



Nonverbal Communication in Close Relationships

What words don't tell us

Edited by

Robert J. Sternberg · Aleksandra Kostić

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Nonverbal Communication in Close Relationships

“Looking at a wide variety of nonverbal behavior, *Nonverbal Communication in Close Relationships: What Words Don't Tell Us* considers the ways in which nonverbal signaling and decoding function within close relationships. With a world-class array of contributors, the book convincingly shows that it's often not what we say, but how we act nonverbally that determines the course of human relationships.”

—Robert S. Feldman, *Senior Advisor to the Chancellor Professor,
Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences,
University of Massachusetts*

“The list of authors contributing to this work includes some of the world's top researchers in the field of nonverbal communication.”

—Robert Rosenthal, *University Professor and Distinguished Professor of
Psychology at the University of California, Riverside*

“This perceptive book gathers two dozen top experts on nonverbal communication to uncover why love looks not only with the eyes, but also with the mind, and why a lover's ear will hear the lowest sound but can also sometimes sense too much, from the neurochemical symphony to the interactional synchrony, from flirting to courting to touching, thus providing unmasked cues to key movements of social life. Excellent innovative scholarship.”

—Howard S. Friedman, Ph.D., *Distinguished Professor,
University of California, Riverside*

“This volume brings together world experts, as well as new voices, to address the many aspects of nonverbal communication in close relationships. The content is a perfect companion to courses in nonverbal communication, interpersonal relationships, or the psychology of close relationships and belongs on the library shelves of leading scholars in these areas.”

—Judee K. Burgoon, *Professor of Communication,
Center for Identification Technology Research,
University of Arizona*

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Preface

Almost all of us have been in situations in which a person's words said one thing and their actions said another. Maybe they told us how much they loved us but could not look us in the eye. Or perhaps they told us that we could trust them, but their actions belied their words. When people's words say one thing, but their actions say another, most of us have learned that we should rely on the nonverbal signals rather than the verbal ones. For a variety of reasons, it is easier to fake words than nonverbal signals or actions.

The goal of this book is to convey to readers what the secret language of close relationships is—the nonverbal signals, which often conflict with verbal ones—about how someone feels about someone with whom they are in a close relationship—whether as a romantic partner, a friend, an employer, a leader, or whatever.

In this book we provide an up-to-date compendium of knowledge on the secret language of close relationships, namely, nonverbal routes of communication. In such relationships, as everyone learns sooner or later, the usefulness of words can be somewhat limited, because people (a) mean different things by the same words, (b) mean the same thing by different words, (c) sometimes find it hard to express their feelings in words, and (d) lie. Nonverbal signals therefore often provide the best means of communication. This book helps decode those signals.

This book potentially has an exceptionally wide audience because of the topic. Whereas some topics appeal only to individuals who specialize in that topic, nonverbal communication in close relationships is potentially interesting and relevant to everyone. We believe that the book is relevant to academics in the fields of close relationships, nonverbal communication, and social psychology in general. The book also should be of interest to students in those fields. But the book also has special relevance to practitioners as well, because therapists and counselors deal on a daily basis with people who have problems in their close relationships. Being well aware of the nonverbal language of such relationships can help these professionals better serve their clients. And even the clients themselves—and laypeople interested in close relationships—can benefit both from learning how better to convey their love nonverbally and from learning if they are making mistakes that may be conveying messages they do not wish to convey.

The book has 14 chapters in all.

In Chap. 1, “Interpersonal Oculistics: Eye-Related Signals of Attraction, Interest, and Connection,” Jonathan M. Bowman and Benjamin L. Compton consider nonverbal signals that emanate from the eyes. The authors point out that the eyes are a source of both intentional and unintentional messages and that these messages can convey approach toward another, avoidance of another, or anything in-between these two extremes.

