Can We Tell When Someone Is Staring at Us?

A common belief is that people can tell when someone is staring at them, and some parapsychologists contend this is a form of distant mental influence. To test this phenomenon, the author carried out two demonstrations, one with forty people in a public area, the other with fifty students in a controlled setting.

ROBERT A. BAKER

According to parapsychologists, a commonly reported form of distant mental influence on human beings is "the feeling of being stared at," which is closely related, historically, to the notion of the "evil eye." Considerable folklore endorses the idea that gazing at someone carries special powers, favors, or influence. Folklore aside, contemporary opinion polls confirm that the feeling of being stared at is known in all cultures (Radin 1997).

A typical occurrence is that of a woman eating alone at a diner who suddenly becomes agitated. Then the hair on the back of her neck raises and she gets the feeling that someone is watching her—someone behind her. She turns and, sure enough, a young woman is staring directly at her. This type

of situation is reported over and over and raises the question: Can a starer's intense focus affect the human nervous system?

According to some parapsychologists it not only can but does, and they insist that it has been confirmed in several laboratory studies, (e.g., Braud, Shafer, and Andrews 1993a; Braud, Shafer, and Andrews 1993b; Schlitz and LaBerge 1994 and 1997; and Peterson 1978). Wiseman, on the other hand, in a series of studies (Wiseman and Smith 1994; Wiseman, Smith, Freedman, Wasserman, and Hurst 1995) as well as a study carried out with Schlitz (Wiseman and Schlitz 1997) found no evidence of psychic functioning. In fact, psi (extrasensory perception) proponents are the only ones who seem to obtain evidence for psi while skeptics do not and, as Wiseman notes (Wiseman and Schlitz 1997), this fact may provide strong support for "the experimenter effect" (Palmer 1989), i.e., the experimenter somehow controls the outcome of the study. Such an effect, however, would be as mysterious—if not more so—than the alleged "staring effect" itself. In another context Wiseman (1999) suggests that the positive results might well represent a "file drawer" effect, i.e., people who failed to obtain impressive positive results simply filed the study away and didn't bother to report it. Nevertheless, Blackmore, who is a severe critic of parapsychology in general (Blackmore 1996), has stated that most contemporary parapsychologists believe this phenomena to be true and offer it as valid proof of psi.

Unquestionably the most vocal supporter of this claim is the British biologist Rupert Sheldrake who, in chapter four of his book *Seven Experiments That Could Change the World: A Do-It-Yourself Guide To Revolutionary Science* (Riverhead Books, New York, 1995), argues that not only do our minds "extend beyond the body" but also suggests, "If our minds reach out and 'touch' what we are looking at then we may affect what we look at just by looking at it. If we look at another person, for example, we may *affect* him or her by doing so" (107). Sheldrake, moreover, insists that the sense of being stared at is not only very "well known" but in informal surveys in both Europe and America, "I have found that about 80 percent of the people I have asked claimed to have experienced it themselves." Sheldrake also notes it is accepted as a premise in countless works of fiction and it plays an important part in the relationship of people with animals and their pets.

It is, therefore, of considerable importance and significance to determine if such "mental influence," independent of other possible material means of human-to-human communication, does exist.

Demonstration One

Methods and Procedures

Despite the fact that parapsychologists maintain people are sensitive to being stared at and are physically affected under nor-

Robert A. Baker is professor of psychology emeritus, University of Kentucky, Lexington.

mal social conditions, most of the research in this area has not involved asking people if they're aware of being stared at but has, curiously, monitored subtle, subthreshold physiological differences between staring and nonstaring periods. Such staring effects—if they exist—that are so subtle that they can only be detected at subthreshold levels must be very weak and insignificant indeed. Measuring conscious and overt responses, as Sheldrake has done (1995) seems to be a simpler and more direct way to tell if people are aware they're being stared at. This, after all, is the claim usually made by believers in psi.

Rather than carrying out a rigidly controlled laboratory experiment, the author decided to test this claim under ordinary, real-life conditions in the form of a demonstration. The author was convinced at the outset that people who are cognitively focused (i.e., mentally engrossed in an activity), will never, under normal circumstances, attend to such a weak, nonintrusive, nonmaterial, competing sensation as that of "being stared at." Showing that people are not aware they're being stared at is a demonstration of "common sense," not an experiment with an unpredictable outcome. To carry out this demonstration the author, on several occasions over a two-month period, took up a physical position no closer than five feet and no farther away than twenty feet behind forty individuals—twenty-one women and nineteen men (of the forty, twenty-two were University of Kentucky students and eighteen were Lexington, Kentucky, citizens)—and for a period of time between five and fifteen minutes stared intently at the back of each individual's head. Both the viewing distance and the time spent staring varied because of the situational requirements for each subject and the conditions prevailing at the time of the observations. The mean age of those who were stared at was 29.5 years.

