

THE ATTENUATING INFLUENCE OF GAZE UPON  
THE BYSTANDER INTERVENTION EFFECT\*<sup>1</sup>

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SUMMARY

One hundred ten adult American women participated in a field experiment employing the bystander intervention paradigm and encountered either one (needing assistance) or two (one needing assistance and the other passive to the incident) female confederates (Cs). The format of the study was a  $2 \times 2$  factorial with variations in the condition of the victim's gaze (gaze *vs.* no-gaze) and the bystander's relative solitude (with-C *vs.* alone). The results indicated that gaze increased helping whether S was alone or in the presence of a passive C. Moreover, though bystander effects occurred when the victim did not look at the S, this trend was reversed in the presence of gaze. Discussion focused upon the possibility that interpersonal gaze creates a positive relationship between women during helping interactions and may function to establish a coalition between victim and bystander.

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A. INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of relatively recent laboratory and field studies in the area of altruism has focused on a wide array of factors related to helping behavior [for recent reviews, see Bar-Tal (3), Rushton (19), Wispé (26)], ranging from such subtle influences as interpersonal gaze (9, 11, 20, 23) to variations in apparent distress (21). A flurry of activity examining the bystander intervention effect (4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 24) presently constitutes a prominent subarea of research within this domain of social psychology. Specifically, the latter effect refers to the fact that a negative relationship frequently exists between the number of bystanders

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observing a situation in which someone needs help and that person's likelihood of receiving it.

Bystander effects have appeared within both emergency and less serious altruistic contexts and have analogously been observed in nonaltruistic settings (14). The elimination of these effects has been rather difficult to accomplish and has generally required the use of elaborate laboratory procedures with manipulations of the perceived ability of other bystanders to help (4), the situational ambiguity (5, 6), the perceived dependency of another bystander (17, 18), and the number of individuals needing assistance (24). Research exploring the *limits of subtlety* of variables having possible ramifications for the intervention problem, however, has been relatively scarce. Moreover, since the elicitation of help is an interactive process which includes the establishment of a relationship between benefactor and recipient, this may be one factor which cuts across the range of subtlety just mentioned. Any cue which establishes a positive relationship between victim and bystander may increase the probability of help being exchanged regardless of its subtlety and however temporary the association. Interpersonal gaze illustrates this point. While essentially a nonverbal cue and therefore more elusive than some others, it remains powerful enough either to increase or decrease helping, depending upon the gender composition of victim-bystander pairs (23). It is believed that the potency of this cue derives from the nature of the stimulus itself and its ability to create an immediate, though often momentary, relationship between two individuals. Since gaze is apparently an effective means of establishing a relationship with someone, then in situations where it increases help giving (e.g., when both victim and bystander are females), the effect may be maintained even with the addition of other bystanders. With this possibility in mind, the design of the present study represented a  $2 \times 2$  factorial which included differences in the condition of the victim's gaze (gaze *vs.* no-gaze) crossed with differences in the bystander's relative solitude (with-confederate *vs.* alone). It was predicted that the victim's gaze would increase helping regardless of whether *S* was alone or in the presence of another. In addition, bystander effects were expected to emerge in the absence but not in the presence of gaze.

## B. METHOD

The sample consisted of 110 white, adult females waiting alone at bus stops in Staten Island, New York, with the experimental sessions being conducted on weekday and weekend afternoons.

Depending upon whether or not the woman was to be alone, *S* was approached by either one or two white female confederates (*C*s) casually dressed in blue jeans and pullovers. In the two with-*C* conditions the first *C* walked to a distance of approximately four feet from the *S* and stood directly in front of the *S* at the bus stop. She remained passive and read a magazine throughout the ensuing episode. Several seconds later, the second *C* arrived with a sling on her most frequently used arm. This "victim" (portrayed by either of two white females) stood directly facing the *S* at an estimated distance of seven feet. She attempted to take some change from a pants pocket (opposite the hand that was free) and after having some difficulty, finally dropped about eight coins on the ground. For *S*s randomly assigned to the gaze condition, the victim (blind to the experimental hypotheses) then looked at the bystander for a five-second period. If the woman looked at the victim's eyes during this interval, the victim permitted eye contact to be established for a moment and then shifted her gaze elsewhere for the remainder of the five-second period. In the no-gaze condition, the victim looked at the ground for five seconds. Regardless of condition, she immediately proceeded to pick up the change after this duration of time. The *S* was considered helpful if she either picked up some of the change or showed its location before the victim completely recovered the coins. The victim did not speak and maintained a neutral expression throughout; however, the *intervening* bystander was later thanked. Finally, aside from the fact that the *S*s in the two alone conditions remained alone with the victim at the bus stop, the procedure was virtually identical to that for the two with-*C* conditions: *S*s were simply approached by the victim.