In Chap. 2, “Communication and Communal Emotions in the Learning of Love,” Ross Buck discusses the origins and development of human bonding, including parental, filial, and sexual bonding. He contrasts the emotions of gratitude, respect, elevation, appreciation, and trust (“GREAT emotions”) with the emotions of loneliness, ostracism, shunning, exclusion, and rejection (“LOSER” emotions). The former are associated with love, and the latter with lack of love or failed love. These latter emotions can lead to admiration for charismatic, authoritarian leaders and rejection of perceived outsiders, a problem facing many countries today, including the United States. Often, these “LOSER” emotions are hidden behind a thin religious or ideological veneer that barely covers the negativity underneath.

In Chap. 3, “The Role of Nonverbal Communication in Leadership Skills,” Mirjana Franceško and Jasmina Nedeljković discuss nonverbal

communication in the context of leader-follower relations. Their goal is to construct an instrument for assessing beliefs about a leader and leadership. They are particularly interested in measurement of the significance of nonverbal communication in a particular setting, what this significance is in comparison with verbal signals, and leaders' knowledge of the nonverbal symbols that they can and do use.

In Chap. 4, "The Look of Love: Evolution and Nonverbal Signs and Signals of Attraction," Mark G. Frank, Anne Solbu, Zachary R. Glowacki, Zena Toh, and Madison Neurohr examine the nonverbal signals related to interpersonal attraction and also consider the evolutionarily derived reasons for them as well as their meanings. They also look at features of people's faces that we find to be attractive and the relations of these features to generalized desirable features of individuals, such as health, fertility, and dominance. They further examine the nonverbal signals that signify attention, trust, and commitment.

In Chap. 5, "Love Signals and the Reproductive Force," David B. Givens and John White relate nonverbal signals to reproductive forces. They believe that the reproductive force in humans is a powerful motivator of behavior. It shows up in people's overall demeanor, their facial expressions, their gestures, and in their nonverbal communication with each other. On this view, we can understand nonverbal communication better if we seek to understand it in terms of how it contributes to reproduction.

In Chap. 6, "The Verbal and Nonverbal Communication of Romantic Interest," Terrence G. Horgan, Judith A. Hall, and Melissa J. Grey consider early courtship and the signals people emit to show their interest in a romantic relationship. They compare the romantic signals that men and women emit to show romantic interest. They further consider the romantic signals sent in same-sex courtships and relationships.

In Chap. 7, "Misunderstood Nonverbal Cues in Close Relationships: The Contributions of Research Over Opinions," by Amy S. Ebesu Hubbard, we learn how easy it is for nonverbal communication in close relationships to be misinterpreted. Often, people's nonverbal skills do not match their verbal ones, so they encode or decode the wrong signals. Misunderstandings can arise in many areas of relationships, including but not limited to interest in forming a relationship, sexual interest and

consent, and understanding of what constitutes the partner's cultural norms. It thus is important for partners in close relationships to be sure that the signals they are sending or receiving are those that are truly intended.

In Chap. 8, "What Words Don't Tell Us: Nonverbal Communication and Turmoil in Romantic Relationships," Diana K. Ivy and Shane A. Gleason claim that nonverbal cues reveal a kind of truth about relationships that verbal communication often obscures. They are especially interested in how nonverbal cues display both turmoil and turbulence in relationships. In particular, they look at cues emanating from touch/affection, proxemics, eye behavior, vocalics, and dyadic synchrony.

In Chap. 9, "Negative Emotions, Facial Clues, and Close Relationships: Facing the End?" Aleksandra Kostić, Marija Pejičić, and Derek Chadec note, as have others, that nonverbal communication reveals feelings in a way that verbal communication does not, whether because words are used to hide feelings or because words obscure feelings. Decoding of nonverbal communication is very important in relationships, both to preserve them and to make them better. Often, negative expressions serve as a warning that something is wrong and thus can serve as a first step toward improving a relationship.