Considerable care was taken with each subject to ensure that the starer was not noticed by the person being stared at when the starer took up his physical position behind the subject. Care was also taken to ensure that the subject was not physically aware of the starer's presence during the observation period. Further care was taken to ensure that no third party was aware of the author's staring behavior and then communicated this to the person being stared at during the staring period. The author made sure his staring behavior went undetected not only by the subject but by other people in the environment. No communication between the subject and any other "watchers" took place during the staring sessions. When the subjects completed the activities in which they were engaged, they were approached and questioned. All subjects were seated during the time they were observed. No subject was ever interrupted by the experimenter during the staring period, and the staring period was continued until the subject clearly shifted his or her attention to another task. For example, those subjects stared at while they were eating or drinking were not approached and questioned until they had left their table and had moved toward the cashier or exit.

Seven of the subjects were stared at while they were eating or drinking. Nine subjects were observed while they were reading or studying at the University library or one of the Lexington city libraries. Eight subjects were observed while they were watching TV and the remaining fourteen were observed while they were working at a computer video terminal. Results from two other subjects were discarded.

During each of the forty observation periods the experimenter tried to maintain a steady and unrelenting gaze at the subject's back and head and to ensure that the experimenter's presence and position went undetected during the period of observation.

Following each observation period the experimenter approached the subject, introduced himself, handed the subject his business card, explained the purpose of the investigation and asked them to check and sign a prepared response sheet (figure 1). This response sheet asked them to indicate whether or not they were aware of being stared at and to give their permission to use their results. The mean time of all the subjects being stared at was 8.6 minutes (standard deviation 2.7) and the mean distance behind the subjects was approximately twelve feet.

Results

Thirty-five out of the forty subjects who were stared at and then interrogated reported they were "totally unaware that anyone was looking at me." Three subjects reported during the period that they did feel as if something was "wrong," "odd or

DATE: _____ TIME: _____

PLACE: _____ OBSERVER: _____

PLEASE CHECK THE ONE STATEMENT BELOW THAT IS THE MOST ACCURATE:

_____ During the last 5 minutes I was definitely aware that I was being observed and being stared at.

_____ During the last 5 minutes I felt strange, odd, and definitely different, i.e., I felt something was wrong, that is, not normal.

_____ During the last 5 minutes I was totally unaware that anyone was looking at me.

SIGNED_____

NAME_____

ADDRESS_____

PHONE NUMBER_____

NOTE: By signing above I hereby give my consent to having my results included in this psychological study.

During the observational period record the number of times S turned around, looked back, looked sideways, looked at either of the observers, etc.:

_____

_____

For further information call: Dr. Robert Baker or Video Hits.

Figure 1. 'Sense of being stared at' experiment response sheet.

unusual," but they were unable to report where the experimenter was seated during the staring period. Two subjects reported that they were habitually being observed and routinely were stared at by other people. One of these two subjects thought she was constantly being "spied on" by the FBI and/or "aliens from outer space." The other stated that since he "had extrasensory ability and always knew what other people were thinking and doing," he was well aware of my presence. Neither of these subjects were able to correctly designate the experimenter's position during the observation period, increasing the likelihood they were neither aware of his presence nor of his staring behavior. Therefore the results from these two were discarded. It is also of interest to note that the three subjects reporting a sense of anxiety were not totally engrossed in what they were doing during the observation period. All three stood up, looked around, shifted their position several times, and appeared to be momentarily distracted on a number of occasions. None, however, stared at the experimenter or took anything other than casual notice of his presence. No eye contact between the experimenter and any of the subjects was ever made during the observation periods.

Figure 2. View of subject at table with digital clock. This is what the experimenter saw when staring at the subjects through the one-way mirror.

