

RESEARCH IN SCHOOLS ON THE SENSE OF BEING STARED AT

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Introduction

The feeling of being looked at from behind is remarkably common. So is the experience of looking at someone from behind and finding that they turn round. Surveys show that about 90% of the population have personally experienced these phenomena.

If people really can tell when they are being looked at from behind, this suggests that an influence somehow reaches out from the looker. If this influence cannot be explained in terms of normal sensory information, the implications are very far-ranging. But there has been remarkably little research on this subject so far.

I discussed the background to this research in Chapter 4 of my book *Seven Experiments That Could Change The World* (Fourth Estate, London), gave preliminary results of my own experiments, and described a simple experimental procedure that could be carried out at practically no cost. Since my book was published, staring experiments following the method I suggested have been conducted at over 40 schools in Britain, America and Germany. The results of these experiments have been positive in practically all cases. The statistical significance of the staring effect in all the school experiments taken together is overwhelming. Currently, the odds against the positive results being due to chance are 10 billion to one.

In the light of the results obtained so far, and as a result of recent research that I have carried out myself in schools in North London, I have now developed improved methods for doing this research. Below, I suggest two simple procedures that can be used with classes in schools, both of which I have tried out myself successfully with children as young as 8. It may well be possible to do these experiments with children even younger.

I hope that it will be possible to repeat these experiments in a variety of schools because the results will be of great value for this research programme.

They are also fun for the children to do, and provoke many interesting discussions. I would much appreciate receiving copies of the results, and give my address at the end of this paper.

Method 1: Experiment with lookers and subjects within the same room

This experiment involves students working in pairs, one the looker and the other the subject. The subject sits with his or her back to the looker, and wears a blindfold. (If this is not possible, the subject keeps his or her eyes closed.) I have found it convenient to use blindfolds of the kind supplied by some airlines to their passengers and have been given some for my own research by Virgin Atlantic Airlines.

Then the looker sits at least 1 metre behind the subject, and either looks or does not look at the subject in accordance with a random sequence as set out on an instruction/score sheet. I attach one such sheet herewith. The lookers write their names on the score sheet and also the names of the subjects.

Lookers either look or do not look at the subjects in a series of 20 trials according to the random sequence on their sheet. To signal the beginning of each trial, two methods are possible:

1. Each looker has a clicker, bleeper or other mechanical signal to indicate when the trial begins. (Mechanical signals are necessary, rather than the voice, to ensure that no subtle clues are given consciously or unconsciously). After the signal has been given the looker either looks at the back of the neck of the subject, or looks away and thinks of something else.
2. Instead of each looker proceeding at their own speed and giving their own signal, the teacher can give a signal to the entire class, so that all trials are performed simultaneously. This can be done by means of a bell, buzzer or simply

be saying 'trial one: begin.' (Since all lookers have different random sequences of instructions, the teacher's voice can give no relevant clues to the subjects). Then for the next trial saying, 'trial two: begin.' And so on.

The subject then says, 'looking' or 'not looking,' and the looker puts a tick or a cross against that trial depending on whether the subject is right or wrong. This procedure is repeated for all 20 trials.

The score sheets for each looker involve a different random sequence. I myself use a set of 24 different sheets, produced as follows.

For the first 12 sheets, I use random number tables and moving down the column put, 'look' for every even number and 'no' for every odd number. For the remaining 12 sheets, I take the sequence in the first 12 sheets and invert it. So if, for example, sheet number 1 ends 'look,' 'no,' 'no,' sheet number 13 begins 'no,' 'no,' 'look'. And so on. Instead of random number tables, the randomisation can be done simply by tossing a coin, taking heads to mean 'look and tails to mean 'no'.

After the series of 20 trials has been completed, the lookers hand in their score sheets. The looker and subject then change places, and the new looker is issued with a new instruction/score sheet. Obviously this score sheet should not be given to the looker until the subject has already got the blindfold on, so he or she cannot see the sequence in which the trials will be conducted.

If more time is available then a third session can be conducted in which the looker becomes the subject again and the subject the looker, and so on.

I have found by experience that it is possible to explain this experiment and carry it out with two sessions in about half an hour. If a longer period is available, then increasing the number of sessions of course enables the amount of data to be increased too.

Method 2: Experiments involving looking through windows

The experiment described above eliminates the possibility of the subject knowing when they are being looked at through visual clues, if blind-folds are being employed. But it is still possible that there is some leakage of information through sounds which may be

given consciously or unconsciously by the looker. Therefore a more rigorous form of this experiment is to do it under conditions in which sounds can be eliminated as well. For this purpose the lookers look at the subjects through windows. This is most easily done from a classroom or laboratory on the ground floor. The lookers are inside, and have a list of instructions for the 20 trials. The subjects are outside, sitting with their backs to the window and wearing blindfolds. (If no blindfolds are available the subjects sit with their eyes shut.)