In Chap. 10, "Love in the Time of COVID-19: What We Can Learn about Nonverbal Behavior from Living with a Pandemic," Valerie Manusov makes five major points. The first is that nonverbal cues are essential in sending messages in close relationships. Second, the same messages can be communicated in various ways, both verbally and nonverbally. Third, nonverbal communication, like verbal communication, follows fixed rules. Fourth, touch is important in communication, especially in times of a pandemic when so much about relationships is limited. Fifth, nonverbal communication can change over time and place. Finally, empathy and compassion are critical to successful relationships.

In Chap. 11, "Nonverbal communication: From good endings to better beginnings," Stephen Nowicki and Ann van Buskirk suggest that relationships proceed in cycles. They can have multiple beginnings and multiple endings. In other words, a relationship is not a straight line

passing through time but rather a cycling process that can be at various stages at various times, sometimes moving forward, sometimes seeming to move backwards, but cycling along rather than simply moving from beginning to end. On their view, there can seem even to be multiple relationships with the same person, with each new relationship building upon but ultimately superseding the earlier ones.

In Chap. 12, “The Functions and Consequences of Interpersonal Touch in Close Relationships,” Martin S. Remland and Tricia S. Jones analyze the emotional consequences of both touch and deprivation of touch. They also look at cultural factors and how, in various cultures, touch serves as a basis for understanding people’s needs for intimacy and closeness of various kinds. Their analysis is at multiple levels: biological, social, and cultural. They also examine how the Age of the Internet, where so many relationships can become remote ones, affect people, given their need for touch and physical closeness.

In Chap. 13, “Nonverbal Skills in Relationships: Too Little or Too Much May Be a Bad Thing,” Ronald E. Riggio and Alan Crawley suggest that there is not always a linear relationship between skills and success, especially as this principle applies to nonverbal communicational skills. In particular, they suggest that too high a level of nonverbal skill can be detrimental, just as too low a level can be. They analyze in particular three skills—expressivity, sensitivity, and control—seeking to understand what the optimal levels of these skills are.

In Chap. 14, “Nonverbal Communication in Relationships as a Link between Affect and Social Intelligence,” Robert J. Sternberg seeks to summarize the main takeaway messages of the book as a whole. He notes that nonverbal communication is an important feature of close relationships. Indeed, nonverbal communication often is more important than verbal communication. Nonverbal communication forms a language, just as do the symbols of verbal communication. Nonverbal communication involves both encoding and decoding, which are distinctive but related abilities. Nonverbal abilities have some degree of domain-specificity. It also is often transmitted preconsciously and unintentionally. We often are not aware of the messages we are transmitting. But sometimes, when people are aware of what they are doing, they try to manipulate

nonverbal communication to make it appear as though a signal that is communicated intentionally is unintentional. And finally, nonverbal signals may contradict both each other and verbal signals.

As you can see, the book covers a very wide range of psychological phenomena regarding nonverbal communication. We hope you enjoy reading it!

Ithaca, NY, USA
Niš, Serbia

Robert J. Sternberg
Aleksandra Kostić

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1

Interpersonal Oculistics: Eye-Related Signals of Attraction, Interest, and Connection

Jonathan M. Bowman and Benjamin L. Compton

Introduction

Although overused media tropes about people experiencing “love at first sight” after their “eyes met across a crowded room” are pervasive, many people may underestimate the importance of the oculestic code of eye-related nonverbal behaviors. Focusing exclusively on the meanings that are encoded by the eyes—and decoded about the eyes—the range of possible nonverbal messages are far more significant than many laypersons and even scholars are likely to realize. After all, popular discussions about the use of eyes in communication seem to focus exclusively on the role of eye contact, missing other key elements of oculestic behaviors that may in fact impact our ability to send and receive relational messages using our

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eyes. Whether conveying attention or interest to a partner or indicating affection or threat, the possible impact of eye-related behaviors must not be overlooked in the context of close relationships.

