"AN EXTENSIVE LITERATURE OF SOCIAL MEANING OF EYE CONTACT TROUGH THE CULTURES: A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON"

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the social meaning and the function of eye in personal relationship between people and cultures. Eye contact is the only common language in the world and feature of non-verbal communication which is a branch of interpersonal communication. The eyes are an integral part of the face when it comes to the observation or the transmission of non-verbal information. Each of the seven universal expressions of emotion have some change in or around the eyes that can lead you to understand what someone might feel or think. Since, cultural norms guide behavior and people from different countries can communicate differently. A Qualitative methodology has been chosen. The results show that eye contact is an important language of interpersonal communication. The researcher kept how to decode the many possible elements and understanding the discourses of eye contact closely are tied to cultural. Also the meaning of eye contact that is created can be totally different from each other. It can communicate a variety of attitudes such as anger, love, sadness, happiness as facial expression in different situations. This study could make a modest contribution on finding an understanding of people, their interaction and, their culture in a global world. The direction for further researches was also discussed.

Keys Words: People, social Meaning, Eye Contact, Cross-Cultural Comparison.

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1. Introduction

Eye contact is a non-verbal ability to communicate, and it often equals to our ability to verbally express a thought. Interestingly, we are least aware of our non-verbal communication skills like body language and especially eye contact, yet these non-verbal skills often speak louder than our words.

Eye contact occurs when "two people look at each other's eyes at the same time.[13].In human being, eye contact is a form of nonverbal communication and is thought to have a large influence on social behavior. Coined in the early to mid-1960s, the term has come in the West to often define the act as a meaningful and important sign of confidence and social communication [3]. The customs and significance of eye contact vary widely between cultures, with religious and social differences often altering its meaning greatly. Eye-contact can have a variety of subjective meanings such as friendship, sexual attraction, hate and struggle for dominance [3].

In Middle Eastern Cultures, Intense eye contact is often a method used to show sincerity and believe. In Asian Cultures like China and Japan, eye contact is not considered an essential to social interaction, instead it is often considered inappropriate. In African and Latin American Cultures, many circumstances intense eye contact is seen as aggressive, confrontational and extremely disrespectful. In gender situation, eye contact communicates a great deal honesty, respect, shame, interest, but the rules governing eye contact and what it means differ widely among cultures

In some contexts, the meeting of eyes arouses strong emotions. It is also an important element in flirting, where it may serve to establish and gauge the other's interest in some situations. Mutual eye contact that signals attraction initially begins as a brief glance and progresses into a repeated volleying of eye contact.[19]

2. Social meanings of eye contact

Eye contact and facial expressions provide important social and emotional information; people, perhaps without consciously doing so, probe each other's eyes and faces for positive or negative mood signs. In some contexts, the meeting of eyes arouses strong emotions. In some parts of the

world, particularly in East Asia, eye contact can provoke misunderstandings between people of different nationalities. Keeping direct eye contact with a work supervisor or elderly people leads them to assume you are being aggressive and rude, the opposite reaction of most Americans or Europeans. Eye contact is also an important element in flirting, where it may serve to establish and gauge the other's interest in some situations.

Mutual eye contact that signals attraction initially begins as a brief glance and progresses into a repeated volleying of eye contact.[19].In the process of civil inattention, strangers in close proximity, such as a crowd, avoid eye contact in order to help maintain their confidentiality..

3. Function of Eye Contact in Different Cultures

Muslims people, often lower their gaze and try not to focus on the opposite sex's features except for the hands and face. Lustful glances to those of the opposite sex, young or adult, are also prohibited. Japanese children are taught in school to direct their gaze at the region of their teacher's Adam's apple or tie knot. As adults, Japanese lower their eyes when speaking to a superior as a gesture of respect. In many cultures, such as East Asia, Nigeria and Mali, it is respectful not to look the dominant person in the eye, but in Western culture this can be interpreted as being "shifty-eyed", and the person judged badly because "he wouldn't look me in the eye"; references such as "shifty-eyed" can refer to suspicions regarding an individual's unrevealed intentions or thoughts. Nevertheless, the seeking of constant unbroken eye contact by the other participant in a conversation can often be considered overbearing or distracting by many even in western cultures, possibly on an instinctive or subconscious level.

