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Mutual Gaze Among Strangers

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MUTUAL GAZE AMONG STRANGERS

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the reactions people experienced when engaged in extended eye contact with a stranger. Artist Marina Abramović and an organization entitled The Liberators International have demonstrated a spectrum of reactions, many emotionally-charged, that have occurred from the opportunity to sit across from and gaze into the eyes of a stranger. Current research on eye contact has been predominantly quantitative, with no available research that qualitatively investigates the scenario in focus. The design of this study involved interviewing 35 people who participated in "The World's Biggest Eye Contact Experiment," where individuals paired with a partner and gazed into each other's eyes for one minute. The data revealed a significant overlap between negative and positive face, where individuals sought out the experience in order to exceed their comfort zones and to foster connections with other people. Participants reported feeling a sense of vulnerability, which was attributed to civil inattention and the simultaneous threat to and expansion of negative face.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

There are few opportunities in life where mutual gaze, for an extended period of time, is expected or necessitated. These rare instances are likely limited to intimate relationships, where the experience of such could be an affirmation of intimate feelings. Even fewer opportunities exist where one would experience extended mutual gaze with a stranger, and due to this lack of availability, one might never encounter its potential as a profound experience. I attended a seminar entitled *The Art of Making Change*, where, during a group discussion, we were instructed to look into the eyes of the person beside us for a couple of minutes, in silence. The initial thought of it seemed dreadful, and the first minute matched the thought; I giggled nervously, averted my eyes once or twice, and felt uncomfortable. In observing these reactions, I challenged myself to stick through it and to not let my thoughts distract me. I increased my concentration, focusing intently on the person's pupils. This intentional transition, from uncomfortable to focused, caused a major shift, an opportunity to let this encounter become a transformative experience. The remaining time felt meditative and surreal, where the more I gazed into their life, the more our differences began to disintegrate, unveiling the often forgotten reality that all humans are inherently interconnected, and that our similarities significantly outweigh our differences. While I normally perceive life as relative to my perspective as the center, labeling everyone around me as part of my environment, seeing my own reflection in their eyes, my own face gazing back at me, revealed that I am just as much a part of their environment, as they are a part of mine.

My experience is not unique, as this activity has been reproduced within similar contexts.

A video on Youtube, published by an organization called The Liberators International (2015), demonstrated a social experiment, situated in a public space, where three individuals sat in separate stations, silent, and waited for people who passed by to take the empty seat opposite to the three individuals. The experiment displayed a sign that read "Where has the human connection gone? Share 1 minute eye contact to find out!," and while most people watched from the sidelines, seemingly hesitant to participate, some came forward. The video captured several of their reactions, many of which displayed profound emotional responses; a few people cried, held hands with those they were gazing at, and several ended their interaction with a hug.

A similar demonstration, created and performed by artist Marina Abramović (2010), was situated at the Museum of Modern Art. Her piece was entitled *The Artist is Present*, in which she sat at a table, with an empty seat across from her, and gazed attentively at any visitor who took the seat. This piece went on for three months straight, where the total amount of hours she sat in silence and gazed at visitors accumulated to over 700 hours (Abraham et al., 2012). A documentary (2012) captured the variety of people who came to participate, and as more weeks went by, it became more popular. Soon, numbers had to be distributed to visitors who wanted the chance to simply sit across from a silent woman, to engage in extended eye contact with her. People started camping outside of the museum; one interviewed women said she had waited for 16 hours before arriving to the front of the line, and another woman stated that she had flown in from Australia to experience this piece (Abraham et al., 2012). Several people cried, putting their hands over their chest, during the exeperience. There was a consistent crowd surrounding the perimeter of the square, where people sat for hours, watching as, one by one, another individual sat and gazed into Marina's eyes. During an interview with Marina that occurred after the

exhibit, she noted: "When they're sitting in front of me, it's not about me anymore. It's very soon, I'm just a mirror of their own self" (Abraham et al., 2012).

Simmel (1908) eloquently characterized the experience of eye contact as a unique union between two persons, as "the most direct and purest reciprocity which exists anywhere" (p. 358). These profound reactions that people experienced demonstrate three common themes regarding the experience of extended eye contact among strangers, and these perceived themes are what have captured my interest. The first theme is the allure that drew strangers to participate in and view this activity. In both The Liberators International's social experiment and Marina Abramović's performance art, individuals from all walks of life were attracted to the prospect of engaging in this moment; specifically, for Marina Abramović's piece, the allure was great enough to cause people to begin waiting in line the night before, and to have a crowd of spectators surrounding the space, many simply watching, mesmerized by the encounter. As Douglas Christie (2013) described, an author who attended Marina's exhibit, "I am not sitting in the chair. But I feel a jolt run through my body as I begin to feel the depth and power of this moment" (p. 13). A second theme is that, during the few minutes that two individuals engaged in this silent, simple, experience, something occurred that brought some to tears, and brought others to hold hands and embrace each other. Perhaps this quote by Simmel, which describes the inherent vulnerability associated with mutual gaze, may provide insight into why these exchanges catalyzed such emotional reactions:

> By the glance which reveals the other, one discloses himself. By the same act in which the observer seeks to know the observed, he surrenders himself to be understood by the observer. The eye cannot take unless at the same time it gives.