### C. RESULTS<sup>2</sup>

Since two women served as the victim, one responsible for testing 60 *S*s ( $n = 15$  per condition) and the other for testing 50 *S*s ( $n = 13$  for each of the two gaze conditions, and  $n = 12$  for each of the two no-gaze conditions), a preliminary analysis was undertaken to determine whether there were any meaningful differences involving this factor. This analysis revealed no significant effects or interactions due to the use of the two different victims and, consequently, the data collected by both were combined.

Proportions of help were transformed into arcsines and entered in a 2 (gaze *vs.* no-gaze)  $\times$  2 (with-*C vs.* alone) analysis of variance (25). From this

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<sup>2</sup> For all *F* values reported in this section,  $df = 1, \infty$ .

analysis a significant main effect for gaze emerged,  $F = 29.62$ ,  $p < .001$ , with 70% overall helping in the gaze conditions and 22% in the no-gaze conditions. No effect was found for the with- $C$  vs. alone manipulation. However, a significant interaction was obtained,  $F = 8.34$ ,  $p < .005$ , and an analysis of the simple effects confirmed that significant trends were reversed for the no-gaze and gaze conditions. In the absence of gaze, 33% ( $n = 27$ ) helped when *alone* as compared to 11% ( $n = 27$ ) who helped when paired with a passive  $C$ ,  $F = 4.12$ ,  $p < .05$ . Conversely, when  $S$  was looked at, the victim obtained the assistance of 82% ( $n = 28$ ) of those in the *presence of another bystander* but of only 57% ( $n = 28$ ) of those alone,  $F = 4.21$ ,  $p < .05$ . This reversal then was apparently the principal factor which eliminated any possibility of an overall main effect for the  $S$ 's relative solitude and indicates that the manipulation of gaze qualifies any general statement regarding the milieu in which the victim in this study was most likely to receive help (i.e., in the presence of a solitary observer vs. group).

The simple effects analysis also suggested that the direction of the relationship between gaze and helping was consistent for both alone and with- $C$  conditions. In essence, interpersonal gaze was associated with greater assistance whether  $S$  was alone or paired with a nonresponsive bystander (24% vs. 71% more helping, respectively). The differential in the alone conditions, however, simply approached significance,  $F = 3.26$ ,  $p < .08$ , whereas it was highly significant in the with- $C$  conditions,  $F = 34.69$ ,  $p < .001$ .

#### D. DISCUSSION

The data reported above indicate that in testing American female victim-bystander pairs, the effect of gaze was maintained across variations in the bystander's relative solitude. The presence of the victim's gaze had the effect of eliciting more aid than its absence, a finding that confirms part of the work by Valentine and Ehrlichman (23).

Given that in the absence of the victim's gaze the bystander was more likely to be helpful when alone and that the presence of the victim's gaze completely reversed this trend, it becomes evident that interpersonal gaze is one of the more delicate and refined nonverbal interaction signals which possesses enough strength to counter the appearance of bystander effects. Though these findings may appear a bit surprising in light of the fact that gaze is such a subtle nonverbal cue, consider the question of the victim's

preference or choice for which of two (or more) bystanders should help. In certain situations this matter is obviously not crucial because the victim desires and/or needs the assistance of just about anyone who happens to be present and therefore remains relatively indiscriminating. In other cases, however, the needy individual may have a definite preference which may or may not be conveyed to the bystander. Since gaze between females in this and certain other cultures (e.g., England) is frequently interpreted as an affiliative gesture (2, 10, cited in 1,22) and often suggests liking and preference (1), the implications of this stimulus have relevance for the issue under consideration. The gaze employed in this experiment may have served to form a temporary coalition (bond) between victim and bystander though three women were present in the with-C conditions. This type of coalition formation would, if anything, propel the bystander towards intervention because in effect she had been singled out in the group by the victim. Having been partitioned off from the remaining group member, she may have interpreted the gaze as a request for help nonverbally directed towards herself. By simply looking at one of the bystanders, the victim may have expressed a preference for which of the two should help, thereby focusing the principal aspects of responsibility on that particular woman.

The victim could express no apparent preference in the gaze/alone condition, since there was only one bystander present. Thus, as with the no-gaze/alone condition, S had the sole responsibility for intervention and the victim's look may have simply indicated a desire for help. In the gaze/with-C condition, however, gaze may not have only suggested that help was desired but also expressed the victim's preference regarding which woman should intervene. This combination would place an even greater emphasis on the S's responsibility and increase the likelihood of helping measurably (as compared to the gaze/alone condition). Furthermore, if this line of reasoning is reversed (i.e., with the lack of gaze, the victim's desire for help remained relatively ambiguous, and no preference for which, if either, bystander should intervene was indicated), the combined effects would attribute even less emphasis to the S's responsibility and considerably decrease the probability of helping in the no-gaze/with-C condition (as compared to the no-gaze/alone condition). The pattern of results therefore suggests that in this study intervention was affected by rather subtle variations in the S's perceived responsibility which occurred as a function of the interaction between her relative solitude in the situation and the presence or absence of the victim's gaze.

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