4. Literature Review

This literature review will address the theories of eye contact, as they pertain to the cultures and people. More specifically the literature will address affiliative conflict theory**,** the attachment theory**,** and the evolutionary theory of attachment Lorenz's Imprinting Theory

4.1. Affiliative conflict theory (ACT) .It is a social psychological approach that encompasses interpersonal communication and has a background in nonverbal communication. This theory postulates that "people have competing needs or desires for intimacy and autonomy" (Burgoon, p. 30) [8]. In any relationship, people will negotiate and try to balance out their own

behavioral acts of (approach and avoidance) to maintain a comfortable level of confidentiality. The theory also referred to as Equilibrium Theory or Model, [8] was first introduced in the 1960s by Michael Argyle. His article "Eye Contact, Distance and Affiliation", co-authored with Janet Dean was published in Sociometry in 1965[1], and has been used greatly as the base line for ACT. Michael Argyle had a long distinguished career in which he advanced the field of social psychology. His work on nonverbal communication greatly developed this theory and his book "*The Psychology of Interpersonal Behavior*" became an international bestseller in 1967. [3] Argyle's curiosity regarding if social skills were learned in the same way as manual skills led him to research interpersonal behavior. Throughout his life's work he had various associates (Argyle & Dean, 1965; Argyle & Ingham, 1972; Argyle & Ingham, Alkema & McCallin, 1972) [1] [2] [2]; all of which worked to validate the theory through their focus on the relationship between visual behavior (nonverbal behavior) and interpersonal distance (Coutts, pg. 3) [8]. Visual behavior research studies deal with influence, and with attributions made by observers. This reflects psychological research on nonverbal cues.

Affiliative Conflict Theory thus proposes that there are two separate, but related; propositions that involve maintaining the balance of the intimacy equilibrium point. The first is the "establishment of an equilibrium or balance of approach and avoidance forces reflected in the intensity of immediacy behaviors emitted by the interactants" (Coutts, pg. 3) [8]. The second deals with "compensatory changes in one or more of the immediacy behaviors following disruptions in the established equilibrium" (Coutts, pg. 3) [8]. These propositions can also be explained as balanced and unbalanced.

During social interaction, people look each other in the eye, repeatedly but short periods. If we may anticipate, people look most while they are listening, and use glances of about 3-10 seconds in length. When applied to the affiliative conflict theory, the approach forces include the need for feedback and affiliative needs. Argyle suggests that increased eye contact during interaction warrants an increase in intimacy. Eye contact is a reinforcer in the operative conditioning of verbal behavior such as looking your partner in the eye when you say "I love you" or during wedding vows.[3]

Lorenz (1935) took a large clutch of goose eggs and kept them until they were about to hatch out. Half of the eggs were then placed under a goose mother, while Lorenz kept the other half beside himself for several hours. [22]

Lorenz and Hess believe that once imprinting has occurred it cannot be reversed, nor can a gosling imprint on anything else. In the Communicating attention, a person's direction of gaze may indicate to others where his or her attention lies. For the Facilitating learning, recent studies suggest that eye contact has a positive impact on the retention and recall of information and may promote more efficient learning.[12[17[26]

5. Discussion

In this research, the table summarizes the factors and people's culture, the meaning of eye contact and some countries' cultures as references. Then the researcher focused a special attention to the representation of five main cultures around the world and their cultures. In Middle Eastern Cultures, Asian Cultures, African and Latin American Cultures, gender situation, Mother and child in eye contact situation. (See Table1)

