

New research debunks importance of eye contact

February 5 2019



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Remember that magical moment when you first locked eyes with your partner and felt an instant connection?

Chances are they were looking at your mouth. Or your ear.

Yes, [eye contact](#) might be all in our heads, according to new research by Edith Cowan University.

Using eye tracking technology, ECU researchers have demonstrated that people don't need to mindfully look at the eyes of their audience to be perceived as making eye contact during face-to-face [conversation](#). Simply gazing somewhere around the face or head will suffice.

Lead author Dr. Shane Rogers, from the School of Arts and Humanities, said for people who experience [social anxiety](#) when gazing specifically at another person's eyes—or when being looked at—this finding will be welcome news.

"Maintaining strong eye contact is widely accepted to be an important communication skill in [western cultures](#)," Dr. Rogers said.

"People believe if you aren't willing to engage in soul-to-soul mutual eye contact then you are at best lacking in confidence, at worst, untrustworthy.

"However, the reverence devoted to eye contact is not supported by scientific evidence," he said.

No difference between gazing at the mouth

The study involved a researcher engaging in four-minute conversations with 46 participants where both parties wore Tobii eye tracking glasses.

"For approximately half the conversations the researcher looked at the eyes most of the time, and for the other half gazed predominantly at the mouth," Dr. Rogers said.

After the conversations, the participants rated how much they enjoyed the conversations.

"The mouth group perceived the same amount of eye contact and enjoyed the conversations just as much as the eye group," Dr. Rogers said.

He said the results suggest that when specifically focused on trying to determine the gaze of one's [partner](#), people demonstrate limited capacity to do it accurately.

"People are not very sensitive to the specific gaze focus of their partner to their face; instead they perceive direct [gaze](#) towards their face as eye contact," Dr. Rogers said.

"So don't get hung up on seeking out the eyes of your audience, just look generally at their face, and let the eye contact illusion experienced by your partner do the work for you," he said.

The paper Contact is in the eye of the beholder: The eye contact illusion is published by SAGE publishing in the journal *Perception*.

More information: Shane L. Rogers et al, Contact Is in the Eye of the Beholder: The Eye Contact Illusion, *Perception* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0301006619827486](#)

Provided by SAGE Publications

Citation: New research debunks importance of eye contact (2019, February 5) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-02-debunks-importance-eye-contact.html>

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