

PRIMAL HEALTH RESEARCH

A NEW ERA IN HEALTH RESEARCH

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EYE-TO-EYE CONTACT FROM A PRIMAL HEALTH RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

Since prehistorical time

The beliefs and theories related to the power of eye-to-eye contact between humans are lost in the obscurity of prehistoric ages. The 'Evil Eye' is mentioned in cuneiform texts on clay tablets that the Sumerians, Babylonians and Assyrians wrote thousands of years ago¹. These texts describe the deep-rooted belief that there are individuals who exude an aura of bad-good luck depending on the way they look at others. In his theory of sight, Aristotle explained the possible power of a glance by claiming that there is some substance that emanates from the eye and settles on the seen object.²

Scientific studies of eye-to-eye contact started with Charles Darwin who researched whether facial expression is innate or governed by social rules. He circulated a list of questions to missionaries and others in remote parts of the world. One question he wanted to know was if astonishment is expressed everywhere by wide eyes and raised eyebrows.³

Twentieth century ethologists developed clever methods to explore universal behavioural patterns. Eibl-Eibesfeldt used a special camera with a lateral lens to study flirting behaviour in a great number of cultures, including industrialised countries: he demonstrated that gazing is the most striking human courtship ploy.⁴ More recently, we have learned from countless experiments that the appeal of eyes, and a need for eye contact, develop early in life. Among very young babies, images of paired eyes resulted in more smiling than single or treble eyes, and a larger pair is more arousing than a smaller pair.⁵

There are, of course, cultural differences regarding the interpretation of eye contact in particular situations. In Western culture eye contact is usually a sign of confidence, of interest in the conversation, of openness and frankness. In Asia there are very different reactions to eye contact. For example, in several Asian countries, children are not supposed to make a direct eye contact with elders. In Europe, on the other hand, parents and teachers often say: 'Look at me when I am talking to you!'; in Rudolf Steiner (Waldorf) schools, the teacher ritually welcomes each pupil every day, shaking hands and making eye contact.

The eye contact between non-human mammals and between humans and other mammals is also well documented. In many species, eye contact is often perceived as a threat. All programs to prevent dog bites recommend avoiding direct eye contact with an unknown dog. In the 1990's, black bears returned to Catoctin Mountain Park, in Maryland, after a twenty-year absence. An important recommendation to visitors is to avoid direct eye contact if the bear stands on its hind legs. Chimpanzees

use eye contact to signal aggression in hostile encounters, and staring at them in a zoo can induce agitated behaviour.

Comparisons with other mammals lead to the realization that *homo sapiens* is also the 'weeping ape'. Terrestrial mammals do not express their emotions by weeping. Tears of emotion contain different proteins from tears produced by chopping onions. If we add that the diameter of the pupil is highly dependent on the hormonal balance, and therefore on the emotional state, we can explain that a great diversity of messages can be transmitted through eye contact.

The first eye-to-eye contact between mother and newborn baby

After thousands of years of culturally controlled childbirth, we had to wait until the 1970s to realize the importance of the first eye-to-eye contact between mother and baby, immediately after birth. We cannot dissociate the recent interest in this aspect of mother- newborn relationship from the value of colostrum and our new understanding of the initiation of lactation.⁶ In 1977, at a medical conference in Rome, when analysing the conditions for the baby to find the breast during the hour following birth, I could already include dim light and wide-open eyes among the factors that are linked to 'the early expression of the rooting reflex'.⁷

Today we are in a position to describe a typical behavioural pattern during the very first minutes following birth, when the un-guided mother does not feel observed, and is in such a state of consciousness that she has forgotten what she read or been taught. We might say that this typical behavioural pattern occurs when there is such a reduction of neocortical activity that cultural conditioning has been to a great extent erased. It usually follows the typical 'fetus ejection reflex', which is a short series of irresistible contractions without any room for voluntary movements. In such a context the mother's trunk is often upright; she may be, for example, on her knees. Usually the mother first looks at her baby, before becoming more audacious and touching her baby with her fingertips. After a while she is even more audacious, and takes her baby in her arms. Then most mothers search for the baby's eyes. Women who had this experience usually claim that they will never forget this first eye-to-eye contact. One woman told me that just after the birth she saw the whole universe in the eyes of her baby.

This first eye-to-eye contact appears to be an important facet of the complex interaction between mother and newborn in our species. Physiologically, the fetus must protect itself during the fetus ejection reflex by releasing noradrenaline. One of the many effects of this hormone is that the baby is born with dilated pupils. These large pupils obviously signal to the mother 'look at my eyes!' at a time when the behaviour of the mother is more instinctive than ever, since she remains in both a special hormonal state and particular state of consciousness.

In 1982, at a conference in Oxford, I described the potential interaction between mother and newborn baby—particularly the first eye-to-eye contact. After my presentation I had a conversation with Niko Tinbergen (Nobel Prize winner, 1973). As a 'field ethologist' he was studying autistic children in their daily environment by sharing the life of families with an autistic child. He became convinced that there are risk factors for autism during the perinatal period (such as labour induction, anaesthesia during labour and forceps delivery). He considered eye contact between mother and baby as a major 'social releaser' and that we should explore the hypothetical link between the tendency to routinely disturb the first mother-newborn eye-to-eye contact, and the fact that autistic children cannot communicate by

looking at the eyes of others. This hypothesis has not been tested because Tinbergen, an octogenarian, was then at the very end of his career. Today the Primal Health Research database includes a dozen large and authoritative studies detecting significant risk factors for autism in the perinatal period. Prematurity does not appear to be a risk factor: this is remarkable, since premature birth implies early visual stimulations. There are many new reasons to save the Tinbergen hypothesis from oblivion.

