

Making eye contact doesn't always help your cause

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New research shows that making eye contact, long considered an effective way of bringing someone to your point of view, may actually make people more resistant to persuasion, especially when they already disagree.

"There is a lot of cultural lore about the power of eye contact as an influence tool," says University of British Columbia Prof. Frances Chen, who conducted the research at the University of Freiburg in Germany. "But our findings show that direct eye contact makes skeptical listeners less likely to change their minds, not more, as previously believed."

Chen and colleagues took advantage of recently developed eye-tracking technology to investigate the effects of eye contact in situations involving persuasion. The findings are published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

A series of experiments found that the more participants watched a speaker's eyes, the less persuaded they were by the argument of the person speaking – that is, participants' attitudes on various controversial issues shifted less as they watched the speaker's eyes.

Spending more time looking at someone's eyes as they spoke was only associated with greater receptiveness among participants who already agreed with the speaker on that issue. In one experiment, participants were more likely to find speakers convincing when they focused on their mouths rather than their eyes.

According to the authors, the findings highlight that eye contact can signal very different kinds of messages depending on the situation. While eye contact may be a sign of connection or trust in friendly situations, it plays an important role in the competitive or hostile encounters in primates and other mammal species.

Background

The researchers plan to explore whether eye contact may be associated with certain patterns of brain activity, the release of stress hormones, and increases in heart rate during persuasion attempts.

Study authors are Frances Chen (UBC Dept. of Psychology), Julia Minson (Harvard University), and Maren Schöne and Markus Heinrichs (University of Freiburg).

"Whether you're a politician or a parent, it might be helpful to remember that trying to maintain [eye contact](#) may backfire if you're trying to convince someone who has a different set of beliefs than you," says co-author Julia Minson of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

More information: "In the Eye of the Beholder: Eye Contact Increases Resistance to Persuasion," *Psychological Science*, 2013.

pss.sagepub.com/content/early/.../97613491968.abstract

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