For the thirty-five subjects who reported that they were unaware of being stared at it is important to stress the fact *that each of these subjects was totally involved and attentive to the activity they were engaged and focused on. They were seldom if ever distracted by surrounding activities during the period of observation.*

Demonstration Two

Methods And Procedures

Because of the possibility that subjects, when cognitively focused on an important activity—like eating or drinking, or reading and studying, or problem solving—would not or could not attend to weaker or more subtle stimulation from psi or other paranormal sources such as "feelings of being stared at," a second study was carried out. If subjects were told that over a fixed time-period they would be stared at on a number of separate occasions, they might well be able to detect when they are being observed. Since they are focused on the problem of "being stared at" rather than competing activities their ability to detect stares should be maximized. Some parapsychologists (and Sheldrake in particular) argue that under such conditions the subjects should do well. Sheldrake, in fact, reports positive results from his own similar experiments but notes that "most people do not perform very impressively under artificial conditions" (Sheldrake 1995). Sheldrake also makes a strong case for studies of this sort and argues that this is one of the "big scientific questions" that does not require a "big science approach" i.e., millions of dollars, large laboratories, and Nobel Prize-winning researchers in order to obtain valid and reliable answers.

To test this hypothesis fifty University of Kentucky students, thirty-six women and fourteen men from the Freshman Introduction To Psychology Course, served as volunteer subjects. Each of the fifty volunteers served both as an experimenter, i.e., starer; and as a subject, i.e., the person being stared at.

Two adjoining, soundproofed rooms connected by a one-way vision window in the psychology building at the University of Kentucky were used for the observations. Working in pairs, the subject being stared at was seated at a table in the observation room with his or her back to the one-way mirror. A digital clock with large hour and minute numbers was placed at one end of the table with the subjects at the other end. The clock was located so that it could be seen from the observation side, i.e., the other room, by the two observers doing the staring, (the author experimenter and the student experimenter) as well as by the person being stared at (figure 2).

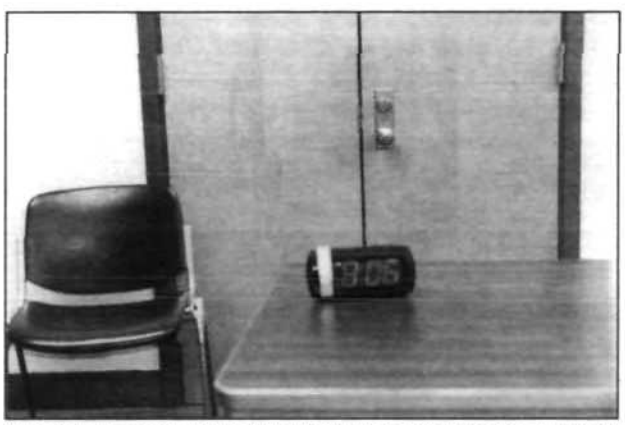

Figure 3. This is the view of the digital clock that the experimenters saw through the one-way mirror during those time intervals in which the subjects were not being stared at.

On the observer side of the window the two doing the staring were seated at a table in a position where the clock was clearly seen but the view of the subject was blocked by a small cloth partition. To stare at the subjects both the experimenter and the student had to stand up and look over this partition and stare at the back of the subject at the required time for the full one-minute interval (figures 2 and 3).

Before each twenty-minute staring session the subject was furnished with a time sheet on which they filled in their name, date, and time of the experimental staring session. Subjects were told to write "yes" on the minute-by-minute time line whenever they believed someone was staring at them. Next, they entered the time shown on the digital clock after their "yeses." The subjects also marked his or her degree

of certainty that they were being observed in the appropriate column on the right hand side of the time sheet. They were also informed that they could check only five "yeses" in the first column—since no one would be stared at more than five times, i.e., more than five minutes during the twenty-minute session. If, however, the subject filled in five lines before the twenty minutes were exhausted but felt that during the last few minutes of the session they were more certain they were being stared at, they were allowed to cross out earlier "yeses" and fill in the later minutes with a "yes" of a higher degree of certainty (figure 4).

On the observer side of the mirror the experimenter and the student experimenter used an identical twenty-minute Experimenter Time Sheet in which the five individual minute observation periods were pre-selected and marked on the experimenter's time sheets. The five one-minute staring periods for each of the fifty student subjects were randomized by putting fifteen white poker chips and five red poker chips in an opaque bowl. After shaking the bowl, for each of the fifty Experimenter Time Sheets the chips were drawn one at a time, with the red chips used to designate the minutes for staring. The only restriction imposed on this method of randomization for the minute staring sessions was that in the event five red chips were drawn successively this draw was rejected and and the randomizing procedure was started afresh.[1] All subjects were informed of these randomizing procedures and all questions regarding exactly what they were supposed to do and the precise requirements of their task were answered before each twenty-minute period began (figure 5).

