

## *The Importance of Eye Contact in the Interview Setting*

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### *Abstract*

*There have been many studies done showing that eye contact is an important factor in the decision to hire. The hypothesis of the current study is that when two individuals are equally qualified for a job, the individual who maintains appropriate eye contact will be seen as more competent and more hireable. However, this effect will be less severe for highly intelligent and highly qualified applicants as such individuals are often excused for their socially inappropriate behaviors. In the current study, participants read a sample job opening and the resume of either a highly qualified or average applicant before watching a brief interview clip in which the applicant either made appropriate or minimal levels of eye contact. Results show that inappropriate eye-contact did lower perceived hirability, but is more forgivable in highly qualified individuals.*

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### *The Importance of Eye Contact in the Interview Setting*

Good communication is necessary in any relationship, whether personal or professional. However, words are not always needed when individuals communicate. Nonverbal communication, also known as body language, is an important form of communication. All of our nonverbal behaviors such as posture, eye contact, and gestures send strong messages. A study by McMahan (1976) demonstrated the importance of nonverbal cues on person perception in social interaction. In this study undergraduate students viewed videos of targets displaying various combinations of both verbal and nonverbal cues portraying dominance and/or submissiveness. The results showed that nonverbal communication had more of an effect on

perceived attitudes and the formation of first impressions than verbal communication in interpersonal relationships.

When it comes to nonverbal communication, eye contact is one of the most important forms that an individual can use. The level of eye contact maintained can signify anything from interpersonal attraction to the level of confidence a person is feeling. If an individual averts eyes contact it can make it appear as if they are being dishonest (Levine, Asada, Park, 2006). Of course, if a person maintains appropriate eye contact, it is a good way of conveying interest in what others are saying. High levels of eye contact can also convey high levels of self esteem (Droney & Brooks, 1993). In a study done by Weisfeld, Bloch, and Ivers (1984) high school aged females were even perceived as being more fashionable and attractive with increased eye contact. As one can see, maintaining appropriate eye contact is very important in many aspects of life. Eye contact alone has even been found to be a highly important variable in regulating communication between two or more individuals (Weins, Harper, & Matazzaro, 1980). The influence that eye contact has on impressions has lead there to be many studies done on its effects.

In one particular study subjects were split into groups to view one of six 60-second video tapes. In these tapes there was either a male or female target that maintained eye contact with an interviewer for either a total of 5 seconds, 30 seconds, or 50 seconds. After viewing the tape subjects were asked to rate the target on a series of bipolar adjectives. The intent was to assess the perceived potency (e.g. strength, assertiveness, grade point average, dominance, and leadership) of the target. As it turned out, the more eye contact was displayed in the video, the more potent the targets appeared. However, this effect was most pronounced between the video clip with 5 seconds of eye contact and the video clip with 30 seconds of eye contact. There were no significant effects for either the gender of the target viewed or the gender of the subjects (Brooks, Church, & Fraser, 1985).

Employment interviews are one setting where first impressions matter greatly. In many situations an applicant only has one chance to make a good impression in person. It seems self evident that if the interviewee portrays themselves poorly, the odds that they will receive a job offer will decrease noticeably. Also, as mentioned earlier, nonverbal communication can speak louder than words. With how much emphasis society has put on eye contact as a form of

nonverbal communication an individual has to wonder if the level of eye contact maintained during an interview could influence whether or not an applicant gets offered the job.

This was the focus of a study done by Amalfitano and Kalt (1977). They wanted to determine whether or not the level of eye contact made could influence job interviewers' evaluations of applicants. To do this the experimenters took four photographs. Two of these photographs were of a man either looking straight into the camera or looking downward. The other two photographs were of a woman doing the same thing. The subjects were randomly assigned to receive one of these photographs. They were told to assume that the individual whose photograph they were given was an interviewee for a position as a management trainee. The subjects were then told to rate the photograph of the supposed interviewee on a series of scales. The results of this study supported their original hypothesis that eye contact is one of the determinants of the decision to hire an individual. Applicants who made eye contact were rated higher and were more likely to be offered the job.

A study was done by Burkhardt, Weider-Hatfield, and Hocking (1985) to determine whether or not the level of eye contact used during an interview was so important that it could affect the interviewers' evaluations of subsequent applicants. To begin, six employment interviews for a summer job as a receptionist were taped. Each of these mock interviews consisted of one of three women making either appropriate or inappropriate levels of eye contact. The researchers were curious to find out whether an interviewee who maintained appropriate eye contact would be perceived less favorably when she was preceded by interviewees who also maintained appropriate levels of eye contact. To discover this, subjects watched an interview preceded by two interviews containing appropriate levels of eye contact or two interviews containing inappropriate levels of eye contact. After watching each interview subjects were asked to rate each interviewee on a series of scales assessing personality traits and predicting job skills. The results of this experiment support their original hypothesis that interviewees who maintain appropriate eye contact will be evaluated less favorably when they are preceded by interviewees who also maintain appropriate levels of eye contact. This effect was noted in both the ratings of personality traits and perceived job skills.

