

Blinking as Needed

By Emily Adkins

I keep asking myself over and over again why I signed up for this. I'm wasting my time in a white room about to "gaze deeply into the eyes of a stranger." No, I'm not kidding. This is my fate. Thank you, Dr. Narowitz from Introduction to Psychology. You just had to include mandatory research participation to further the interests of science in your syllabus. Who better to use as guinea pigs than college students? The study I am here to participate in (the only one that would fit in my schedule) is supposed to research how behavior, feelings, and attitudes change based upon the amount of eye contact two individuals have with one another. I am going to be staring (hopefully not longingly) into the eyes of a person I have possibly never met before for at least two-hundred forty seconds without saying anything, but blinking as needed. This is not a staring contest, the researchers remind us. This is a study to gather data as to how people react in different situations, they say, so just act naturally. But I think if they wanted us to act naturally, they wouldn't make us stare uncomfortably at someone we've never met for long periods of time. That's usually frowned upon.

The moment my partner and I see each other is supposed to be just before the staring starts. I find it very comforting that I'm at least given the opportunity to get comfortable before my partner comes in. I'm not really sure when this is supposed to begin. I wonder what my partner is going to be like. It will be just my luck that I'll get a cute boy on a day like today. What if my partner looks like he stepped out of a magazine? I'm wearing sweatpants. I obviously did not think this through. I could be meeting the future father of my children who looks like a model

and I'm sitting here wearing sweatpants and a shirt that I slept in. The clothes are comfortable but right now, I can't say the same for myself. There are just so many things that can go wrong in this type of situation. Regret is beginning to sink in. I could have skipped calculus to do the study about video game violence or color theory or something. Of course the weirdest one would be the most convenient for my schedule.

A researcher in a white lab coat stands up, but it's not the same guy who helped me sign in when I first got here. This guy looks very serious. He's holding a clipboard and a stopwatch.

"In sixty seconds, your partner will arrive and sit down across from you. Do not introduce yourself. Do not speak to your partner under any circumstances, except in case of emergency. In the rare case in which an emergency does occur, the fire exits are located to your right against the wall. Please take a moment to look around the room if you have not done so already, because as soon as your partner arrives, we ask that you be completely committed to the task of looking into their eyes and avoid all other activity."

The researcher interrupted my train of thought. Oh well. I do as the lab coat guy suggests. There are about ten other people in this particular room, although I assume this experiment is also being conducted in other locations as well for quality control and all that. The walls and the floor are slightly different shades of white. The windows have shades pulled down over them (white ones, unsurprisingly). Rules and regulations for research on human subjects are posted on the wall, and I'm pretty sure nobody is going to want to read that instead of looking at their partners. My chair is very comfortable and spacious. It's also a really groovy paisley print. I would totally have this in my house one day, especially because I can sit just about any way that I like. I go for criss-cross applesauce. These chairs are literally the only non-neutral colored object

in this room. There's a chair across from me that complements mine, which reminds me of the coming stare down. I wonder how awkward and creepy this is going to be. I guess this is safe, sane, and consensual. Both my partner and I did, in fact, have to sign consent forms stating that we are doing this of our own free will. But wait, if I did this because of a grade, does that mean that the teacher is using coercion for me to be here? Is that a scapegoat? Does that mean I get to leave?

Not so fast. Too bad. The researcher who spoke last stands up and says, "It is almost time to begin. Please face forward and take a deep breath." Then he walks in. I must be psychic. He looks like he stepped out of an Abercrombie advertisement. He probably even has abs under his jacket. Great. My worst fears are realized. Maybe this is karma for going over the speed limit all the time. Wait, it's not like I'm actually going to be talking this guy. I'm going to stare at him for four minutes and then never see him again. That's a pleasant thought. Then it will all be over. I guess it's time to get this party started, because he sits down across from me. He takes off his jacket and his cologne heads in my direction. I'm not sure I enjoy it—It's really strong, like he deliberately put three layers of it on this morning just to come this white room and sit across from some random girl he had never met, although I'm sure he was not trying to impress me. He probably expected someone tall, blonde, with no visible disfigurements. Instead, he got an awkward short girl with glasses staring at him. My rational brain says not to worry because I'm sure he's a nice guy, but the irrational side of me is sure that he must be wishing he had been seated in the chair next to him so he would have gotten the tanned beach blonde girl. She would probably be his type. I wonder what he's thinking. I wonder how far we are into this experiment already. I hope

it's almost over because I think I'm beginning to get emotionally attached to looking at my partner. Goodness, this boy is handsome. I know I'm not supposed to be looking, but his hair is falling in just the right way and he has great posture. His eyes are green with gold specks in the middle. He is very dedicated to the task at hand. He hasn't looked away from me once. This is strange.

I wonder what we would say if we could speak. Perhaps it would go something like this:

"Good afternoon. What's your name?"

"Summer," I would say. "What about yours?"

"I am John Smith, the most handsome and charming man you will ever meet, Summer. I sail off into the sunset with beautiful women weekly. And yes, I do actually have my sailing license. But I would stop all of that for you, Summer. You could be my one and only. I like to take long walks on the beach and I love children. We are destined to be together. Will you marry me?"

"No, John. I think that would be highly inappropriate. I've only just met you. Don't you think we should at least go on a date first?"

"Of course not, Summer, light of my life. Did you know staring into someone's eyes for four minutes will make you fall in love with them? Or at least that's what I read on the Internet. That must mean it's true. Please, be mine forever! We could have beautiful children together and live by the seaside! Think of it, Summer! After these four minutes, you and I will be bound for all eternity!"

