

This Week's Citation Classic

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Argyle M & Dean J. Eye-contact, distance and affiliation.
Sociometry 28:289-304, 1965.

It was postulated that approach and avoidance forces produce an equilibrium level of eye-contact and physical proximity, and that if one of these is disturbed compensatory changes will occur in the other. It was found that eye-contact and length of glance were shorter the closer two people were placed together. [The *Science Citation Index*® (SCI®) and the *Social Sciences Citation Index*™ (SSCI™) indicate that this paper has been cited 239 times since 1965.]

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"Every psychologist is aware of the importance of perception, and knows that visual perception involves looking. Yet until the early 1960s social psychologists had paid no attention to gaze as a feature of social behaviour. For some years I had wanted to study social interaction at the level of the detailed moves and signals involved, but didn't know how to do this. Discussion with a colleague working in motor skills, E.R.F.W. Crossman, led to the formulation of the motor skills model of social behaviour; this model led us to think about gaze. A research student, Adam Kendon, did frame-by-frame analysis of conversations, and found that glances were closely linked with utterances.¹ I had been interested in George Miller's analysis of approach-avoidance conflicts, and thought that they applied to proximity—there seemed to be pushes and pulls towards an equilibrium distance. Similar considerations perhaps applied to gaze, and therefore to both taken in combination, so that one

variable might compensate for the other. I suggested this to Janet Dean, an Oxford undergraduate, for her third year project, and various experiments were run in our first social psychology lab using cumulative stop watches. It became immediately clear that gaze increased with distance. So we ran several replications of the basic experiment. "The paper then had a rather curious history. It was ill-received in the Oxford Psychology Department, who found the discussion of gaze rather embarrassing; it was attacked by the leading social psychologist of the day at a European conference, rejected by *Nature*, and rejected by the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* on the grounds that the main variable (gaze) was unfamiliar. After it had been published in *Sociometry*, a number of papers appeared attacking it on various methodological grounds. However later papers by ourselves and others confirmed the original results. The main amendment and extension to be made came from Patterson, who suggested that under some conditions there is reciprocity rather than equilibrium maintenance.²

"We were not aware that Ralph Exline at Delaware had been doing research on gaze before us, though John Lanzetta, then the ONR Liaison Officer in London, put us in touch. Since our early papers, over 500 studies on gaze have been published. Our paper perhaps became known because (1) it was one of the first to report findings about an important and totally overlooked phenomenon, (2) it demonstrated that gaze was a variable that was subject to empirical laws, (3) we were lucky in obtaining very clear results, and (4) these have been easy to replicate. There has been an increased awareness of the importance of non-verbal communication in general during recent years, though most recent discussion still misses one of the essential points—that gaze functions simultaneously as both a channel and a signal."

References

1. Kendon A. Some functions of gaze direction in social interaction. *Acta Psychologica*, 26:1, 1-47, 1967.
2. Patterson M L. An arousal model of interpersonal intimacy. *Psychol. Rev.* 83:235-45, 1976.