

Staring and Approach: An Interpretation of the Stare as a Nonspecific Activator

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A field experiment was performed to test the hypothesis that the stare may function as a stimulus either to approach or to avoidance, depending on the context. In a 2×2 bystander intervention paradigm, the nature of the victim's plight and the appropriate remedy were either clear or ambiguous, and the victim either stared at the subject or did not. The hypothesis was confirmed: There was no main effect for staring. More help was elicited in the clear conditions than in the ambiguous conditions, but the differences between these two conditions only reached significance when the victim stared.

In a series of field experiments, Ellsworth, Carlsmith, and Henson (1972) found that people tried to escape from a steady direct stare. Half of the subjects were exposed to a continuous stare, the rest merely to a fleeting glance; those who were stared at moved away from the experimenter significantly faster than the others. One interpretation of this finding is that the stare serves as a signal of threat for humans, just as it does for other primates (Chevalier-Skolnikoff, 1972; van Hooff, 1967), and the tendency to flee is a relatively automatic response "triggered" or "released" by the stare.

While this interpretation is consistent with ethological theory (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1970) and with some cultural stereotypes, it is at odds with a number of other strong culturally stereotyped beliefs about the stare. At least in this culture, a direct gaze is also believed to convey openness and candor and to elicit feelings of intimacy and trust. It is part of the occupational folklore of salesmen, trial attorneys, and those in other persuasive professions that a steady, direct gaze increases the probability that the audience will trust the speaker and accept his message. Insofar as this superstition is accurate, it casts doubt

on the hypothesis that the stare automatically triggers an urge to escape (or combat) the starrer.

There are several possible resolutions of this apparent contradiction. It is possible that the salesman's superstition is simply wrong. It is also possible that two different kinds of stare are involved, one eliciting flight and the other, trust. Finally, it is possible that the flight produced by a stare is not an automatic response to a "releasing mechanism" but a function of the whole stimulus situation of which the stare is a part.

Ellsworth et al. (1972) have suggested, for example, that "the stare, in effect, is a demand for a response, and in a situation where there is no appropriate response, tension will be evoked, and the subject will be motivated to escape the situation" (p. 311). The subjects in that study, exposed to a stare from a stranger while they were waiting to cross an intersection, had no immediately apparent appropriate response and fled as soon as the traffic signals permitted.

In another situation involving an unexplained stare, Reis and Werner (Note 1) found that subway riders avoided interaction with a person who needed help if that person had previously been staring at them. The subjects had no indication of the purpose or the meaning of the 4-minute stare, and apparently their desire to stay away from the starrer persisted during subsequent contacts with him.

The salesman's target, on the other hand, knows exactly what is expected of him, al-

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though he may not choose to comply. In an intermediate situation, where a friend or acquaintance stares at someone, we might expect the recipient of the stare to ask "What do you want?" or, more distantly, "Can I help you?" so as to determine an appropriate response.

There is now fairly good evidence that a stare increases levels of arousal (Kleinke & Pohlen, 1971; Nichols & Champness, 1971), possibly because it creates a situation in which the subject is forced into an interpersonal involvement with the starrer (Ellsworth, 1975). The subject may then cast about for an appropriate response. If none occurs to him, the arousal may rise and remain at a high level until the subject is able to escape from the stare. If, however, the subject arrives at an interpretation of the stare that does suggest a suitable response, he can reduce the arousal by performing that response. According to this reasoning, a stare will not elicit flight if there is some other obviously appropriate response. Far from being an automatic trigger for avoidance, the stare may even elicit approach, if it appears to be required by the situation.

In order to test this hypothesis, it seemed desirable to choose a response that would necessitate approaching and addressing the starrer, so as to avoid the possibility that the "appropriate response" was merely an escape in disguise. A situation similar to those typical of bystander intervention research was chosen, because the response called for involves approaching the victim and offering assistance, and previous research (e.g., Langer & Abelson, 1972) has shown that altruistic behavior is highly sensitive to subtle situational cues. If the reasoning behind the hypothesis is valid, when the nature of the victim's plight and the required remedy are clear, the victim who stares at a potential helper should elicit approach and assistance. The more ambiguous the victim's problem, the less likely it is that staring will elicit a helpful response; as the appropriate response becomes more doubtful, the tendency to avoid involvement becomes relatively stronger.

