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You're sitting quietly in your seat on a bus, and for some reason, the person across the aisle is focusing with an intense gaze at your feet. Did you somehow put on two different shoes as you rushed out of the house? No, you check and see that your shoes match perfectly.

Perhaps you're running on the treadmill at the gym and can't help but feel that the person next to you is watching (and judging?) you. That feeling of being stared at is one that arises almost imperceptibly, and it's not even clear how you know that you're the target of another person's visual fixation. By the same token, perhaps you are the one doing the staring. What leads you to want to watch people seemingly outside of your conscious control?

A new study by University of London's Hannah Scott and colleagues (2018) is based on the idea that people stare, because "faces, and in particular, the eyes, provide lots of useful non-verbal information about a person's mental state." The eyes contain "socially relevant information," they go on to explain, because when you see what people are looking at, you have some idea about what they might be thinking. However, as the example of the shoes illustrates, it's not just the eyes that people stare at when they look at you.

The British authors observe that people also stare at others' lips to gain additional contextual cues about what they mean when they're talking. If you feel someone's eyes focused on your mouth while you're speaking, it doesn't necessarily mean that they want a kiss; it could be because they actually can't hear you all that well. People might also look at your hands if you're using gestures while you're speaking, or perhaps they're trying to figure out how to do what you're doing. That person watching you on the bus might be observing you playing a video game on your mobile device or crocheting a scarf. Maybe there's a skill you have that this person wants to learn. If that person is watching your feet, it might be to help figure out when to get up to make it off the bus for an upcoming stop.

The purpose of Scott et al.'s study was to determine what people look at while someone else is communicating. Do they look at the face of the speaker, and specifically the eyes? Or do listeners watch a speaker's hand gestures to gain information? What if they're watching someone perform a manual task? Do they then watch that person's hands?

In other words, the authors suggest that people read your body language in order to extract as much information as possible, and they will direct their gaze toward the part of your body providing that information. One of the reasons why magicians are able to trick you, the authors also note, is that they can direct your attention away from their hands by getting you to look at their faces while they keep up their verbal patter. Misdirection is the key to the success of many common card and coin tricks, as you may know from experience.

The 72 undergraduate participants in the University of London study watched three videos (for about two minutes each) that varied according to the activities of the male actors. The researchers recorded the eye movements of the students while they watched the actor either looking directly at the viewer while giving a monologue (without many hand gestures), talking while making a cup of tea, or performing a magic routine in which both speech and hand motions actively misdirected attention from the trick. The researchers also varied the presence or absence of sound during the actor's performance.

During the monologue condition, whether or not there was audio present, participants spent most of the time looking at the actor's face, but not his hands. The opposite pattern appeared for the tea-making task, as was also true for the magic routine. Additionally, looking just at the period when the actor looked directly into the screen (about 48 percent of the video), participants looked more at the eyes than the mouth if there was audio playing at the same time. With no audio, in the monologue condition, viewers seemed to try to decipher what the actor was saying by watching his mouth move. There were no systematic eye-mouth differences in the viewers when the actors performed either the manual or the music task. However, if the actor looked directly into the screen while performing the manual task, then viewers were drawn to fixate on his face.

The authors concluded that there is not, in contrast to assertions by previous research, a general bias toward looking at someone else's face when given the opportunity. The only time people will try to read a face is if the person is speaking. If the person is doing something else, it's the body part that's moving which attracts the viewer's gaze. As the authors conclude, "Our hands seem to play just as important a role in orienting people's attention as our eyes do." However, if the person looks directly at the viewer while performing a manual task, then the viewer will respond in kind and look at the individual's face (which is why magicians talk so much). When someone's gaze is directed at you, then your tendency will be to stare back in a "nonverbal acknowledgment." Looking at someone who looks at you, therefore, becomes a key aspect of nonverbal communication.

It's natural, then, to stare at someone, especially if the person is speaking softly or doing something interesting that you can watch. What makes the person being stared at uncomfortable, then, would seem to be a mismatch between the appropriateness of the situation and whether it presents a logical basis for staring. It feels odd to be the target of someone's undiluted attention if you're not initiating eye contact, or if you're not doing anything special with your hands or feet that merit an out-and-out stare. A staring contest can be fun if it's a game both of you are playing, but off-putting in the extreme if you're an unwilling participant.

To sum up, staring is a natural part of everyday communication. If you're honestly doing something interesting, or if you don't think you're easily heard (and want to be), don't be upset if another person is looking directly at you. By the same token, avoid making another person uncomfortable by being the one doing the staring. Be aware of what your eyes are doing, and your nonverbal communication will be that much more fulfilling.

Reference

[Teaching Leadership: An Integrative Approach \(Leadership: Research and Practice\)](#)

[Essential Concepts in Clinical Research: Randomised Controlled Trials and Observational Epidemiology](#)