Oculesic Structures

To be clear, there are actually three main types of eye behaviors used in *sending* messages. At the same time, the eyes can be used in an almost infinite number of applications for *receiving* nonverbal and verbal messages from both intentional and unintentional interaction partners (Bowman, 2020). After all, the eyes have been said to account for the majority of social information, with up to 80% of our social information being sight-based (Morris, 1985). Because visual cues encompass the majority of other nonverbal codes, the three oculesic behaviors mostly focus on the intentional and unintentional *sending* of messages from a structural perspective.

Gaze The most common way to understand active messaging in a situation requires an individual to look in the direction of the other person(s) who might be sending messages. This act of one person looking at one or more other people is called *gaze*. It is one of the quickest ways to gain important demographic and cultural information about the person being viewed (Bowman, 2020). When an individual is gazing at another, they are often observing and interpreting a variety of markers of information—including but not limited to the perceived gender and age of the individual in addition to making guesses about their racial, economic, and even sometimes religious identities as well. In initial interactions, this gaze can also provide important information that may lead to attraction and interest, whether platonic or sexual in nature (Bowman, 2019). Gaze can even serve as a sort of indicator of attraction, in that people often look in the direction of people or things that they find pleasing or attractive and can even reinforce those feelings of pleasure or attractiveness through extended gaze (Shimojo et al., 2003). Not all gaze is positively valenced, however, and the experience of unwanted or prolonged gaze can create discomfort or lead to negative evaluations of a known or unknown other, a phenomenon which we will discuss in the

fifth section of this chapter. Clearly, even the one-sided gaze of an individual toward an interaction partner influences the nature of the communal experience of messaging and the overall tenor of the situation.

Mutual Gaze and Eye Contact When two people are gazing in the direction of one another's eyes, they are engaging in a specific form of visual regard known as *mutual gaze* (Jongerius et al., 2020). When both parties become aware of their shared mutual gaze, we typically refer to the experience of individuals having experienced *eye contact* (Argyle & Cook, 1976; Bowman, 2020). This shared experience of eye contact has multiple impacts upon both parties, with eye contact serving not only as an indicator of possible attraction but also as a social function which increases one's own attraction to an interaction partner (Jarick & Bencic, 2019). That is, using eye contact with a potential or current romantic partner may not only indicate your own attraction but also increase your own attraction to that other person. The idea that our eyes are mostly used to perceive information about the social world dramatically misrepresents the importance of eye contact in influencing one's own attraction to a potential mate.

Eye Movement The third main category of oculestic structures involves the way that we move our eyes while in interaction with others. While eye movements are normal as one changes the focus of attention across varied people and objects within a particular context, one can also engage in social signaling where the eyes are used functionally in the same manner as gestures. Consider, for example, a situation where an individual has gone shopping with roommates and has bought a birthday cake as a surprise for their partner. If the partner walks into the room where the day's purchases are laid out on the counter, the roommate may widen his or her eyes to gain the speaker's attention, and then use their eyes to "point" in the direction of the cake to make sure that they cover it up before it is seen. In such a case, the friend has used their eyes to "flag down" their conversation partner and focused that partner's attention in the needed direction. Thus, an oculestic (eye-related) nonverbal behavior can approximate a kinesic (motion-related) nonverbal behavior in function (if not in structure).

Pupil Dilation The final category of oculestic structures is also about the physical motion of the eye, but in this case focusing on the widening or narrowing of the pupils. Interestingly, the widening or dilating of the pupil is often an

unintentional indication of physical attraction, with an individual's pupils dilating more when viewing attractive individuals of that individual's preferred sex (Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012). In addition, individuals may subconsciously perceive pupil dilation as a possible indicator of attraction, unknowingly responding by becoming more attracted to a potentially available partner who they have subconsciously discovered may fancy them (Hess, 1965). That is, the very physiological response that displays attraction to a potential partner may in fact unwittingly induce attraction in that same partner (Tombs & Silverman, 2004). At the same time, however, recent research has begun exploring the impact of attraction on pupil constriction, noting that brief constriction may occur when viewing an attractive partner (Liao et al., 2021) and demonstrating that the movement of pupils is much more nuanced than is the relatively stable finding that pupil dilation leads to increased attraction.

