

The Gaze of Another

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Sociology 1010

Norms are, as defined by *Introduction to Sociology 2e with Concept Coach, “*the visible and invisible rules of conduct through which societies are structured.” In the society of which I am a part, norms exist in regards to how one should conduct themselves when eye-contact is made with another person. These norms can vary drastically, depending on the context of the situation. For the purposes of this essay, the context in which I will be discussing the norms of eye-contact, will be in a situation where those with whom you’re making eye-contact are people you do not know personally. It will also be in a public space: the Atrium of Salt Lake Community College, where many people will coming and going.

When you’re alone and you’re sitting at a table in a high-traffic, public space, and your head is lifted, you’re almost guaranteed to meet the gaze of another person. It is the norm to avoid this form of human contact and instead, look down at your books, computer, papers, phone, or anything else you might have on hand. It is even more acceptable to stare at the ceiling, floor, or off into space, than to stare into the eyes of a passersby. It is also more acceptable to stare at another’s body parts, rather than their eyes, given that the part of the body you are staring at doesn’t happen to be the chest, butt, or pelvic region, which can often be construed as an offensive gesture. You can stare at someone’s feet, shoes, back, legs, hips, shoulders, neck, chin, hair, etc. so long as if they show discomfort in seeing you looking at them, you immediately break eye-contact. What you cannot do, unless you wish to be met with scowls and disdain, is stare straight into the eyes of a stranger.

If by chance your eyes do happen to cross paths, it is only acceptable if it happened by accident, and the norm is to end eye-contact immediately. You can end the encounter by nodding, smiling, or with any other short, friendly gesture, followed by a change in the direction of your gaze. You can also end it in a more awkward fashion, such as jerking your head in another direction, which can add meaning to a meaningless encounter, or make it painfully obvious that you feel uncomfortable with the situation. Even this, the most awkward of methods, is more socially acceptable than continuing to make eye-contact with someone you don’t know.

NOT breaking eye-contact with someone sets us up to feel vulnerable. We don’t know how the person on the receiving end of the stare is going to perceive it. They may think your being aggressive or offensive, trying to show dominance, or attempting to belittle them with your ogling eyes. They might assume your social skills are lacking. They could misconstrue the eye-contact for a flirtatious gesture. Because it is out of the norm to purposely make eye-contact, and even more against the grain to continue or maintain it, once both parties are aware of it, the person whom you’re staring at is going to make some judgement about you and what your intentions are. For these reasons, most of the individuals in our society avoid eye-contact with strangers, and it was for these reasons, I chose not to.

While sitting at a table located near one of the entrances in the Atrium of Salt Lake Community College’s South City Campus, I intentionally made eye-contact with people who I’ve never met as they walked into and passed through the Atrium. As these individuals entered the Atrium, I began eye-contact with them as they approached me, beginning at a distance of approximately twenty-five feet away. I maintained eye-contact with them as they walked toward me, and I did not break eye-contact until they reached a point where it became necessary for me to turn my head to continue looking at them. I repeated this process with approximately thirty different people. In each instance, eye-contact lasted no more than approximately eight seconds and no less than approximately five seconds. I began by writing down the results of each individual, but had to scrap my count due to very large groups of people passing through, but noted anyone that deviated from what I considered the average response.

The results were overwhelmingly similar in all thirty of the individuals with whom I conducted my experiment. They each broke eye-contact very soon after meeting my gaze, however, the time they were able to maintain eye-contact before breaking away did vary slightly. I have broken these individuals into three categories in an attempt to explain the data I collected. The first category, “Solo Walkers,” are those individuals who were walking alone. Of this group, literally no one broke away from average, which I have defined as those who held my stare no more than 0.5 seconds. Group two, “Passive,” are individuals who were in groups that were either quiet or silent. Of this group, four individuals were able to hold my stare longer than average, with a duration of about 1 or 1.5 seconds. Group three, “Aggressive,” were individuals that were in noisy and boisterous groups. Of this group there were two individuals that passed the 0.5 seconds mark, and they maintained eye-contact slightly longer than those in the Passive group, with a gaze of about 3 seconds each.