The eye of a person discloses his own soul when he seeks to uncover that of

another. (p. 358)

Thus, vulnerability is the third theme that binds them all. The will to participate in this activity

can be attributed to the alluring challenge of making one's self vulnerable, and the result of such

subjection is the experience of compassionate emotions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a wide range of research available that examines the relationship between gaze and an innumerable amount of other factors. It is one of the most salient contributors in the realm of nonverbal communication, and its role is interdependent with all other elements that make up communication. The purpose of this literature review is: first, to demonstrate the fundamental role that gaze plays in the regulation of interaction and the transmission of information; second, to highlight a theme between gaze and social connectedness; and third, to review theories and concepts which can provide insight into understanding eye contact among strangers.

As an element of nonverbal communication, research has concluded that eye contact performs several functions in social interaction. Kendon (1967) postulated that the functions of gaze can be assorted into two comprehensive categories: regulatory and expressive. Regulatory functions pertain to the role of eye contact in facilitating the initiation, maintenance, and closure of interactions. Gaze impacts whether a conversation will be initiated or not (Cary, 1978), and during conversation, eye contact is maintained during intermittent intervals, where listeners maintain more prolonged eye contact than speakers (Argyle & Dean, 1965). Just as the initiation of eye contact can signal that the channel for communication is open, the cessation of eye contact may signal that the channel is closed, ending the interaction (Argyle & Dean, 1965).

Furthermore, Kendon's latter category of gaze denotes a separate dimension of eye contact as information providers. Eye contact, as a nonverbal indicator, has the potential to communicate a myriad of pertinent social information. Bischof and Kingstone (2007) demonstrated people's tendency to fixate on eyes when presented with a natural scene, confirming the notion that eyes provide important social information. Kleinke (1986) outlined

thematic subjects, based on the prevalence and consensus of published research, that corresponded to the function of gaze as information providers. Relevant sub-themes demonstrated that gaze communicates liking and attraction, attentiveness, competence, social skills and mental health, credibility, dominance, and feelings (Kleinke, 1986). Gaze also has the power to communicate social inclusion and exclusion, where looking towards the direction of a person, without making eye contact, is enough to make one feel invisible (Wesselmann, Cardoso, Slater, & Williams, 2012).

In addition to exploring the expressive functions of gaze, scholars also point to affective functions of gaze. There is a correlation between the amount of eye contact exchanged and positive evaluations. Lewis and Laird (1989) found that subjects instructed to gaze into a stranger's eyes for two minutes reported high feelings of affection and liking. Wagner (2013) demonstrated the relationship between public speakers' higher use of eye contact and their corresponding positive evaluations. However, while higher levels of eye contact are associated with greater liking and attraction, too much eye contact can create the opposite effect.

Argyle and Dean (1965) conceptualized equilibrium theory as the reason behind the negative reactions instigated by excessive eye contact, which posits that individuals strive to maintain an equilibrium level of intimacy by balancing out affiliative behaviors. Once a level of comfortable intimacy is established by a given dyad, characterized as a combination of "eye contact, physical proximity, intimacy of topic, smiling etc" (Argyle & Dean, 1965, p. 293), if any one of these factors is increased or decreased, then the other factors will respond in reciprocation, by increasing or decreasing, in order to compensate and to maintain equilibrium. By reviewing a multitude of correlational and experimental studies involved in testing

equilibrium theory, Patterson (1973) demonstrated a consensus of support. Underlying the maintenance of intimacy equilibrium are the forces of approach and avoidance (Argyle & Dean, 1965). The establishment of a dyad's equilibrium varies according to their relationship, where approach forces, nonverbal indicators of intimacy, have been found to be greater among friends, as opposed to strangers (Coutts & Schneider, 1976).

