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Books Reconsidered

Gaze and Mutual Gaze

Michael Argyle & Mark Cook

One of the first psychologists to investigate experimentally the role of gaze in human behaviour was Michael Argyle. In 1963 he set up a research group at Oxford with Ted Crossman and Adam Kendon, to study non-verbal communication in human social interaction, which included gaze as an important aspect of this behaviour. Shortly afterwards, Mark Cook joined this group which was funded until 1975, during which time considerable research on gaze had been carried out both at Oxford and elsewhere. This book summarises much of the work done in this field up until that time.

Although people usually gaze at the eyes of another person when looking at their face, it is unlikely that they fixate solely on the eyes because of the small, rapid, involuntary movements made by the eye known as saccades, which are necessary for a retinal image to be produced. Consequently, gaze is generally used to refer to one person looking at the face of another person, particularly the region around their eyes, while mutual gaze denotes two people doing this to one another. Mutual gaze is often called 'eye contact'. The fact that people cannot necessarily tell whether someone is looking them directly in the eye (at least at distances of over two feet) suggests that those who become anxious when doing so may make themselves less anxious if they look slightly to one side, knowing that the other person will not realise that they are doing this.

The most frequently used measure of individual and mutual gaze is the percentage of time spent looking. Other less common measures include the number and length of glances. Some studies of two strangers talking to one another suggest that, on average, people spend about 50% of their time looking at the other person, although variation between individuals is large, ranging from 30 to 70%. In general, people look more when they listen than when they speak. About 25% of the time is spent in mutual gaze, ranging between 10% and 40% for different pairs of people. Length of looking is usually short, averaging about three seconds for individual gaze and about one second for mutual gaze. In addition, friends have been found to show less individual and mutual gaze than strangers, while those more strongly in love have been observed to display more of both these behaviours than those less strongly in love. However, since these figures are likely to vary according to circumstance, they should only be taken as an approximation of the extent to which gazing occurs.

One function of gaze is to convey one's emotions and attitudes towards another person, such as whether one likes them or not. The main theoretical model discussed in this book is the intimacy equilibrium model put forward by Michael Argyle and Janet Dean in 1965. This model sought to explain the relationship between looking and liking, which is that we tend to look more at people we like. According to the model, people seek a certain level of intimacy which is governed by their desire to be intimate with another as well as their fear of being so. The level of intimacy is expressed by various behaviours such as eye contact, physical closeness, the amount of smiling, the intimacy of the topic of conversation and so on. If the equilibrium for intimacy is disturbed by changes in one of these behaviours, then attempts will be made to restore it by compensatory adjustments in the others. For example, if two strangers are made to sit too close together, then eye contact may be reduced to compensate for the greater intimacy created. Conversely, if they are made to sit too far apart, eye contact may be increased to maintain the appropriate level of intimacy.

The intimacy equilibrium model has generated considerable empirical interest. After a decade of research, Argyle & Cook (1976) concluded that while a number of predictions from the model have been confirmed, various improvements should be made to it. Perhaps the most significant of these

changes concerns the assumption that the level of intimacy between two people remains constant. According to the revised model, the level of intimacy can vary with the result that reciprocation rather than compensation may sometimes occur. For example, increased eye contact by one person may signal a desire for greater intimacy, which may then be reciprocated rather than compensated for by the other. Argyle & Cook went on to suggest that reciprocation is more likely to take place in less well-established relationships and where changes in intimacy behaviours are seen as being internally caused.

Published in the same year as this book and not discussed in it, Miles Patterson (1976) proposed an alternative model (called "the arousal model of interpersonal intimacy") to take account of the finding that reciprocation rather than compensation was sometimes observed to occur. This model was limited to explaining how someone might react to changes in the intimate behaviour of another person rather than to what initiated those changes in the first place. It assumed that sufficient changes in the intimate behaviour of one person produces arousal in another person. Depending on the circumstances, this arousal is labelled as being either positive or negative. Compensation occurs if this arousal is seen as negative whereas reciprocation results if it is viewed as positive. For example, an increase in being looked at may create arousal which, if interpreted as being negative (such as anxiety or embarrassment), will lead to, say, moving away. If, on the other hand, this arousal is perceived as being positive (such as liking or interest), moving closer may result.