Solo Walkers broke eye-contact the instant they noticed me staring and did not look back at me the entire time I looked at them. This was the case in literally every instance of a Solo Walker. I believe the reason for the correlation between solo walkers and a 0.5 second duration of eye-contact boils down to a feeling of insecurity. When faced with a situation where norms are being broken by a person or people you don’t know, flags are raised for the individuals in that situation. They don’t know the motives of those who are demonstrating abnormal behaviors. They don’t know if these actions are targeted at them or what is going to happen next. At this point, instinct takes over and the “fight or flight” response kicks in. They don’t want to antagonize someone, who they already perceive as suspicious, by staring back at them. So they attempt to defuse the situation and move on, thus eye-contact is broken and they continue walking.

Individuals, if alone and without “back-up,” naturally fall into a more passive role in order to protect themselves when faced with an uncomfortable and potentially dangerous situation. However, those same individuals, when in a group, can face the same situation but with different results. I believe this is what explains the four responses of those in the Passive group. When in a group of people that they feel secure with, an individual can overcome the fear that would otherwise prevent them from staring back for any prolonged period of time. This may be out of curiosity or a desire not to feel domineered over. Whatever the case, the fear of what a single, staring female can do, when weighed against what a group of two or more is capable of, no longer forces that individual into the fearful survival mode of “fight or flight.” They now dare to push back, so to speak, even if only through a prolonged stare. I believe this is why the six the individuals who were in the groups Passive and Aggressive were able to maintain prolonged periods of eye-contact. However, what accounts for the difference between groups Passive and Aggressive?

The two individuals from Group Aggressive held my gaze for a slightly longer time than the four from Group Passive did. This can be explained through the correlation between noise level and duration of eye-contact. Of the two individuals who were able to maintain eye-contact for approximately 3 seconds, both were in groups of people talking loudly, excitedly, and with more exaggerated hand and arm movements. The reason for this being that those individuals who are willing to be loud in a space where other people are present and studying, are the same individuals who are already pushing the limits of society. These are the more aggressive personality types, and thus, the individuals who are willing to stare back and test the limits of the individual who initiated the eye-contact. When individuals, who are already prone to pushing the limits of society, are in a group that creates a sense of security, they are then able to take it a step further and brave the unknown consequences that hold others back.

While these explanations may seem to be reaching for some, I believe every small interaction a person has can say something about the bigger picture. It isn’t a stretch to say that those who are more apt to aggressive behavior would be willing to test the boundaries of someone they don’t know by staring back at them. It also isn’t hard to believe that when an individual is in a group, that individual is capable of behaviors that they wouldn’t normally demonstrate if alone. When in groups, the “pack mentality” comes to life and people engage in acts that they wouldn’t otherwise be a part of and may not approve of. The behaviors demonstrated by both single individuals and individuals in this eye-contact experiment is no different. It is simply a much more subtle demonstration of behavior; one that requires those studying it to pay close attention if the connections are to be made.

At the beginning of this eye-contact experiment, my expectations were that there would be about a thirty-five/sixty-five divide between those who immediately broke eye-contact and those who held my gaze. I had not taken into account that there would be any correlation between those who held eye-contact and the number of people they were with. My beliefs were based on nothing more than what my life experiences had been. I knew that for the most part people do not enjoy conflict and try to avoid it, especially when it involves someone they don’t know. However, there are always those who are willing to engage potentially contentious interactions, and sometimes intentionally create such situations.

Out of the thirty or so individuals who I conducted my experiment on, about twenty percent of them were willing break from the norm and engage in a battle of the gazes. While these numbers are not too far from my own prediction of thirty-five percent breaking from the norm, after closer consideration, I believe these numbers to be higher than what is true for the population of Salt Lake City. I believe this because the sample I experimented on was not random. They were all people within the age range of 17-30, all of which were on a college campus. This is not demonstrative of the population of Salt Lake City. If I were to conduct this experiment again I would do so in a public area, where people of all walks of life are present, or go to more than one location, in order to get a more representative sample. In a case with a more representative sample, I believe the percent of people willing to hold eye-contact would be closer to ten percent.

I went into this experiment blind, and came out with some insights about people and how far they are willing to push the limits of society. I found that based on whether or not they were alone, and when in a group, they type of behavior the group demonstrated, made a substantial difference in the reaction of the individual. Overall it was a fun and insightful experiment that not only tested the limits of those being experimented on, but also tested the limits of the experimenter.