In general, it was expected that more people would help the victim whose predicament was clear than the victim whose pre-

dicament was ambiguous, but the difference in amount of assistance offered to the two types of victim was expected to be greater when the victim stared. Thus it was predicted that the staring victim with a clear problem and an obvious remedy would receive more help than any other type of victim, whereas the identical gaze from a victim with an ambiguous problem would elicit relatively little help.

METHOD

Setting and Subjects

The experiment was carried out near the doors of a large department store in New Haven, Connecticut. Two locations were used, one just inside of the store and one just outside, in an enclosed bridge leading to an adjacent shopping center. Choice of location on any given afternoon was determined by the relative concentration of security guards in each area, and the pattern of results was identical for the two locations. All sessions of the experiment were conducted on Friday and Saturday afternoons.

Subjects were 60 unaccompanied female shoppers, ranging in age from about 20 to 65.¹

Procedure

Three "experimenters" were involved in each interaction: The first was the person who made the request and who provided the clear-ambiguous information, the second was the person who apparently needed help and who stared or did not stare at the subject, and the third was an observer, who measured the dependent variables. The purpose of differentiating these roles was to keep all three of the experimenters unaware of the subject's exact experimental condition. For each subject, the person who made the request knew only the clear-ambiguous condition, the victim knew only the stare condition, and the observer knew neither condition. Each of two undergraduate women served as victim for half of the subjects and as the person making the request for the other half. A male undergraduate served as the observer for all subjects. Conditions were run in a prearranged random sequence.

Each subject was accosted by the person making the request at the doors leading from the department store to the bridge. The victim, half crouching and leaning against the wall, was located about 25 feet (6.5 m) away from the doors, at an angle of about 35° from the subjects' normal line of march. The observer was stationed in a telephone booth

¹ Two of the subjects who initially appeared to be unaccompanied actually did have companions who caught up with them after the treatment had begun. One (who helped) was in the ambiguous-stare condition, and the other (who did not help) was in the ambiguous-no-stare condition.

about 25 feet (6.5 m) further from the doors; he was out of earshot of both encounters but had a clear view of the subjects' progress.

Ambiguity of the situation. For each subject the procedure was initiated by the person making the request, who waited until she saw an unaccompanied female approaching the glass doors from the other side and then began hurrying toward the doors carrying a heavy suitcase. When she reached the subject, she blurted out the request in a breathless manner and hurried on before the subject had a chance to respond. In the *clear* condition, her speech was as follows: "Listen, there's a girl back there . . . who looks like she's lost a contact lens and needs some help. I can't stop because I'm going to miss a train." In the ambiguous condition, she said, "Listen, there's a girl back there . . . who looks like she's not feeling well and needs some help. I can't stop because I'm going to miss a train." In both cases the ellipsis was filled in with information about dress and location that would serve to identify the victim. So that she would remain blind to the stare manipulation, the person making the request faced her subject throughout the interchange and did not turn around to point out the victim. Likewise, for the sake of preserving blindness, the request was made in a low voice, so as to be inaudible to the victim.

In the clear condition, the problem was entirely specified, and the remedy, helping to look for the lost lens, was apparent. In the ambiguous condition, the problem described was relatively indefinite, and there was no single, obviously appropriate remedy. The victim's posture and demeanor were the same in both conditions and could plausibly be interpreted as either contact lens hunting or feeling faint. An additional "total ambiguity" control group was run in order to make sure that the Ellsworth et al. (1972) results would replicate in this setting. In this group, the victim's behavior was the same as in the other two ambiguity conditions, but the subject was given no information: No one spoke to her at all. In this condition the victim always stared. (Aside from the problem of identifying the subject, a no-stare control group was felt to be of trivial interest.)