A few years later, Patterson (1982) put forward a more general model, known as "the sequential functional model of nonverbal exchange", in which intimacy behaviours were referred to as nonverbal involvement behaviours. In this model, nonverbal involvement behaviours such as gaze are affected by what one perceives to be the function of the interaction as well as what one expects the other person's level of involvement to be. A large discrepancy between the actual and the expected involvement of the other person produces a change in arousal or a cognitive–affective assessment of the situation, which in turn leads to adjustments in involvement behaviours and/or a reassessment of the function of the interaction. For instance, if the function of the interaction is seen as one of expressing intimacy and there is a discrepancy between expecting non-involvement and actually receiving involvement, then the person may reciprocate rather than compensate if they now redefine the function of the interaction as one of social control rather than expressing intimacy. In trying to offer a more comprehensive account of both reciprocation and compensation in nonverbal behaviour, Patterson's sequential functional model has now most probably superseded Argyle & Dean's intimacy equilibrium model and has subsequently been used to organise Kleinke's more recent review on gaze and eye contact (Kleinke, 1986).

Another development was the cuelessness model put forward by Derek Rutter in the early 1980s. Rutter (1984) suggested that seeing the whole of the other person may play a more important function in social behaviour than simply looking or gazing at their eyes. According to the cuelessness model of social interaction, the smaller the total number of usable social cues that are available to one person from another, the more socially distant that person will feel towards the other. This greater social distance makes the content of what is discussed more task-oriented and depersonalised, which in turn causes the style of the conversation to be less spontaneous and its outcome to reflect less compromise.

Gaze and Mutual Gaze came out at the end of the sustained programme of research on nonverbal communication at Oxford, when the research interests of Argyle and his colleagues moved on to the study of human social relationships. As such, this book provided a concise and useful summary of the studies on gaze to date by two of the people who had been actively involved in that research, and who had helped to stimulate interest in it outside Oxford. Research into gaze continued elsewhere on quite a substantial scale until the early 1980s when it seemed to subside. Two reviews published at that time offer a more recent summary of this work. Because of this new research, a revision of this book (which is now out of print) would be necessary. However, this is unlikely to happen because of the changed research interests of both authors.

Since the early 1980s interest in gaze has waned; there may be a number of reasons for this. At present there are few theoretical ideas mainly or solely concerned with the role of gaze to drive further research. As recognised by the intimacy equilibrium model itself, gaze on its own conveys little specific information apart from the direction in which a person is looking. Alone, it gives no indication as to what that person is thinking, feeling or seeing. Consequently, the particular message sent by gazing depends on the context in which that gazing takes place. A theory which assumes that gazing has a particular meaning in certain contexts would need to specify what the salient features of

those contexts are and how they combine with gazing to produce that meaning.

It may also have become more evident that gaze and mutual gaze are less important than previously thought, as argued, for example, by Rutter. The consequence of this view may be that research on this topic is not considered worthwhile. Indeed, everyday experience should suggest that gazing may not be necessary for effective social interaction to occur since many people appear to interact adequately with others without looking at them, such as when they talk to them on the telephone or in the dark. If this observation is correct, then any differences in social behaviour between being able to gaze at someone or not may be relatively minor, and not of much practical value. Nonetheless, everyday experience can be misleading and any generalisations drawn from that experience need to be confirmed experimentally under carefully controlled conditions.

While studies comparing the social performance of pairs of individuals talking over an audio link with pairs of people talking face-to-face suggest some differences in performance between the two conditions, these differences may be due more to the absence of other cues in the audio link condition than to the absence of gazing *per se*. One pertinent experiment which would help to establish the importance of gaze in social interaction would try to manipulate only its presence or absence by comparing the social behaviour of pairs of people, say, interacting with and without wearing dark glasses or, somewhat more contrived, talking over a video link where in one condition there is sound but no picture while in a second condition there is sound and a picture of only the other person's eyes. In this way just the presence or absence of gaze would be varied and any differences in social performance should be due to this manipulation. If few differences were found between these two conditions, then this finding would suggest that gaze does not play a major part in affecting behaviour. As this kind of study does not yet appear to have been carried out, the importance of gaze in social interaction remains to be experimentally demonstrated.

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