Results

None of the fifty subjects were able to accurately guess all of the times that they were being stared at by the two experimenters. Eighteen of the fifty subjects did correctly guess two of the five-minute periods during their twenty-minute session. Seventeen subjects correctly guessed only one of the five-minute sessions and eleven were not able to guess any of the five. Only four of the subjects correctly guessed three of the five correctly. The mean accuracy for the group of fifty was 1.24 with an standard deviation of .91. A score of 1.25 would be expected by chance alone for each twenty minute trial, i.e., 1/4×5 or 1.25. With this outcome the usual statistical tests are irrelevant; there's no way that these particular results could ever approach statistical significance.

Since the four subjects who exceeded chance by correctly guessing three out of the five one-minute periods in which they were being stared at might well be "psi stars" or "psychically

SUBJECT'S NAME: Kim Stewart EXPERIMENTER'S NAME: Baker and R. Smith

DATE & TIME: 18 DEC 1998 — 0745 PM

TIME (In minutes from start at 0800 PM)		NOT SURE	ALMOST SURE	CERTAIN
0801	1 & 2			
0802	2 & 3			
0803	3 & 4			
0804	4 & 5			
	5 & 6 YES — 0805	✔		
0806	6 & 7			
0807	7 & 8			
0808	8 & 9			
0809	9 & 10			
	10 & 11 YES — 0810	✔		
0811	11 & 12			
	12 & 13 YES — 0812			
0813	13 & 14			
0814	14 & 15			
	15 & 16 YES — 0815		✔	
0816	16 & 17			
0817	17 & 18			
0818	18 & 19			
	19 & 20 YES — 0819	✔		
0820	20 & 21			

DIRECTIONS: Write "YES" on the two-minutes line whenever you believe someone is staring at you. Next enter the time shown on the digital clock after your "YES." Then check your degree of certainty in the appropriate column on the right. Remember you can check only FIVE (5) "YESes" in the first column—since no one will be stared at more than five times for two minutes each during the 20-minute experimental period.

Figure 4. Sample of subject's time sheet used to guess times they were being stared at.

gifted," each of these four subjects was retested under the same experimental conditions three separate times. None of the four accurately identified more than one one-minute period in which they were being stared at. The mean retest score for all three retest sessions for the four "stars" was .025 for each session—less than chance. The mean of their original score plus the three retest scores was used in the distribution.

Discussions of the Results of Both Studies

The results from both studies provide little support for those parapsychologists who insist that people, somehow, can sense when they are being stared at. In the first study when the subjects were questioned at the end of the staring period, only two expressed any confidence that "they were aware of or could sense someone was looking at them." Even for these two the accuracy of their claims is suspect. Similarly, in the second study only nineteen of the fifty subjects checked the "certain" level of confidence at any minute for any of their guesses. Of the total forty-two guesses of "certain" made by the nineteen subjects only four were correct, i.e., thirty-eight of the subjects' feelings of certainty that they were being stared at were in error. This is an overall accuracy level of .09. Clearly, even when subjects "know" they are being observed they are never sure exactly when.

These results are not surprising when it is remembered that most industrial and business security systems are based on the premise that the cashiers, dealers, croupiers, et. al., are *not* aware of exactly when they are under surveillance, i.e., being stared at by security personnel from one-way mirrors or monitoring cameras. The TV series *Caught On Tape* (Real Life Productions) is also based on the fact that people frequently commit crimes when they assume no one is looking. CBS's very popular *Candid Camera* TV show also assumes people are not aware of the fact that others are looking at them.

Why Braud and the other parapsychologists resorted to the use of indirect physiological measures, e.g., electrodermal activity, rather than more direct, above-threshold methods is puzzling. Opportunities for the play of bias, i.e., "the experimenter effect," are maximized in the notoriously unreliable recording and reporting of these highly sensitive and quixotic subthreshold measures. In fact, in a recent study using electrodermal measures (Wiseman and Schlitz 1997), Wiseman, a skeptic, found no evidence of psi whereas Schlitz, a believer, found positive and significant effects.