Stare conditions. The victim watched the person making the request just long enough to determine the identity of the intended subject. Then, if it was the *no-stare* condition, she looked down at the ground until the subject spoke to her or until the observer came over to inform her that the trial was over. If the subject was in the *stare* condition, the victim looked up at the subject's face as soon as the person making the request departed and kept looking at her until she either approached and offered help or disappeared from view. Her facial expression was neutral (Ekman, Friesen, & Tomkins, 1971), as in the Ellsworth et al. (1972) study. The victim's position was the same in the stare and no-stare conditions: partially bent over and leaning with her side against the wall. She turned her head sideways in order to stare at the subject. The victim never spoke until the subject spoke.

Dependent variable. The observer watched the person making the request until she had picked out and spoken to the subject. As soon as the experimenter and the subject separated, the observer started a stopwatch and kept it on until the subject walked all of the way up to the victim and spoke to her. The observer continued to watch the subject until she either spoke to the victim or disappeared from view, noting whether she hesitated, appeared to change her mind, or did anything else of interest. Since the observer kept his eyes on the subject, he was unable to see what the victim was doing until the subject and victim joined company. When the subject had left the scene and was out of sight, the observer and the two experimenters met, and the observer recorded what the victim said, whether she actually helped, and whatever other information either experimenter thought was pertinent. This additional information made it possible for blind raters to later score the subject on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 (ignored the victim completely) to 4 (actually helped). Reliabilities among the scorers ranged from .86 to .97. The original ratings may not be entirely uncontaminated by bias, however, as the observer usually became aware of the stare condition in cases where the subject came close enough to the subject to offer help, and a few subjects revealed their ambiguity condition to the victim; experimenters did not mention the subject's condition during the postexperimental consultations.

In all cases, if the subject spoke to the victim and asked what was wrong or offered help, the victim replied that she had lost a contact lens. If the subject then helped to look for it, the victim "found" the lens after about 30 seconds, and thanked the subject profusely for her assistance.

The design was thus a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ factorial, with clarity of the situation and presence versus absence of staring as fixed factors and experimenter as a random factor, plus an additional control group in which the "victim" stared but no prior information was provided.

RESULTS

For a subject to be classified as "helping," she actually had to help the sufferer search for her lost lens. Whereas most of the people who went so far as to walk up and speak to the confederate also helped her, there was one additional person in the clear-stare condition who approached and asked what was wrong and then apparently decided that her assistance was unnecessary and three people in the ambiguous-stare condition who called from a distance but did not approach or help. No additional subjects in the no-stare conditions offered to help.

The general proposition that the effect of a stare depends upon its context was strongly supported. In the stare conditions, when the

victim's plight and the requisite response were clear, 10 (83%) of the 12 subjects who were stared at approached the starrer and looked for the lens, but when the response was ambiguous, only 3 (25%) approached and helped. In the completely ambiguous circumstances, where no request was made of the subject, no one helped the starrer. In the no-stare conditions, assistance was more evenly divided, with 7 (58%) helping in the clear condition and 5 (42%) in the ambiguous condition.

Using the arc-sine transformation method for testing differences among ratios (Langer & Abelson, 1972), it is clear that the main effect for staring is negligible ($z = .34$). The main effect for situational ambiguity is highly significant ($z = 2.70$, $p < .003$), and the interaction effect approaches significance ($z = 1.60$, $p < .06$).

The ratings made by the observer allow these results to be explored in more detail through parametric analyses. A subject who simply glanced at the victim and walked on without hesitating or deviating from her line of march was rated 0. If the subject appeared to hesitate but went no further, she was rated 1. A subject who approached the victim was rated 2, one who addressed the victim but did not help was rated 3, and one who actually helped was rated 4. As measured by this index, the mean degree of helping was as follows for each condition: In the stare conditions, when the required response was clear, the mean was 3.42; when the response was ambiguous, the mean was 1.42. In the no-stare conditions, the means were 2.25 and 1.50 when the responses were clear and ambiguous, respectively. In the completely ambiguous condition (no-information control), the mean was 0.