Table 1 .Eye contact in people's cultures, social meaning and examples of countries

people's cultures	Meanings	Example of countries
Western Cultures	Eye contact is a basic essential to a social interaction which shows a person's interest and engagement with your conversation.	The culture of European countries as well as those that have been heavily influenced by European immigration, such as the United States
Middle Eastern Cultures	Eye contact is often a method used to show sincerity and believe.	The countries of the Middle East have some but not all things in common.
Asian Cultures	Eye contact is not considered an essential to social interaction, instead it is often considered	Asian Cultures generally refers to the societal norms of countries in Far East Asia (including China, Japan, Vietnam, North Korea and South

	inappropriate	Korea) and the Indian country.
African and Latin American Cultures	Eye contact is seen as aggressive, confrontational and extremely disrespectful	Currently, Africa is divided into two cultural groups: North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. Africa is home to a number of tribes, ethnic and social groups. One of the key features of this culture is the large number of ethnic groups throughout the 54 countries on the continent. Nigeria alone has more than 300 tribes, for example. Many of the Spanish-speaking nations are considered part of the Latin culture. The Central America, South America and Mexico where Spanish or Portuguese are the dominant languages
Eye Contact and gender	Eye contact communicates a great deal honesty, respect, shame, interest, but the rules governing eye contact and what it means differ widely among cultures	Western Cultures ,Middle Eastern Cultures ,Asian Cultures ,African and Latin American Cultures

5.1. Comparative Analysis

5.2. Western Cultures

The UK, USA, Australia and Western Europe all have fairly similar social expectations of when and where eye contact is appropriate, which is most of the time. Eye contact is expected in Western culture, it is a basic essential to a social interaction which shows a person's interest and engagement with your conversation. In Western cultures eyes are considered to show the central point of a person's focus. So if somebody doesn't give any eye contact during a conversation, it may be considered insulting. Many people would take this to mean that they weren't interested, and take their wandering eyes as a sign of their distraction.

In other, more formal, circumstances in Western cultures a lack of eye contact can be seen in another way. For example, in an interview situation, strong eye contact by the interviewee is seen as a sign of self-belief, whereas a lack of eye contact is seen as a lack of confidence.

5.3. Middle Eastern Cultures

while the many cultures of the Middle Eastern countries can hardly be grouped together, they do have a few common trends, one of which is their use of eye contact. Eye contact is less common, and considered less appropriate than in Western cultures. There are strict gender rules, whereby women should not make too much eye contact with men as it could be misconstrued as a romantic interest. Intense eye contact is often a method used to show sincerity. Long, strong eye contact can mean 'believe me, I'm telling you the truth'.

5.4. Asian Cultures

Asian cultures place great importance on respect. Hierarchies are much more visible in their society than in Western cultures, and their social behaviors mirror this.

In countries such as China and Japan, eye contact is not considered an essential to social interaction, instead it is often considered inappropriate. In such an authoritarian culture, it is believed that subordinates shouldn't make steady eye contact with their superiors.

For example, students are discouraged from making eye contact with their professors, as it can be interpreted as a sign of disrespect. Similarly a daughter will point her eyes downwards when her father is speaking to her, as a sign of politeness and respect.

5.5. African and Latin American Cultures

Many African and Latin American cultures, while unique in many ways, remain strong hierarchical societies. In many circumstances intense eye contact is seen as aggressive, confrontational and extremely disrespectful. Eye contact is so subtly ingrained into every culture that it is something which is rarely even considered before travelling abroad. Westerner's use of eye contact could be deemed inappropriate, and even disrespectful, in many other cultures, so make sure you learn the use of eye contact and body language before you jet off.

5.6. Eye Contact and the role of gender

Research shows that gender plays an important role in ACT. As Argyle (1967) [1] points out, females are socialized to have a higher affiliative orientation, which they may express through using more eye contact. However, other explanations can report for the higher use of mutual gaze by females. A higher affiliative orientation may increase the female's sensitivity and/or responsivity to social cues.

The duration and frequency of eye contact communicates a great deal honesty, respect, shame, interest, but the rules governing eye contact and what it means differ widely among cultures. Among Latinos, it is respectful to avoid direct eye contact with authority figures.