In a study by Tessler and Shushelsky (1978), both the independent and joint effects of eye contact and perceived social status in a job interview were examined. To accomplish this, undergraduate students acted as interviewers in a mock job interview. The target the participants

interviewed either maintained high, moderate, or low levels of eye contact throughout the entire interview. The target also varied on the level of perceived social status which was manipulated through systematically varying the information given to the subject-interviewer concerning military history, education, and occupational background. The dependent variable was a rating of how qualified the job interviewee appeared to be for a job requiring self-confidence. The results indicated that the level of eye contact an interviewee maintains becomes less important when they are perceived to have a high social status.

Other studies, such as one done by Bebee (1977) indicate that nonverbal communication, including eye contact, has a significant effect on interview impressions therefore affecting future decisions. Clearly appropriate levels of eye contact are important to maintain during an interview. This leads me to another question. Would poor eye contact be excused if the interviewee is perceived as both highly intelligent and very qualified for a job? This sort of an effect can be seen in many areas of life. Individuals perceived as being highly intelligent are often excused for socially inappropriate behaviors. At times, it can even cause them seem more likable, due to the fact that it is easier to relate to them.

A study done by Aronson, Willerman, and Floyd (1966) demonstrated this effect known as a pratfall. They performed an experiment that showed that when a clumsy blunder is done by an average person it decreases their attractiveness. However, if the person is considered to be highly intelligent and superior, the same clumsy act can make them appear to be more attractive. This is due to the fact that highly intelligent, superior people can seem to be above other individuals and the clumsy act makes them appear to be more human. Another reason for the pratfall effect may come from the stereotypes of people considered to be nerds. It is expected that they are socially awkward. If nerds are not socially awkward they can come off as self-important and condescending. Of course, other studies have demonstrated this effect as well. One particular study done by Helreich, Aronson, and LeFan (1970) demonstrated that the pratfall effect significantly increases liking for a competent person.

The purpose of this current study is to further investigate the effects of both eye contact and perceived intelligence have on the interview process. It is my hypothesis that when two individuals are equally qualified for a job the individual who maintains appropriate eye contact will be seen as more competent and more hireable than the individual who makes inappropriate levels of eye contact. However, I believe that this effect will not be seen when the two

individuals are perceived as being highly intelligent and highly qualified for the job they applied for.

### *Method*

#### *Design*

A 2X2 factorial was used to compare the effects of eye contact (high/low) and qualification (high/minimal) on the hirability of a job applicant.

#### *Participants*

Seventy-six undergraduate students from Winona State University participated in this study. Seventy-five participants were compensated for their participation with extra credit points in a psychology course of their choice. One participant volunteered out of personal interest and was not compensated in any way.

#### *Materials*

*Job opening.* A description of a job opening for a full time financial analyst was used. This job opening listed both minimum qualifications (e.g. bachelor's degree, one year related experience, familiarity with accounting software) and preferred qualifications (e.g. master's degree, strong leadership abilities, strong strategic problem solving skills).

*Applicant's resumes.* Two resumes were created for a fictitious job applicant. In one resume the applicant met the minimum job qualifications (e.g. bachelor's degree, 2.97 GPA, strong teamwork skills) and in the other resume the applicant met the preferred job qualifications (e.g. master's degree, 3.94 GPA, strong knowledge of debt and equity analysis, experience with project management).

*Job interview.* Two video clips of an interview lasting approximately two minutes each were made. These videos focused on the interviewee's face. At no point in either clip was the interviewer seen. In both video clips the interviewer asked the same questions and the interviewee responded with the same answers. The information provided during the interview did not overlap with the information provided in the resume. An example of the questions asked was: "Where do you see yourself in five years?" The answer to this question was: "I am definitely interested in making a long-term commitment to my next position. Judging by what I

learned about this position, it's exactly what I'm looking for. In terms of my future career path, I'm confident that if I do my work with excellence, opportunities will inevitably open up for me." Both videos contained the same interviewer and the same interviewee wearing the same outfit. In both videos the shot was taken from the same angle in the same setting. The only difference was that in one video clip the interviewee made minimal eye contact while in the other clip the interviewee made high levels of eye contact.

*Dependent variable.* The dependent variable consisted of a 6 question questionnaire designed to measure subjects' perceptions on the hirability of the applicant. Examples of the questions include: "Is this person qualified for the job?" "Would the applicant be able to complete their tasks in a timely manner?" "Would this candidate succeed at the job?" A scale of 1 (*absolutely not*) to 7 (*absolutely*) was used to measure the degree to which the participants agreed with the questions.

### ***Procedure***

Subjects were randomly assigned to read either the resume of the applicant who was minimally qualified or the applicant who was highly qualified. Subjects were also randomly assigned to either watch the video clip in which the interviewee made minimal eye contact or appropriate eye contact. To begin the experiment, subjects were seated alone at a table. All subjects were told that they were to read a job opening as well as one of the two resumes and to just let the experimenter know when they were finished. After the subjects finished reading the job opening and resume they watched one of the two video clips. Once the video clip finished, subjects were handed the questionnaire assessing the hirability of the applicant. They were instructed to fill out the questionnaire using both what they watched in the video clip and what they read in the resume. The questionnaire was then collected upon completion and the subjects were debriefed.