Since no main effects or interactions involving the experimenter variable approached significance, the data were collapsed over this variable and treated as a 2×2 fixed-factor analysis of variance.² Again the main effect for staring was trivial, $F(1, 44) = 1.32$, whereas the main effect for situational ambiguity was strong, $F(1, 44) = 8.53$, $p < .01$. The Stare \times Ambiguity interaction was non-significant, $F(1, 44) = 1.76$. A contrast comparing the clear-stare conditions with all

other conditions was highly significant, $F(1, 44) = 9.71$, $p < .01$, indicating perhaps that both clarity of response and an involving signal from the victim are necessary to elicit a substantial degree of help.

The mean degree of help in the clear-stare condition was significantly greater than that in the ambiguous-stare condition, $t(22) = 3.40$, $p < .01$, and marginally different from that in the clear-no-stare condition, $t(22) = 1.80$, $.05 < p < .10$. No one in the control group made any move of approach. There were no significant differences in the rate of approach among those who approached the victim, although the pattern of data across conditions resembles that for the mean degree of help.

DISCUSSION

The results of this experiment are sufficient to demonstrate that a stare is not necessarily perceived as a threatening signal, nor does it automatically elicit flight. Although it is impossible to prove that the stare has no innately threatening properties, it is clear that if such properties exist they can easily be rendered ineffective by circumstances. In the right context, a stare can increase the probability of a friendly, helpful approach, even between strangers.

In the introductory section, we raised several conjectural hypotheses that might account for the apparent contradiction between the idea that the stare is an attractive force

²The results of the $2 \times 2 \times 2$ mixed model analysis are as follows: There was no significant main effect for staring, $F(1, 1) = 6.77$; no significant main effect for ambiguity occurred, $F(1, 1) = 119.4$, unless the within-subjects mean square plus pooled interaction mean squares is used as an error term (Winer, 1962), $F(1, 44) = 8.43$, $p < .01$; there was a significant Stare \times Ambiguity interaction, $F(1, 1) = 234.5$, $p < .05$; a significant contrast effect was obtained (as in text), $F(1, 1) = 1292$, $p < .025$. In neither type of analysis were there any significant main effects or interactions for the experimenter variable. Which analysis is the more appropriate is a controversial issue (the reviewer of this article considers experimenter a fixed factor, whereas the first author considers it a random factor); the basic finding that the threatening properties of the stare are context dependent rather than intrinsic is supported in either case.

and previous findings that the stare is a repellent force. The complete absence of a main effect for the stare indicates that neither of these simple ideas is true but that the effects of the stare depend upon the context. When the context suggests a clear explanation for the stare and an appropriate course of action, the stare no longer elicits flight, as it did in the ambiguous context of the Ellsworth et al. (1972) experiment. Instead, 11 out of 12 subjects approached the starrer and made inquiries, and 10 of them helped her to look for her lost contact lens. That the stare may have served as a positive attractive force is suggested by the fact that the lens loser was somewhat less likely to receive help when she did not stare at the subject. When the implications of the stare are more ambiguous, people are more likely to avoid the whole situation. Only 3 out of 12 people helped the starrer when given the vague information that she "looks like she's not feeling well," and when no explanation at all was given, not one person approached.

Although the hypothesis that there are two intrinsically different kinds of stare, one of which is magnetic and the other repellent, may be true, it cannot account for the results of the present research. The starrer was unaware of the situational ambiguity condition the subject had been assigned to, and thus it was impossible for her to bias the results by, for example, introducing a piteous stare in the clear condition and a hostile stare in the ambiguous condition. The stare was the same in both conditions; its meaning and its effects were a function of other information provided in the social situation.

