



EYE CONTACT AND THE MEETING OF MINDS



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Humans develop and lead their lives surrounded by other human beings. To a large extent, our behavior can be seen as responses to other people and their behavior, real or imagined. Eye gaze is one of the most powerful social cues regulating people’s interaction. Seeing another person looking at you is likely to indicate that he or she is attending to you, whereas another person’s gaze averted away from you indicates that his or her attention is directed elsewhere.

For several years, we have been investigating the effects of another person’s gaze direction on the perceiver’s cognitive, affective, and motivational processes. We have shown, for example, that seeing another person’s direct gaze (eye contact) results in enhanced approach motivation –related brain activity and autonomic arousal. However, these results are observed only when the face/gaze stimuli are shown “live”, but not when shown as pictures on a computer monitor. These are intriguing findings and potentially have a major impact on social cognition research.

The present project comprises two parts. In the first part, we will carry out a series of laboratory-based experiments to provide more robust evidence in support of our hypothesis that differential psychophysiological, cognitive, and self-evaluative to another person’s direct vs. averted gaze reflect, not simply responses to the eyes, but the observer’s awareness of being looked at or not by the other person. In the second part of the project, we will move forward and expand our interest to investigating the effects another person’s gaze direction can have on feelings of social exclusion.

Among other things, we will investigate the feelings of social exclusion and associated psychophysiological reactions evoked by receiving others’ averted gaze (a form of silent treatment), and whether seeing another person’s direct gaze has “healing power” on feelings of social exclusion. Finally, we will study the feelings of social exclusion in everyday life among teen-age school children, and also develop a novel self-administered intervention method to alleviate the feelings of social exclusion and test its effectiveness among children/adolescents by using mobile phone technology.



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