

# Oculesics

*by Sophia Tutorial*



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss another method of non-verbal communication that is impacted by culture.

The particular areas of focus include:

1. Oculesics as a Communication Style
  - a. Direct Eye Contact
  - b. Indirect Eye Contact

## 1. Oculesics as a Communication Style

**Oculesics**, or the use of eye contact, is a way of communicating with the eyes. All cultures use eye contact to communicate in a variety of ways.

However, misunderstandings can occur due to the ways different cultures use eye contact.

In particular, there are two general forms of eye contact:

- Direct
- Indirect



### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Oculesics**

The communication style which uses eye contact as a symbol.

##### **1a. Direct Eye Contact**

Direct eye contact is very common here in the United States. We expect people to make direct eye contact with us as a sign that they're interested and engaged.

It can also be used—particularly in a business setting—to send a message that you're confident and bold. In fact, if you don't make eye contact, you may appear as though you're unsure of yourself.

Our culture is very comfortable with direct eye contact. We do it unconsciously and instantaneously because that's the message we've been taught to send. However, if you were to go to another country, making direct eye contact could send a very different signal.

## IN CONTEXT

In certain Asian countries, direct eye contact can be seen as an affront, a sign of disrespect, or even a challenge. This is particularly true if you're making that eye contact with someone in a position of authority over you. It would instead be more proper to look away, or have brief, sporadic eye contact. In contrast, sporadic eye contact would be interpreted very differently in the United States.

In some cultures, direct eye contact between a man and a woman—even just quick eye contact—can signal different things.

## IN CONTEXT

A woman (or anyone) from the United States may make eye contact as a way of just saying hello to someone, or as a way of being cordial and respectful. In some cultures, however, a man making eye contact with a woman is a sign of flirtation. Returning that eye contact could send a very different message than the one the woman intended.

Direct eye contact can thus have several different meanings depending on the context and culture in which it is used.

The extreme of this would be prolonged direct eye contact, or not gazing away for an extended period of time.

## IN CONTEXT

People in the United States tend to be very comfortable with direct eye contact, but if someone makes eye contact with you for too long, you would probably start to feel uncomfortable. However, there are some countries in which that kind of eye contact—particularly between members of the same gender—is a sign that people are telling the truth and can be trusted.

### 1b. Indirect Eye Contact

Indirect eye contact is another form of oculesics, and the connotations of indirect eye contact can differ depending on the culture.

## IN CONTEXT

In the United States, gazing away or looking down often sends a signal to people that you're distracted or uninterested. However, in many Latin American, Asian, and African cultures, brief, sporadic eye contact would be considered normal and respectful; you would not want to look someone directly in the eye.

As a complete opposite of prolonged, direct eye contact, there is lack of eye contact. Lack of eye contact is a form of communication in some cultures.

## IN CONTEXT

In Japanese culture, it is considered respectful, polite, and appropriate for a Japanese woman not to make any form of eye contact with someone. Lack of eye contact in that culture sends a very different message than the one it would send here in the United States.



### BIG IDEA

People don't always consciously consider how they make eye contact because they have grown accustomed to the way it is done in their particular culture. Non-verbal signals are often instant and emotional, so a person might not even be aware that they are sending a particular message.

It's therefore important to have an awareness that vast differences in the meanings of these signals can exist between cultures.



### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **oculesics as a communication style** that uses eye contact as a symbol. While some cultures use direct eye contact to convey respect, others use indirect eye contact (or sometimes even no eye contact) to convey that message. You now understand that because the way eye contact is used, as well as the meaning that it sends, can differ depending on context and culture, it's important to have an awareness of these differences in order to decrease the chances of miscommunication and conflict. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



### TERMS TO KNOW

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