

Eye Contact May Make People More Resistant to Persuasion

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Making eye contact has long been considered an effective way of drawing a listener in and bringing him or her around to your point of view. But new research shows that eye contact may actually make people *more* resistant to persuasion, especially when they already disagree. The new findings are published in [*Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

“There is a lot of cultural lore about the power of eye contact as an influence tool,” says lead researcher Frances Chen, who conducted the studies at the University of Freiburg, Germany, and is now an assistant professor at the University of British Columbia. “But our findings show that direct eye contact makes skeptical listeners less likely to change their minds, not more, as previously believed,” says Chen.

To investigate the effects of eye contact in situations involving persuasion, Chen and colleagues took advantage of recently developed eye-tracking technology.

They found that the more time participants spent looking at a speaker’s eyes while watching a video, the less persuaded they were by the speaker’s argument – that is, participants’ attitudes on various controversial issues shifted *less* as they spent more time focusing on the speaker’s eyes.

Spending more time looking at the speaker’s eyes was only associated with greater receptiveness to the speaker’s opinion among participants who already agreed with the speaker’s opinion on that issue.

A second experimental study confirmed these findings.

Participants who were told to look at the speaker’s eyes displayed less of a shift in attitudes than did those participants who were told to look at the speaker’s mouth. The results showed that participants who looked at the speaker’s eyes were less receptive to the arguments and less open to interaction with the advocates of the opposing views, and were thus more difficult to persuade.

According to Julia Minson of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, co-lead researcher of the studies, the findings highlight the fact 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’s more likely to be associated with dominance or intimidation in adversarial situations.

So, while we might be tempted make the demand, “Look at me when I’m talking to you!” of a listener, this demand may have unintended consequences:

“Whether you’re a politician or a parent, it might be helpful to keep in mind 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 Minson.

The researchers are planning to look at 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.

“Eye contact is so primal that we think it probably goes along with a whole suite of subconscious physiological changes,” says Chen.