal communication.

Posted Sep 15, 2010



Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "The eyes of men converse as much their tongues." We all know this to be true. A doctor with excellent bedside manner once told me that when he enters a treatment room, he immediately looks his patient in the eye. "This helps me understand my patient's level of stress," he explained.

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From birth to death and all occasions in between, the eyes have it. While women and men differ in their eye behavior and what that behavior means, eye contact is the strongest form of nonverbal communication.

A study headed by Stephen Janik and Rodney Wellens at the University of Miami in Florida found that 43 percent of the attention we focus on someone is devoted to their eyes, with the mouth running a poor second at 13 percent. (The mouth and the eyes together account for 56 percent of our attention.)

We attend to others' eyes because these organs are highly expressive of emotions. Why would we want to look into another's eyes if not to assess what that person is feeling?

Think about the sentiments conveyed when a loved one's eyes are dulled and flat, when they're sparkling with joy, when they're softened by passion, when they're filled with fear or surprise, or when they're brimming with tears. How about the images or songs that accompany the following descriptions: shifty eyes, laughing eyes, wild eyes, lying eyes, and Bette Davis eyes.

Women have always sensed the eyes' alluring power. They do more to enhance their eyes than men.

Cleopatra was well known for eye adornment—she used kohl makeup to outline and accentuate her eyes. In India, women place jewels around the eyes to draw attention to them. In America, we have our own methods: Think concealer, false eyelashes, eye shadow, eyeliner, and mascara.

It is also true that people make eye contact more at women than they do at men. There are two possible explanations for this phenomenon:

1. Women are considered nicer and are more likely to respond nonverbally. They smile more and are more receptive, engaging, and expressive.
2. Women are considered weak. They can't prevent the violation of their privacy by others' prying eyes.

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Continuous eye contact for 10 seconds or longer—also known as staring—is disconcerting and can make the receiver feel uncomfortable. The recipient will inevitably start wondering, "Do I have spinach in my teeth?" "Do I need to wipe my nose?" "Is that guy challenging me?"

On the other hand, the avoidance of eye contact also sends meaningful messages. Looking away contributes to a sense of psychological distance, and may even be a function of anger. "I'm so mad at you, I can't even look at you!" "I wish I'd never laid eyes on you." "Get out of my face." And the expression "Talk to the hand" has the unspoken subtext "because I don't want to look at you."

In my household, we were having a serious malfunction with our Volvo, so my husband and I took it to the mechanic, Dave. Even though this was my car, and I had experienced the problems firsthand, Dave never made eye contact with me. In fact, he acted as if I were not even present. During the entire conversation, he only made eye contact with Adam.

Sensing that I was being ignored, I physically moved closer into the circle, almost forcing Dave to look at me. He briefly glanced my way but then turned right back to Adam and carried on. It wasn't until I made a verbal command, "Well since I am the driver of the car, I can speak to the problems with it when it broke down," that he actually directed his gaze at me.

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The moral: We give more attention to and make greater eye contact with people we consider our superiors and less to those whom we feel are inferior to us. All of us unconsciously play these power games with our eyes, even using eye contact to manipulate a social situation in order to get what we want.

Eye contact is also indicative of where one feels one stands in a social hierarchy. People who have less power or who are dependent are relatively more attentive than those with high power. The corollary is also true. Studies have found that people give more visual attention to those in high status positions than to those who are not.

In research with ROTC candidates and officers, for instance, investigators found that people who are more dominant break a greater number of mutual gazes than those who are more submissive. Individuals in the superior position may look less because they don't need to read their subordinate's feedback. It may also be true that they don't care what their inferiors think or how they are responding to their message.

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We know this to be intuitively true as evidenced by attitudes and expressions such as, "I'm in the driver's seat," and "I'm in charge here," which imply, "Why do I care what you think or how you feel? You have no control over me." Or, "He didn't give me the time of day."

Research also shows that high status individuals feel free to stare more at others, to look less as they listen, and to command a larger visual space. (They can look outside, down the hallway, at everyone in the room—they have a wider range.)

People with less power and status do the opposite: They will avert their gaze when stared at, look more when they are listening, and assume less visual space. We can see these behaviors exhibited between men and women, the executive and the secretary, and even between various racial groups.

In the 30 years that I have been a trainer and consultant in corporate America, lack of eye contact is

the primary nonverbal cue that women mention when they tell me that they are not being "taken seriously by the opposite sex." This is one of the top complaints women have about men. Janice, a corporate vice president, for instance, may perceive that when she is in a face-to-face interaction with her counterpart Ed, and he does not look at her, it's because he doesn't care about her message. This is understandable.