Let's keep in mind that this situation is highly improbable and hypothetical. This does not actually happen, and I'm quite grateful that I don't happen to be living in a soap opera. I doubt John Smith would ask me to marry him or that he even has a sailor's license. But what I don't doubt is staring into his eyes for four minutes is super creepy and is making me have weird

thoughts. I don't like this. I think I've blinked a total of two times throughout this whole process and my eyes are getting so dry I am starting to tear up. I wonder if I've been making faces while having this inner dialogue. I certainly hope not because then he must be seriously weirded out.

I notice that John the Hypothetical Sailor is wearing a watch. I should have noticed sooner so that I could have timed this. I wonder what type of reactions the researchers wanted to procure. Immediate lust probably wasn't one of the desired effects. Maybe they were going for more of "reactions of sudden positivity and hopefulness due to human connection." It feels like I've been sitting here for hours. My leg starts to go numb and I wonder about the logistics of switching leg positions without breaking eye contact. I remember I am allowed to move my head as long as I keep looking at him. I attempt to keep my upper body still as I slowly re-maneuver my legs over top of one another without looking. It occurs to me that I might be too close to the edge of this very comfortable chair so I start to scoot back but I'm losing my balance and this cannot end well and—ouch. Wow. That will be a bruise in a few days. My pride and my bottom half both hurt. I'm impressed with myself because I have just managed to catapult myself off of this giant chair and onto the uninviting tile floor. To make matters worse, the entire room is now looking at me. I bet they're going to have to throw these results out now. If I could sink into the floor and become a puddle I would in a split second. I try to smile at the sailor as my face burns, turning as red as a tomato, and he looks like he's enjoying himself. Maybe he's into girls who manage to make themselves look completely stupid. If so, I'm really acing this first impression.

"Are you okay?" one of the researchers demands, clearly concerned about the validity of his data rather than my safety.

“Just peachy,” I squeak. John the Sailor just heard me talk for the first time and I squeaked. I hope all of my future first dates go this well.

The other man in a white lab coat is quick to regroup. He gazes across the room and directs the other participants back to the task at hand and their partners. We will all complete the experiment but we will reset the timer to two minutes for damage control, even though we only had fifty-two seconds left.

Everyone in the room must hate me now. I resign to making these last couple minutes as completely normal as possible. My blush is starting to fade, for which I am thankful, but Mr. GQ is still smiling at me and I don't know whether to be flattered, embarrassed, or annoyed. Either way, I'm definitely uncomfortable. I stare right back with a somewhat neutral expression on my face although I'm trying to avoid drawing any attention to myself. I'm really hoping he'll walk out without talking to me, and I'm pretty sure I'm going to make a beeline for the door the moment that the lab coat guys let me go. I am definitely going to pray I never see anybody in this room again. I can get through this. Finding ways to pass the time without creating dreamscapes involving the sailor is pretty difficult. Maybe I'll count back from seventy and by the time I'm done this will all be over.

Sixty-nine, sixty-eight, sixty-seven.....and John Smith's eye just twitched. I think it was a twitch. It could be because he's nervous or uncomfortable. Or dehydrated, for that matter. I don't know, though—his smile is really wide. Maybe he has a neurological disorder that makes his face twitch randomly and uncontrollably. I could be imagining all of this, though. In fact, I probably am, just like I had that dream sequence with him becoming Fabio and offering to sweep me off into the sunset and be the father of my children. He definitely did it again, and I was looking right

at him this time. I was totally paying attention. His eyes are really nice. Maybe that was a wink. He's showing his teeth when he smiles. They're nice and straight and he has a very small gap between his two front teeth. But that was definitely a wink. My dreamboat sailor man just winked at me. I think I'm going red again. Hiding my face behind my hands is probably not a valid option at this point in the experiment. Is he doing this on purpose? Today cannot get any worse.

Suddenly, sweet relief comes. Or so I hope.

"Time is up, ladies and gentlemen. Please, no one leave the room. You still have to complete your exit surveys. You will come up one at a time in alphabetical order—the same order in which you were seated and assigned to your partners. After that you may go. Until then, feel free to socialize with people near you. Just keep it quiet, please."

Great. This is exactly what I wanted. At least my last name starts with D. But if they sat us in alphabetical order then there are four people in front of me, possibly five if John's name precedes mine. I'm trying my hardest to hide my face and look completely disinterested when he kneels in front of my chair.

"Hey, I know this has been really strange but I think you would be fun to talk with over coffee. You have really nice eyes. It's good that you don't wear a lot of makeup. Are you busy after this?"

"I'm not really sure that I'm free and caffeine this late in the day will keep me up all night. Maybe some other time," I say, kind of regretting that I ever opened my mouth to begin with. I should have just ignored him.

“Come on, it’ll be fun. I’ll even sit next to you in Starbucks to make sure that you don’t accidentally land on something important when you’re uncrossing your legs.” Then he smiles, and he is clearly flirting with me. I think.

I’ve always heard it said that you should be yourself around people you’re interested in and good things will happen for you. And this guy is certainly interesting. I resolve that it is only by fate that this turned out this way and that I wouldn’t forgive myself for not taking advantage of this generous offer.

Why not throw caution to the wind? I ask myself. I steady my voice and tell him that I think I would really like that.

“Great. Hey, I think it’s my turn. You should be next, though. You’re Summer Downing, right? We had pre-cal together last semester in that big auditorium class. Meet me outside when you’re done. By the way, my name’s John.”