For Muslims, direct eye contact between members of the opposite sex is considered bold and flirtatious. Arabs have greater eye contact than Americans among members of the same gender. Personal space is the distance two people keep between themselves in order to feel comfortable. If the amount of space is too great, the person approaching you will seem cold, shy, or unfriendly. If the amount of space is too small, the person approaching will seem aggressive, rude, or intrusive.

Personal space is influenced by gender. Two women will naturally stand closer than two men or a man and a woman. Personal space is influenced by status. A person of high status is normally instinctively granted more space. This distinction will be more pronounced in cultures that have a greater consciousness of status and social class, such as Asian cultures. Personal space is influenced by the degree of intimacy in a relationship. Good friends stand closer than two people

whose relationship is strictly business. A romantically involved couple stands closer yet. Many Latin American and African cultures place heavy emphasis on personal relationships in their business dealings, which will shrink the personal space bubble down from "business size" to "personal size." Personal space is influenced by the space available. Colleagues may be comfortable standing right next to each other in a crowded elevator, but not in an empty room. Most people will cope with this collapsing of personal space by facing outward, rather than toward the other person, and avoiding eye contact.

The standard personal space of a culture is also strongly influenced by available space. People from crowded places, such as India or New York City, will be accustomed to a smaller circle of personal space. People from empty places such as Mongolia or Montana will generally have a much larger personal space bubble.

In some cultures, looking people in the eye is assumed to indicate honesty and straightforwardness; in others it is seen as challenging and rude. Most people in Arab cultures share a great deal of eye contact and may regard too little as disrespectful. In English culture, a certain amount of eye contact is required, but too much makes many people uncomfortable. Most English people make eye contact at the beginning and then let their gaze drift to the side periodically to avoid 'staring the other person out'. In South Asian and many other cultures direct eye contact is generally regarded as aggressive and rude.

In some cultures and religious groups eye contact between men and women is seen as flirtatious or threatening. Men of these communities who do not make eye contact with women are not usually rude or evasive, but respectful. Different cultures also vary in the amount that it is acceptable to watch other people. Some experts call these high-look and low-look cultures. British culture is a low-look culture. Watching other people, especially strangers, is regarded as intrusive. People who are caught 'staring' usually look away quickly and are often embarrassed. Those being watched may feel threatened and insulted. In high-look cultures, for example in southern Europe, looking or gazing at other people is perfectly acceptable; being watched is not a problem. When people's expectations and interpretations clash, irritation and misunderstandings can arise.

6. Conclusion

Eye contact is a non-verbal ability to communicate, and it often equals to our ability to verbally express a thought. Interestingly, we are least aware of our non-verbal communication skills like body language and especially eye contact, yet these non-verbal skills often speak louder than our words. People who are listening to what you are saying will take you more seriously, and will take what you say as important. If you lose eye contact or focus on everything else but the person you are speaking to, you may not be taken seriously and the truth in your points may be lost. Eye contact may be one of the most subtle forms of social interaction, but it should never be underestimated. If you are travelling or planning a trip, it is something that you need to be particularly aware of, as something which is normal social behavior at home, may not be in another culture. These results also have the potential for facilitating effective cross-cultural studies. For example, East Asian individuals should not over interpret the eye contact of Western European individuals as signaling anger, and Western European individuals should tolerate shorter and less frequent eye contact with East Asian individuals, as East Asian individuals might think that long and frequent eye contact could present an unapproachable impression.

5.1. Direction for further research

There are lots of factors which affect eye contact. Because of the limitation of occasions, this study couldn't focus on those factors. For instance, religion is one of the significant factors that affect eye contact directly. Also, age of the people can have direct effect on the eye contact meaning. For example, in Islamic countries meaning of eye contact can have different meanings from other countries. Moreover old people can understand young people from their eyes differently from young people .The researcher suggests that in order to obtain better results for eye contact, other factors such as religion, age, etc should also be taken into consideration. How Mother understands the meaning of the children eye contact that is established in the child psychological development could be studied. Different cultures also vary in the amount that it is acceptable to watch other people. Some experts call these high-look and low-look cultures. Further studies are necessary to better understand how cultural norms modulate eye contact behaviours.

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