Multiple Meanings of Eye-Related Behaviors Before getting into some of the specific functions of these oculesic structures, it must be noted that the range of structural behaviors for the eyes is relatively limited compared to, say, the nonverbal code of physical appearance. For example, physical appearance can include a range of nonverbal characteristics and behaviors like perceptions of age/sex/race, body shape, height, apparel and artifacts, viewable physical ability, and general physiognomy like hair color and texture, facial structure, and skin color among many others. Oculesic nonverbal behaviors typically involve the ways that one moves and directs one's eyes toward or away from others. As a result, while humans have established many norms for encoding and decoding eye behavior, these movements must often be processed as a gestalt in conjunction with myriad other nonverbal cues (Burgoon et al., 1996). As a result, one can use additional contextual nonverbal cues to easily distinguish between the eye contact associated with a sexual advance (e.g., mutual gaze, smile, licking of lips, and emphasis of bodily sex-based difference) as compared to the eye contact associated with a threat of harm (e.g., mutual gaze, scowl, furrowed brow, and striking of a fist into a palm). While all these other features help distinguish between the oculesic dialectic of interest and threat, the intense, prolonged, unbroken stare may be structurally very similar despite the highly discrepant functional intents. That is, there is often *polysemy*—multiple meanings associated

with a specific nonverbal oculestic behavior—that makes it relatively difficult to interpret based solely on a limited channel alone (Manusov & Harvey, 2011).

Given the polysemous nature of oculestic structures, we will explore some of the functional aspects of our use of eyes in close relationships. Despite the exhortation of the often-misattributed proverb, “the eyes are the window to the soul,” in fact, the eyes can tell us some interesting information about an individual’s attitudes toward the people around them, especially useful in the context of close relationships. Oculestic behaviors can result in feelings of both platonic and romantic attraction. Oculestic behaviors can demonstrate interest in others while also maintaining the interest of an interaction partner. Oculestic behaviors can aid in the creation and maintenance of intimacy and affection through connection. Finally, as aforementioned, oculestic behaviors can lead to a variety of antisocial responses as well, ones which can lead to the deterioration of a relationship or even cause harm to an interaction partner. Clearly, the way that we use our eyes have multiple implications for our close relationships across the entirety of the relational lifespan, able to send multiple messages despite a rather limited set of possible structures.

Attraction

One of the most obvious uses of the eyes involves the observation of one’s surroundings and the subsequent gleaning of important social and contextual information. Essentially, we use our eyes to look around us and figure out what is going on. At the same time, we assign valences—positive, neutral, or negative attitudes or feelings—to the objects and especially the people that we observe. Those things which are positively valenced (or evaluated favorably) can be said to be attractive to the observer, and that attraction is incredibly important in the formation of close relationships (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). At the same time, one’s use of the eyes can also serve to indicate to others those things to which one is attracted. As a result, oculestic behaviors can both promote and indicate attraction. In this section, we will talk about the nature of attraction as

experienced in a one-sided manner. That is, the implications associated with one-sided observations of others like those found in simple gaze. In our next section, we will focus more on the impact of mutual gaze on interest between interaction partners who share a close relationship.

Initial Attraction

During the initial impression-forming stages of relationships, we gain much of our information about one or more individual(s) simply by looking in their direction and evaluating both their appearance and their behaviors (Duran & Kelly, 1988). During the earliest stages of relational development, observations are made before any significant interaction has occurred, serving as a gatekeeper to help both parties determine whether future interaction is beneficial (Bowman, 2019; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005). Put simply, as we look in the direction of a potential interaction partner (whether that partnership is potentially platonic or romantic) we observe their physical appearance to find information about their physical and social characteristics, in part to determine the compatibility that we might have with one another (Bowman, 2019). If you are interested in sports, you might look at a possible friend in order to determine if they would make a good gym buddy or running partner or maybe even be interested in joining your softball team. You might also observe the way that the other person behaves, looking to see if they appear to be relatively similar to yourself and also perhaps seem to be of good humor or attentive to others. Observed physical features like muscle tone and body fat would then combine with some observed interpersonal behaviors like a broad smile and an open body orientation to determine whether that person might be a good fit for future sport-based interactions.