It may be, of course, that Ed doesn't make eye contact because he wants to avoid any suggestion of the aggressive stare, but Janice interprets his lack of eye contact as diminishing her credibility. On the other hand, it also may be true that Ed uses the dearth of eye contact to manipulate the situation and assert dominance.

As linguist Deborah Tannen has pointed out, a person who withholds information establishes a more powerful position. If Janice wants to access that information, she has to do whatever she can to analyze Ed's nonverbal cues. That means she may have to look at him more to discern what his intentions are.

Gender Prescriptions

When we try to interpret sex differences in eye contact and gazing behavior, there seem to be competing themes of affiliation/approachability on the one hand and dominance/power on the other. It seems clear that women use eye contact to check in and "read" how they are being perceived. They also try to bond with others and incorporate them into an interaction with their eyes. Women will also lower their eyes in submission.

In contrast, men employ eye contact to mark status and dominance (men stare more than women). They use less eye contact with an individual as a way to communicate: "You are unimportant. I have a higher ranking than you."

Awareness of these divergent nonverbal styles can help you better understand the signals that you're sending, and how they can be interpreted and misinterpreted. Pay attention to the behaviors that go on auto-pilot out of habit or socialization.

I think it's important for men and women to self-monitor. Women should pay attention to lowering their eyes, a behavior that sends the message, "I'm the doormat." Keep your gaze steady and straight as an equal and participating member of an interaction. Men need to understand that they should also participate in some of the social maintenance that occurs during interactions by looking more to get information on how they're being received. They need to understand that women can misinterpret their lack of eye contact as a lack of interest.