### ***Results***

Participant's ratings on the six questions regarding the hirability of the applicant were combined into a single scale,  $\alpha=.91$ . A 2 x 2 ANOVA was then conducted to test the effects of eye contact qualifications on the perceived hirability of an applicant. The means of each condition can be seen in Table 1. There was a significant interaction between the level of eye

contact maintained and the level of qualification,  $F(1, 72) = 16.313, p < .001$ . Applicants who had low qualifications were judged much harsher for their lack of eye contact. There was a significant main effect for the level of eye contact,  $F(1, 72) = 67.482, p < .001$ . When the applicant maintained high levels of eye contact he was considered to be much more hireable. There was also a significant main effect for the level of qualification,  $F(1, 72) = 73.223, p < .001$ .

Table 1 Mean scores of hirability based upon eye contact and qualification.

Eye Contact	Qualification	Mean	Standard Deviation
Yes	High	6.123	.552
	Low	5.544	.761
No	High	5.588	.410
	Low	3.974	.442

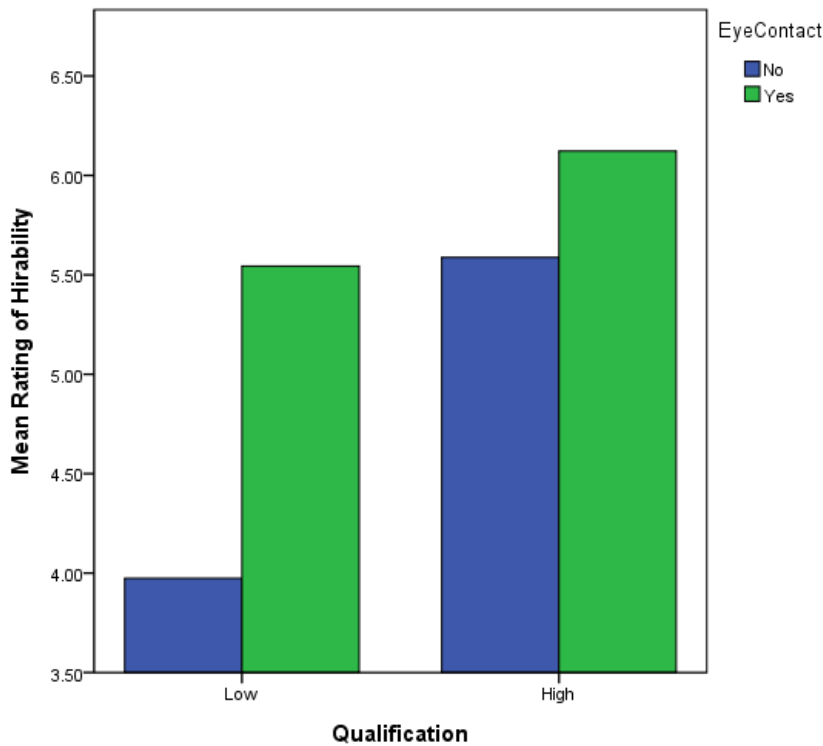


Figure 1. Mean rating of hirability based upon the interaction between perceived qualification and level of eye contained maintained.

Those who were seen as being highly qualified were considered much more hireable. This suggests eye contact is an important factor for everyone no matter how qualified they are. However, applicants who are highly qualified are not judged as harshly for a lack of eye contact during the interview process as those who are minimally qualified.

### *Discussion*

It was hypothesized that when two equally qualified applicants apply for a job the individual who maintains appropriate eye contact will be seen as more hireable than the individual who makes minimal levels of eye contact. It was also believed that this effect would not be seen when the two individuals were perceived as being highly qualified for the job they applied for. The results of this study partially support the original hypothesis. No applicants were excused for making poor eye contact during the interview. However, minimally qualified applicants were judged much harsher for making low levels of eye contact than highly qualified applicants.

In future research one area to consider would be the effects of the applicant's gender when looking at the importance of both eye contact and perceived qualifications on hirability. There is a chance that women and men may not be judged the same for their lack of eye contact during the interview. It appeared as though some of the subjects found the target to be incompetent when he made minimal eye contact in the video clip. However, I'm curious if women would be perceived as shy rather than incompetent.

Another area that would be interesting to consider in further research would be the effects of the applicant's level of attractiveness. The target used in the current research was of average attractiveness. It is quite possible that those who are highly attractive may be more forgiven for their lack of eye contact than those who are of average attractiveness. Of course, it is also quite possible that highly attractive people may be judged more harshly for their lack of eye contact. One possible reason could be that they may appear bored with the interview rather than nervous or incompetent.

In the end, the important message to take from this research is that no matter how qualified an individual is eye contact is still important. For those who are of average qualification, the level of eye contact maintained during the interview itself may make or break the chances of being offered a job. So as recent graduates prepare for their first interview, this is definitely something that they'll want to keep in mind.



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