Phrasing new questions

Tinbergen's insights helped me realize that we often need emerging knowledge to define new and fruitful questions. We can offer many examples of basic—but paradoxically new—questions inspired by recent scientific advances.

For thousands of years it has been commonplace to promote love and describe its different facets: however we had to wait until 'the scientification of love' to formulate fundamental questions about how the capacity to love develops.

There have been countless campaigns to promote breastfeeding. However, we had to wait for an accumulation of physiological data to start understanding how the capacity to breastfeed develops.

In many societies, generations of children have been told that being left-handed is a 'bad habit'. In the current scientific context, our understanding of gene-environment interaction inspires questions about factors that influence the process of laterality.

Until recently the issues of hetero- and homosexuality were the realm of moral philosophers and spiritual leaders. In the current scientific context the genesis of sexual orientation is studied from new perspectives.

The same scenario is constantly replicated: scientific disciplines provide answers to questions that had not previously been properly formulated. Today, the time has come to ask how and when the capacity to communicate through eye contact develops? This leads us to acknowledge, in particular, the real importance of the first contact between mother and newborn baby.

It is obvious that human beings are not equal regarding their capacity to communicate via eye contact. We all know about 'high-functioning' individuals who have difficulties to communicate that way (mild forms of Asperger's syndrome?). Such personality traits may be studied from a primal health research perspective. One can also wonder why many people routinely wear sunglasses, whatever the season: are they hiding their discomfort at being exposed to the sight of others?

Intriguing cross-cultural beliefs and rituals.

A long history of socialised childbirth explains why anthropologists have not yet paid attention to cross-cultural attitudes. They have not explored why all societies they study have dramatically disturbed the physiological processes in the perinatal period, particularly the short period of time between the birth of the baby and the delivery of the placenta. Once more knowledge inspires more questions. It is because we are learning about the importance of this 'third stage of labour' that we now think of understanding the cultural interferences.

We would need volumes to mention hundreds of beliefs and rituals, the effects of which are always to separate mother and newborn baby and to make the first eye contact impossible. Some of these beliefs are directly related to the mother-newborn eye contact. In some ethnic groups of sub-Saharan Africa

(around Benin), it is believed that if the mother looks at the baby's eyes during the day following birth, a bad spirit will enter the baby's body. Other beliefs have the same effects indirectly. The most universal (and intriguing) way to interfere is simply to promote the belief that colostrum is tainted or harmful to the baby—even a substance to be expressed and discarded. This negative attitude toward colostrum implies that, immediately after being born, the baby must not be in the arms of the mother. This is the origin of a widespread deep-rooted ritual—the rush to cut the cord.

Several beliefs can be combined and reinforce each other. Many rituals make the first contact between mother and baby impossible: bathing, rubbing, tight swaddling, foot binding, "smoking" the baby, piercing the ears of the little girls, are typical examples. In several parts of the world, the mother must wait for the permission given by a third person (shaman, godfather, father...) before she may interact with her baby.

These beliefs and rituals have evolutionary advantages if basic strategies for survival of human groups are to dominate nature and to dominate other human groups. Until now successful societies are those that have developed the human potential for aggression and the capacity to destroy life, while moderating the development of the capacity to love, including love of nature. This is what we can understand as we learn that the capacity to love develops to a great extent in the perinatal period.

Today, while humanity should be inventing radically new strategies for survival, we are still stuck in the aftermath of such beliefs and rituals. We constantly find excuses to separate mother and newborn baby immediately after birth, and therefore to distract the mother at the very time when she needs the skin-to-skin and eye-to-eye contact with her baby. She also needs to smell the odour of her baby in order to release a vital peak of oxytocin.

Some new rituals have been introduced by the medical institution: for example, instead of waiting for the permission of the shaman or the godfather before interacting with their newborn baby, some modern mothers may have to wait for the paediatrician's permission. Other excuses are based on theories introduced by the natural childbirth movement: for example the theory of an immediate 'bonding' between father and newborn comparable to mother-baby 'bonding' dramatically disturbs the first eye contact between the two main characters of the birth drama during a critical period.

What is the future for eye-to eye contact among humans?

We might argue that eye-to-eye contact is a vestige of the limited communication in preliterate societies. Is it so important to develop the capacity to communicate that way in the age of mass media—newspapers, radio, television, mobile telephones, e-mails, and other aspects of information technology, and at a time when the family meals together are disappearing? Teenagers laugh in the presence of adults who gesticulate while on the phone, considering these visual signals futile. Do they expose a difficulty in adapting to a new technological and sociological context? Do we still need body language at all?

We cannot provide answers to such questions without assuming that as long as human beings are not completely robotized they need to transmit more than just data. They also need to transmit emotional states. This is the reason for body language in general, and, in our species, eye contact in particular. We must keep in mind that we remain at the same time the talking ape and the weeping ape.

Michel Odent

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