The same process occurs as we look for potential romantic partners, searching for physical features that we find attractive and/or interesting while also looking for the ways of behaving that meet the needs we have decided are important for a potential romantic encounter. For some, they may be attracted to a tall dark and handsome partner, somewhat aloof and dripping with cool. Others may be most interested in a more androgynous individual who appears open, warm, caring, and affectionate. The

very things that we observe in these initial interactions are sorted to allow us to quickly determine the potential for additional engagement with one another (Finkel & Eastwick, 2009; Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005). To be sure, however, one must clarify that the attraction resulting from the oculestic behaviors we are discussing have to do with the observation of characteristics about a relatively unknown other. This is different from the interest that emerges with a known other (discussed in the next section). Even more significantly, this is different from the one-sided looking behaviors known as surveillance, a set of oculestic practices that can be much more sinister in nature, relying on differences in power and efficacy to gain information about another individual (Marwick, 2012).

Oculestic Indicators of Attraction

One can also observe a variety of indicators which may be perceived as indicators of individual attraction, behaviors which may not necessarily be intentional and which may not always be exclusively representative of attraction. Two of these indicators of attraction are directly related to oculestic behaviors, including the dilation of one's pupils and the use of one-sided gaze.

Pupil Dilation As discussed earlier in this chapter, people may interpret dilated pupils of another individual as an indication of attraction (Hess, 1965). While this is a valid assumption grounded in research, there also exist other reasons for pupil dilation that can somewhat muddy the waters. For example, it is possible to observe dilated pupils on individuals under the influence of prescription or recreational pharmaceuticals of certain sorts (Bowman, 2020; Larsen & Waters, 2018). At certain times throughout human history, larger pupils have been associated with facial attractiveness in women (Couch & Koeninger, 2016; Tombs & Silverman, 2004) and there have been recorded attempts of persons regularly using small doses of poisons to achieve this dilated pupil appearance in order to capitalize on such trends (Hess & Petrovich, 1987). Similarly, people may experience temporary pupil dilation upon viewing *objects* that they find pleasing or attractive, which can also account for potential misunderstandings associated with physical attraction (Gump, 1962;

Kuraguchi & Kanari, 2021). Larger pupils themselves are more likely to be seen as “cute” and are linked with a desire to protect and nurture among adults (Sternglanz et al., 1977). Scholars also note that other emotional experiences may include (as a side effect) similar changes in pupil dilation (Hess & Petrovich, 1987) so it is quite possible that this indicator of attraction is not as robust as people likely subconsciously perceive. Gaze Somewhat surprisingly, the very act of looking in the direction of someone or something may also be seen as an indicator of attraction. After all, humans spend more time looking at people or things that they find attractive than they do at those people or things that they find unattractive (Shimojo et al., 2003). As a result, gaze can be seen not only as a way of discovering social information about an attractive individual, but also as a *de facto* way to indicate that one considers someone else to *be* an attractive individual (Bowman, 2020). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the trope of a young person staring off in the direction of an unrequited love—to the obvious amusement of friends and classmates who are able to ascertain an attraction-based motivation—finds itself actually grounded in regular human behavior. People do in fact stare at the people and things that they find attractive or pine after. This positive valence for one-sided gaze is well-demonstrated, showing not only that gaze is an indicator of attraction but that it can also be a contributor towards attraction. Indeed, across the course of the life span scholars have found a robust preference for direct gaze from both humans and primates (Simpson et al., 2019). When that previously one-sided gaze is observed and reciprocated, the resulting mutual gaze may be seen as a component of shared interest rather than simple individual attraction—as we discuss in this next section. Interest

