

Who Am I Looking At? Gaze in Online Mediation

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'Because you're distant, forgive me for being a little bit bossy' (Paddy O'Connell, BBC Radio 4's Broadcasting House)

After plying their trade for a while mediators (and broadcasters) develop a persona, not so much bolted on as inhabited. Once in 'the chair,' voice, posture and gestures all coalesce to support their purpose and, with minimal cognitive effort, free them to listen and notice. When I began to work more online I assumed it would be much the same, albeit sitting in my own chair before a Zoom screen. But something was missing. My voice and posture were similar, my gestures could 'shrink to fit', yet none of the parties knew who I was looking at. Only by its absence have I come to appreciate the significance of gaze in online mediation. The question 'who am I looking at?' has become more or less unanswerable.

Why does it matter? In this blog I describe my mediator's intuition and consider some psychological evidence.

Managing the room

A colleague and I recently worked with a larger group, first face to face then, post lockdown, via Zoom. The matter is ongoing so I say nothing about the content. However, as we were de-briefing following the online session I began to compare the two events, scratching my head over our management of the room. 'Managing the room' describes the mediator skills that enable people to have the conversations they need to have. The larger the group the more important it becomes.

Given our principles of empowerment, and the older Ockham's Razor notion of parsimony, most mediators seek to do this with as few interventions as possible. It's not great to keep interrupting. Yet our Zoom mediation somehow seemed more challenging to manage. I felt we interrupted more, to less effect. Why would this be?

Attention and gaze

Casting my mind back to the earlier face to face meeting I started musing on what worked. My most vivid memory is of providing intense attention. While each person spoke we offered our gaze, intently listening while nodding and using 'minimal encouragers' like mmm and uhuh. Goffman describes this as an 'eye-to-eye ecological huddle' (cited in Kendrick K H and Holler J, 2017, Gaze Direction Signals Response Preference in Conversation. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*. Routledge 50, 12-32). While as listeners we tended to offer undivided gaze, the speaker often looked away, particularly during long or difficult passages. This was first systematically noted by Adam Kendon in his seminal 1967 article 'Some Functions of Gaze Direction in Social Interaction.'

The monitoring function

Still more was going on. As one person spoke our peripheral vision told us who else wanted a turn - again, after some years mediating this becomes an intuition. We were, in effect, 'monitoring' the room for data to inform our next move. Sometimes that required an intervention. Noticing someone's growing agitation while another spoke, one of us might occasionally switch our gaze, perhaps using our hands to pause the speaker, and say 'I can see you want to come in. We'll come to you as soon as ... has finished.'

The expressive function

Even more important is what we were NOT doing. By giving our undivided attention to one speaker we removed it from the rest. Unspoken yet powerful social norms militate against interrupting uninvited, and most mediators will have discovered that they don't need to speak to invite the next contribution. A simple movement of the eyes will do. So our gaze also has an 'expressive' function, telling others where our attention is placed and, by implication, what we would like them to attend to (see Holler and Kendrick 2015). Gaze, then, helps mediators conduct a conversation between others. Because we are authority figures, granted responsibility for process, we employ both the monitoring and expressive functions of our gaze to select subjects and individuals for attention.

Online attention and gaze

Now imagine applying these techniques online. Instead of a 3-dimensional scene we are faced with a 2 dimensional display. More significantly, the subtle art of gaze direction is obliterated. Most of the time we cannot tell whether the speaker is looking at us, or away from us to another participant, or even at something else on their screen. Mediators may well offer their undivided attention to the speaker - but no-one will know. We also lose the impact of gaze aversion. They way screens are arranged on Zoom (and my experience of Teams is similar or worse) it's almost impossible to tell who another participant is looking at. So gone is our capacity to manage the conversation without speaking simply by offering and withdrawing our gaze.

We are presented with a 'flat' world. Gaze is never off. We all look at each other all the time. By effacing the distinction between gaze and non-gaze Zoom diminishes its meaning.

As an aside, the problem is compounded when cameras are switched off. Rather than being never off, the expressive function of gaze is never on. The speaker thus receives no clues and no feedback about when another wishes to speak, whether their words are landing and whether they need to engage in 'self-repair.' This is where a speaker recognises that their question or statement isn't having the desired effect and makes another attempt (Kendrick and Holler 2017).

What's to be done?

Is this disastrous? Given human adaptability I doubt it. Almost all of us are experts in communicating by phone. We've learned to replace the clues offered by gaze with oral cues - again, mm, uhuh, I see - and their absence, silence. So I offer this blog as an invitation and a provocation to mediators to think about gaze in online mediation. If you have worked out ways to integrate all the richness of eye contact into the online domain I'd love to hear them.

For myself I was inspired by Paddy O'Connell's pithy introduction on Radio 4. I'm guessing he's intuited that, without the nuances of eye contact an intimate radio studio provides, he will have to be more 'bossy' in managing the conversation. Like an online mediator he can't rely on the monitoring and expressive functions of gaze, leaving him little choice but to spell them out. It's probably better than nothing. In my next mediation I may find myself saying something rather similar.