For this experiment I have found it most convenient for the students to work in groups of three. One of the group is the looker, indoors, with the instruction sheet. The second is the subject sitting outdoors with their back to the window as I have just described. The third is the scorer who sits next to the subject, also with his or her back to the window, and with a score sheet which simply has numbers from 1-20 on it for each of the trials. Neither the subject nor the scorer know the sequence in which the subject will be looked at. And as in Method 1, each looker has different randomised instructions.

The subjects, with their scorers next to them, sit in a row with their backs to the windows, and the lookers are in a row in the laboratory in the same order so that they are looking directly at the subject in their own group.

For this experiment it is most convenient to have two adults supervising. One is inside with the lookers, the other outside with the subjects. When both lookers and scorers have written the names of the members of their group on their instruction sheet and score sheet and everyone is ready, the trial begins. The teachers inside says 'Trial 1. Ready, Go' and at that stage signals to the teacher outside by tapping on a window, or activating a bell or buzzer in the playground connected to a press-button indoors. To avoid any possible confusion about the sequence of the trial, the teacher indoors can hold up to the window a piece of paper with a large number 1 written on it. The teacher outdoors, who is the only person facing the window, then calls out to the subjects and scorers 'Trial 1, Begin.'

The subjects then say either 'looking' or 'not looking' and their scorer writes down what they have said against the number 1 on their list. When all are ready, the adult outdoors gives a thumbs up signal to the adult indoors who then says, 'Trial 2. Ready. Go', signaling with a bell, buzz or tap to the teacher outdoors that the trial is beginning, and also holding up

a piece of paper with a large number 2 on it. And so on. This procedure is repeated until all 20 trials have been completed. The looker then goes to the scorer and the two sheets from each group are collected by the supervising teacher and stapled together so that they can be scored later to see how many of the guesses were right and wrong.

After the first session of 20 trials has been completed, the children change places, with the subject becoming the looker, the looker the scorer, and the scorer the subject. In a third session they change places again so that all children are able to experience playing each role in the experiment.

Each session need last no more than 10 minutes, and so with an initial period for explaining the experiment, the time needed for handing out sheets, moving chairs outdoors and changing over between sessions, I have found that the entire procedure need take no longer than one hour, during which time three sessions can be completed.

For each score sheet, the number of correct and wrong guesses in the looking trials is added up, the same is done for the 'not-looking trials,' and these subtotals are added together to give the totals. The results for each subject can then be tabulated and the grand totals added up.

In my research so far, I have found that there is a typical pattern of results in these experiments which seems remarkably repeatable, namely that the score in looking trials is usually above the 50% chance level, whereas that in not looking trials is close to the chance level of 50%. The overall percentage of correct guesses ranges from around 52-60%.

As in any area of human activity, some people seem to be better as subjects (and probably as lookers)

than other. If time is available, the best-scoring subjects can be asked to volunteer for further experiments which can be carried out in lunch breaks or at other times. In follow-up experiments of this kind in Germany, some children have consistently scored as high as 90% correct.

I would be very grateful to you if you could send the results of these experiments to me, including the score sheets, so that I can combine the results of experiments in different schools and analyse them together statistically.

If you are interested in analysing the results from your class statistically yourself, there are two simple methods. One is to use a paired-sample t-test with the numbers of correct and incorrect guesses for each subject as the paired samples. The second method is non-parametric, and employs the chi-squared test. In this case each subject is scored "+" if the number of correct guesses exceeds the number of incorrect guesses, "=" if the number of correct and incorrect guesses is the same, and "-" if the number of incorrect guesses exceeds the number of correct guesses. The total number of "+" and "-" scores is then compared used a chi-squared test, taking the null hypothesis to be that there is no difference between the "+" and "-" scores. The expected score, from the point of view of the chi-squared test, is the average of the "+" and "-" scores.

Please send your results to me, with or without statistical analysis, at this address:

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SCORE SHEET

.....
 Looking at

Date:

| Trial number | What to do | Right or wrong |
|--------------|------------|----------------|
| 1 | look | |
| 2 | no | |
| 3 | no | |
| 4 | no | |
| 5 | no | |
| 6 | look | |
| 7 | no | |
| 8 | look | |
| 9 | no | |
| 10 | no | |
| 11 | look | |
| 12 | look | |
| 13 | look | |
| 14 | no | |
| 15 | look | |
| 16 | look | |
| 17 | no | |
| 18 | look | |
| 19 | no | |
| 20 | look | |

| | | | |
|--------------|----------------|------------|----------------------------|
| | LOOKING | | NOT LOOKING |
| Totals: | right..... | wrong..... | right..... wrong..... |
| Grand Total: | | right..... | wrong..... |