Once attraction has been established through gaze, individuals may continue to engage in more interaction-based oculosic behaviors—such as eye contact or mutual gaze—to signal romantic or sexual interest in another individual. Extended eye contact is often seen as an approach signal, used socially as an invitation to initiate interaction (Givens, 1978; de Weerth & Kalma, 1995). In the process of courtship, once an individual has determined one’s attraction to another through gaze and observation, they likely will then pursue signaling their own interest while simultaneously attempting to decode whether there is mutual interest.

Initiation of Interaction

Apart from those few individuals blessed with an excess of self-confidence, most individuals prefer some assurance that the apple of their eye is at least somewhat expressing reciprocal interest. One of the primary non-verbal indicators of this interest is expressed through eye contact. When it comes to initiating interaction, individuals often rely on reciprocity to gauge whether another is mutually interested (Burgoon et al., 1995). Such *reciprocity* occurs when an individual reacts to another's behavior by mirroring or displaying similar behavior. Imagine one is hanging out with friends at a bar on a Friday night, and during their evening, their friend informs them that an attractive person at the end of the bar keeps glancing in one's direction. Over the course of the next ten minutes, one may begin to gaze toward the attractive person, whereupon they engage in prolonged eye contact on numerous occasions. Fortunate for both parties, eye contact can express confidence and assertiveness and is perceived as an indicator of self-esteem (Droney & Brooks, 1993). Assured that this attractive person might be gazing with romantic or sexual interest, one feels as though there is enough evidence to confidently approach the attractive person at the end of the bar to pursue additional interaction.

Eye contact is not expressed as an exclusive nonverbal signal in the approach decision-making process, however. Studies have found that eye contact coupled with smiling tends to increase whether an individual might decide to approach another (Walsh & Hewitt, 1985). Given the polysemous nature of eye behavior (Manusov & Harvey, 2011), in our previous example, the attractive person's gaze might have not been a message of romantic or sexual interest, but instead the result of some other issue. Perhaps the gazer thought one was someone they knew, or maybe they believed that one was dressed in a peculiar way. For that matter, it is even possible that the attractive person at the end of the bar was bored and simply looking at everyone in the bar as a form of entertainment or even trying to determine who might have been their blind date for the evening. Most individuals might not deem the presence of a solitary non-verbal behavior as enough evidence to confidently determine mutual interest, but the combination of eye behavior and other nonverbals like

facial expressions can add confidence or even certainty. Many of these behaviors exist, and other studies focused on gender have found that eye contact combined with space-maximizing movements (e.g., stretching, extending limbs), intrasexual touching, and less closed-body postures (e.g., crossed arms, crossed legs) were indicators that men were more likely to approach women (Renninger et al., 2004) in these polysemous contexts.

Flirting

Once an individual has determined attraction and interest and approached someone, the two persons might engage in flirting behavior. Flirting is when an individual expresses romantic or sexual attraction to another, receives such an expression of attraction, or attempts to decide if the feelings of attraction are mutual (Hall, 2013). Although one might be tempted to rely solely on eye contact alone to determine mutual attraction, flirting is a much more nuanced interaction than being limited to just one nonverbal behavior. While the eyes can't solely provide a guaranteed assurance of interest, the eyes might allow one to differentiate between romantic and social intrigue. That is, both gazing toward one another's eyes and using extended eye contact might help individuals discern platonic interactions from flirtatious interactions (England et al., 1996).

During a flirtatious interaction, the quantity and quality of oculosic behavior is very much dependent on the individuals involved and their idiosyncratic preferred flirting styles. Overall, flirtatious glances (i.e., gazes that involve an eyebrow raise with a smile, which may or may not involve mutual look) have been linked with physical attraction within the first three minutes of interaction, whereas one-sided or mutual gazing was linked with physical attraction between the subsequent four to nine minutes of interaction (Hall & Xing, 2015). In other words, when an individual is attracted to another, they tend to first engage in flirtatious glances toward the other and then as the interaction progresses it relies more on gazes that are subsequently absent of those eyebrow or facial movements.