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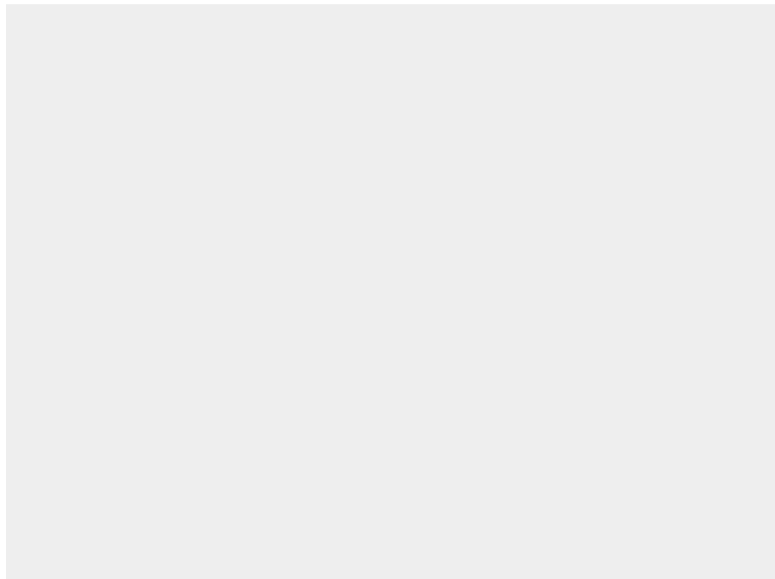
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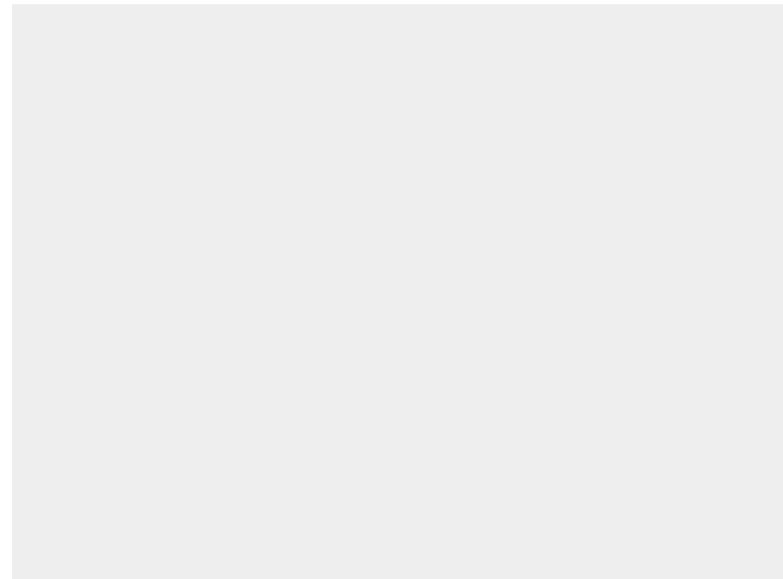
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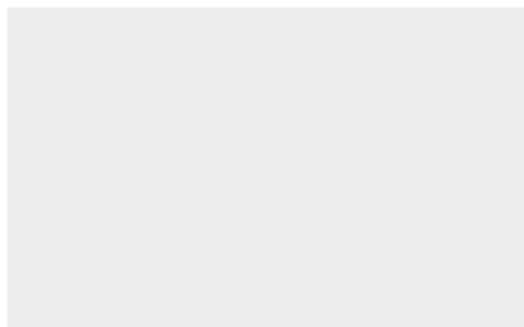
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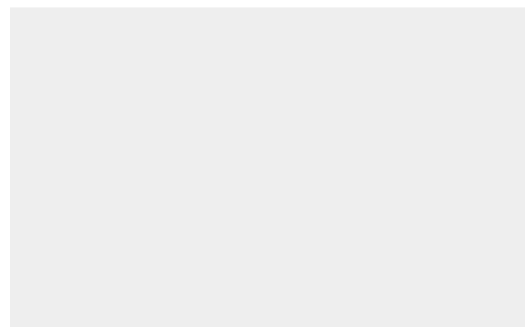
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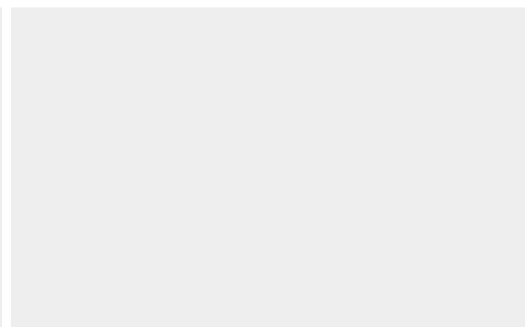
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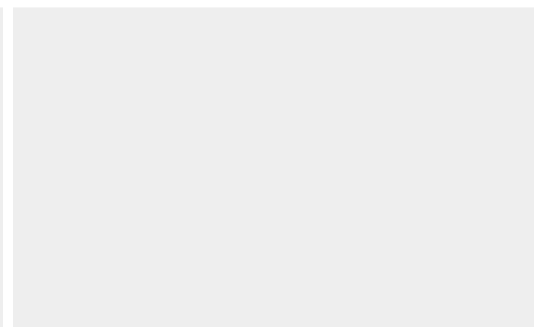
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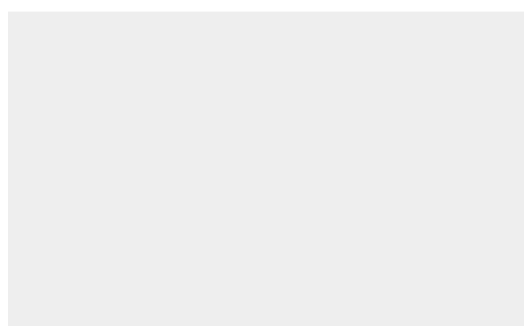
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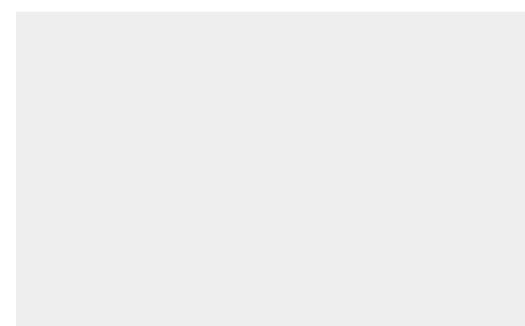
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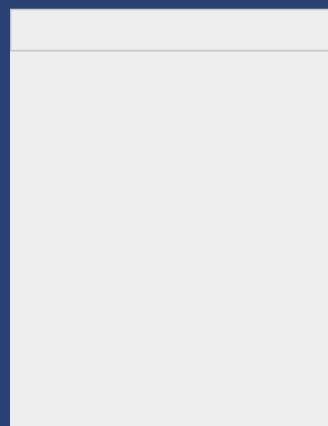
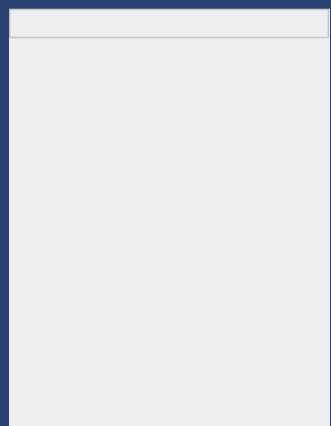
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