Accordingly, a simpler, more direct approach to the study of such alleged effects seemed both more reasonable and more reliable, especially since the claim that people know they're being stared at is an "above threshold" phenomenon.

Sheldrake's contention that such studies as the two reported here cost very little to carry out, can be done by most anyone without special training—including amateurs—and can yet provide good scientific answers to big questions are points well taken. A recent example of what Sheldrake calls "small science" is the work of eleven-year-old Emily Rosa and her study of Therapeutic Touch (Sarner

EXPERIMENTERS' TIME SHEET (20 MINUTES)

EXPERIMENTER'S NAME: Baker and R. Smith

SUBJECT'S NAME: Kim Stewart

DATE & TIME: 18 DEC 1998 — 0745 PM

TIME (In minutes from start at 0800 PM)

1 & 2	
2 & 3	
3 & 4	X 0803
4 & 5	
5 & 6	
6 & 7	X 0806
7 & 8	
8 & 9	
9 & 10	
10 & 11	X 0810
11 & 12	X 0811
12 & 13	
13 & 14	
14 & 15	
15 & 16	
16 & 17	X 0816
17 & 18	
18 & 19	
19 & 20	
20 & 21	

Figure 5. Sample of time sheet used by the experimenters to determine exactly when subject would be stared at. "X" indicates the five specific one-minute periods during which this particular subject was stared at.

1998). Because two studies reported here are also good examples of small science, the author strongly recommends that other interested skeptics replicate these studies. The second study does not require connected rooms with a one-way mirror. A cardboard partition with two holes—one allowing the experimenter to see only the digital clock and the second allowing the experimenter to see both the clock and the person being observed—would serve adequately. Both the experimenter and the subjects could carry out such a study in a single room with the subjects at one end and the observer at the other. In the present study when subjects were asked not to turn around or stare at the one-way mirror all of them complied. In the first study, obviously no special equipment of any sort is required.

A note of caution is in order to those who would replicate the first demonstration. As noted earlier, two subjects, once they learned that the experimenter was an investigator of paranormal phenomena, did their best to persuade the experimenter that they were special people with special gifts badly in need of scientific attention. This behavior is not unusual. Many ordinary individuals desire attention and publicity and will do anything to get it. The opportunity to establish themselves as psychically gifted and in possession of paranormal powers and, therefore, worthy of further study is a chance they find difficult to pass up.

Summary and Conclusions

Parapsychologists claim man's ability to know when he is being stared at has existed since the time of primitive man and served, in those days, to warn him of impending danger and attack from savage beasts. They also believe this ability still exists in modern men and women today. Skeptics deny this claim and believe it is nothing more than superstition and/or a response to subtle signals from the environment that are not strong enough to let us know exactly what caused them. For example, if we are in a very dark room and we suddenly sense the presence of another person—even though we do not see or hear him—we may know he is there because of the person's shaving lotion, movement of air currents in the room, body heat, etc. In other words if we are warned of another's presence, it is likely due to subtle physical cues in the environment that we normally do not attend to—not to any so-called "psychic" or paranormal ability!

To determine if people can tell when they are being stared at, two demonstrations were completed. In the first, forty individuals were stared at for an average time of 8.6 minutes while they were eating, reading, or watching a computer screen or television. When they finished they were asked if they were aware they were being stared at. Of the forty a total of thirty-five reported they were "totally unaware that anyone was looking at them." For the other five there is good reason to believe they also were not aware they were being viewed. In the second demonstration fifty students sat at a table in front of a one-way mirror and were observed by two experimenters, one minute at a time, five times during a twenty-minute observation period. The students' task was to try to guess when they were being stared at and report their degree of certainty. None of the fifty were able to correctly guess when they were being stared at. The mean accuracy score for the group was 1.24; the chance score for guessing was 1.25 out of a total of five guesses.

Despite the parapsychologists' contentions, unless replications of these two studies prove otherwise, it is prudent to conclude that people *cannot* tell when they are being stared at. If experimental purists question either the validity or the reliability of the outcome of these two demonstrations, I suggest they repeat them and see for themselves. If people somehow know they are being stared at—but only at a subthreshold level (which at the moment is unproven and only speculative), this "fact" is of theoretical value only and is far too weak, and unreliable to be of any practical use to modern man.

Acknowledgments

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Note

1. This is a simple, quick, and legitimate way to randomize such a presentation. Even if the series were biased, subjects would still be expected to detect the stares when they occurred.

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