Research has argued that there is more than one “type” of flirting style that can be applied to individuals when interacting with novel others within initial interactions (Hall & Xing, 2015). Depending on an individual’s preferred flirting tendencies, the use of flirtatious glances and/or gazing might be enacted more during initial interactions with a potential partner. For example, individuals who prefer creating an intense emotional connection with a potential partner (i.e., sincere flirts) tend to engage in flirtatious glances within the first few minutes of an interaction compared to the average individual (*ibid.*). On the other hand, individuals who prefer to flirt purely for fun without the desire for long-term commitment (i.e., playful flirts) tend to use more flirtatious glances after the first few minutes of interaction compared to the average individual. One explanation for this might be that sincere flirts might prefer to begin interaction with subtle behavior, such as more coy and flirtatious glances, and then begin to engage in direct behavior (e.g., asking questions seeking intimate disclosure, partaking in active listening behaviors, etc.) following initiation of interaction as a means to signal sincere interest (*ibid.*). Of course, not all individuals flirt specifically to create intimate connection, but once an intimate relationship has been established the use of eye contact can continue to build connection—as discussed in this next section.

Connection

Not only do nonverbal oculestic behaviors serve to demonstrate and induce attraction and/or interest depending on the nature of the relationship, but also some of these eye-related behaviors can serve to establish and maintain perceptions of connection between two or more individuals. Within the context of an established relationship, it would be difficult to understate the significance of mutual gaze—or the lack of this reciprocal behavior—for the vast majority of relationships. Indeed, the popular tropes that emphasize the abilities of couples to communicate “with just one look” is widespread and trusted, perhaps unsurprising since humans have their earliest experiences with interpersonal connection as a result of the mutual gaze they experience as an infant with a caregiver or trusted adult (Brooks & Meltzoff, 2014).

Intimacy

Scholars have identified multiple forms of intimacy over the course of studying human relationships (e.g., emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, recreational intimacy, among others; Schaefer & Olson, 1981) and yet a key foundational element of intimacy is the sense of connection to one's partner (whether romantic, platonic, and/or familial). The experience of shared mutual gaze (i.e., eye contact) within the context of a significant relationship is one of the most robust elements of nonverbal intimacy and immediacy behaviors (Bowman, 2019). Indeed, the linkage between partner gaze and the experience of emotional connection are borne out at even the most basic chemical level in our bodies (Denes, 2012).

This use of eye contact is so foundational to what it means to connect with other humans on a deeper level that partners even interpret gaze avoidance (covered later in this chapter) or gaze directed at an extradyadic individual to be seen as an indicator of a potential relational threat by a partner (Guerrero et al., 1995). To regularly look at a partner and to share eye contact with a partner is a key part of intimate communication. Indeed, when trying to simulate a sense of connection between a human and an anthropomorphic robot, programmers consider the importance of oculesics in trying to foster and build connections between the two (Kim & Kwon, 2010).

Maintenance Part of keeping an established relationship between individuals at the desired level of connection involves engaging in relational maintenance behaviors (Bowman, 2019; Bowman, 2020). These behaviors include a variety of nonverbal intimacy cues for nonverbal codes across the body, and yet the importance of eye contact is one of the most-discussed nonverbal indicators in popular culture (perhaps alongside perceptions of the importance of sex). Indeed, immediacy behaviors like eye contact are strongly related to those positive behaviors in a relationship that are predictive of long-term relational satisfaction (Hinkle, 1999). Clearly, people who are skilled at keeping a relationship at a desired state are also fluent in nonverbal expressions of connection like eye contact. At the same time, eye contact is not just one of those behaviors that can