It should be pointed out that while the degree of ambiguity in a situation clearly makes a difference in the way people respond to a stare, the parallel proposal that the presence or absence of a stare makes a difference in how people respond to an ambiguous situation is not strongly supported. Less than half of the subjects helped the victim in the ambiguous-no-stare condition, and while this was reduced to a quarter in the ambiguous-stare condition, this difference is nowhere near significant. One might argue that in the no-stare condition, subjects thought they might sneak away unnoticed, whereas in the

stare condition, they were actively trying to escape the implications of the stare. However, at this stage this is sheer conjecture. On the whole, we believe that a stare with ambiguous implications is avoided and that a potentially difficult ambiguous situation is avoided anyway, but we would not risk predicting that the two combined would elicit still greater avoidance.

In the remainder of this article, we present a rough sketch of our current speculations about the properties of the stare, realizing that the processes suggested are not the only ones consistent with the results of this particular experiment.

Ellsworth et al. (1972) proposed that "staring is a salient stimulus which forcibly involves the subject in an interpersonal encounter and demands a response" (p. 311). The results of the present experiment are consistent with this interpretation. Whether the recipient of the stare avoids or increases involvement with the starrer depends on whether he recognizes a clear and appropriate response.

Is the stare, then, simply an intensifying focus for other situational variables, with no intrinsic effects? We would not carry the argument so far. In the first place, the very fact that the stare consistently serves in this focusing capacity may be considered an "intrinsic effect." The stare is a very salient stimulus, one that can create a social situation where none existed and alter or intensify an already existing interaction. It is noticed. In none of our field experiments have we ever had any trouble drawing attention to the stare; most subjects look up and meet the gaze of the starrer within seconds.

In addition, the stare is psychologically and autonomically arousing (Kleinke & Pohlen, 1971; Nichols & Champness, 1971). This arousal increases the probability that the subject will feel a need to respond to the stare, to arrive at some interpretation of the stimulus that is making his heart beat faster. One might argue that like other arousing stimuli (cf. Schachter & Singer, 1962), the stare is a provocation to attribution. The arousal indicates to the perceiver that the stare is worth noticing and worth interpreting.

Finally, the perceiver's interpretation fo-

cues on the nature of his involvement with the other person. The stare implies involvement; we doubt very much if situational cues can easily lead to an interpretation of the stare as a sign of indifference.

Thus we would argue that the stare does have some intrinsic properties: It elicits attention, arousal, and a sense of interpersonal involvement. The type of involvement inferred and the response perceived to be appropriate depend upon contextual cues. Consequently, the behavioral response is a function of the stare *and* its context, or the stare in context. In the present study, the probable nature of the involvement was signaled by the verbal information about the victim's plight. The main effect for the situational ambiguity indicates a slight general reluctance to attend to the uncertain needs of a person who might be sick, as opposed to the comparatively straightforward needs of the lens loser. Without the stare, however, the contextual information lacked the power to create clear differences in the amount of assistance given. Perhaps the arousal produced by the stare strengthened the dominant behavior tendencies (cf. Zajonc, 1965), spreading the behavioral alternatives apart. Or, on a more cognitive level, the type of involvement signaled by the stare may have been interpreted differently for each context. Certainly there are a variety of specific cognitive interpretations that could have been reached in the various conditions of the present experiment: Looking down for a lens implies successful coping, looking up implies inability to cope, looking up when one is supposedly sick implies that one is really okay, looking down implies that one is not, and so on. There is, however, at least one other context in which the approach effect has been demonstrated: A person will avoid a staring woman with an armful of packages but will approach and offer assistance if she drops a package. Assistance is reduced if she drops a package but does not stare (Bear, Note 2). The fallen package provides an explanation for the involving stare and suggests a clear response.

Whatever the exact mechanism involved, the stare is a powerful stimulus, powerful despite, or perhaps because of, its lack of a

specific and invariant meaning. Although the stare does not serve as a releaser for any particular behavior pattern in humans, it may well serve as a releaser for a diffuse emotional arousal. The arousal is interpreted or altered in context, and the particular behavior that is motivated varies accordingly.

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