Goffman's work may shed light on an explanation for compensatory behaviors, described in equilibrium theory. A prominent conception in Goffman's work is the idea that humans are social performers, where the public setting is the stage, and the interactions between individuals are coordinated in order to uphold the demands of the scene (Cupach & Metts, 1994). As social actors, the roles that individuals possess and perform are a display of their conception of self, deemed "face," which vary according to the context of the interaction (Cupach & Metts, 1994). Thus, not only are the normative demands of the scene striven to be upheld, but Goffman noted that there is an underlying, cooperative principle, which suggests that individuals cooperate to support each others' faces and, thereby, each others' performances; consequently, "to not support each other's face is to disrupt the entire scene" (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 2). This lack of cooperation, the disruption of the social scene, would result in what is deemed "face threat" (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p.3). In accordance with this conception of face, the compensatory strategies related to equilibrium theory can be attributed to stemming from face threats. Since the performance of face varies based on the intimacy of relationships, the connection can be made that more intimate relationships condone more nonverbal immediacy cues, whereas less intimate relationships do not. Strangers breaking the norm centered on the perceived, appropriate amount of eye contact and immediacy behaviors threatens the performance of face, of which is

contingent on the relationship between the dyad, and the normative behaviors associated with such relationship. In order to avoid face threatening situations, people may engage in "preventative facework," and if damage has already been done to one's face, then such individual would engage in "corrective facework" (Cupach & Metts, 1994). Moreover, people strive to meet and maintain positive and negative face needs, where positive face denotes the aspiration to be liked and admired, and negative face necessitates the desire to not be imposed on, thus maintaining a needed sense of autonomy (Lim & Bowers, 1991).

As beings socialized into a dynamic, socially constructed world, there are implicit norms that pertain to a multitude of social contexts, and visual behavior is an element which varies according to the social setting. Since the appropriate use of eye contact varies in each setting, effective implementation of the appropriate visual behavior can serve to maintain one's face. Goffman (1963) noted a pattern of visual behavior in public places, characterized as the action of people observing others with an initial glance, so as to acknowledge the presence of others, and subsequently withdrawing the glance, in order to communicate that there is no fixation to pursue further contact. Coined "civil inattention," (Goffman, 1963, p. 88) this social phenomenon has been demonstrated as more present and relevant in areas with more condensed population. Newman and McCauley (1977) found that openness to communication, utilizing eye contact as a measure of such, was much less frequent in a city, in comparison to a suburb and a small town. Simmel (1908) also noted this reluctance to make eye contact in cities, in contrast to towns, and he cited this as an issue afflicting modern life, where the prevalent lack of eye contact instigates the feeling that one is "surrounded on all sides by closed doors" (p. 361). These observations are explained by the overload hypothesis. Conceived by Milgram, this hypothesis denotes that

individuals become overloaded with the amount of stimulation, instigated by the availability of social interaction, within populous cities; as a result, individuals adapt to this social overload by reserving themselves (Newman & McCauley, 1977) and perpetuating civil inattention. Thus, as humans have evolved to adapt to social overload by implementing civil inattention, there has been a simultaneous effect, where the reluctance to make eye contact and to make one's self open to communication can induce feelings of isolation and disconnection.

In consideration of the aforementioned research, the most prominent gap found is the lack of any qualitative analyses surrounding the experience of extended eye contact among strangers. Most of the research illustrates gaze as communication tools for regulating interaction, or as information transmitters. Carey (1989) characterized an alternative interpretation of communication, where it is not merely sending and receiving messages, but rather, it is a holistic maintenance and reproduction of the culture at the time. The available literature lacks an interpretive lens for assessing communication as a ritual. In addition, there is an absence of a qualitative application of facework to the experiences related to prolonged eye contact among strangers. Therefore, the research question I propose is: what are the reactions that individuals experience when they engage in extended gaze with strangers?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Considering the qualitative nature of the research question, as well as the prominent lack of such analyses present in the research, a qualitative methodology was utilized to address the research question. The initial, proposed methodology was designed to emulate The Liberators International's (2015) eye contact experiment, where trained participants would sit in a public space, waiting for members of the public to sit across from them, in order to engage in the extended eye contact activity. Participants, subsequently, would have been interviewed about their experience. However, by pure chance, an event entitled "The World's Biggest Eye Contact Experiment," established by The Liberators International, occurred during the data collection phase of this research process and eliminated the need to emulate the experiment on my own. The design, therefore, shifted from the implementation of the exercise, as the source for the interviews, to the attendance of "The World's Biggest Eye Contact Experiment," as the strategy for gathering interviews.

A pilot study was conducted, with the initial methodology in mind, and although the study's objective was to gather feedback for understanding the constraints of the exercise, for the purpose of reproducing the situation during the data collection phase, it provided context for generating pertinent interview questions. The most relevant application gained from the study resulted in the creation of the question "Why do you think eye contact can be so uncomfortable?," since an overwhelming majority of the participants expressed feeling uncomfortable during the exercise.

"The World's Biggest Eye Contact Experiment" was a global, synchronized event, where individuals from hundreds of cities, from around the world, volunteered to host the eye contact

experiment on a specific day and time. The creators of the event, The Liberators International,

are described as a "peaceful international social movement," and they've coordinated this event

on a global scale twice before, for the purpose of unifying people and promoting "love and

humanity" ("Your Experiment Details," n.d.). The third annual event took place in September of

2017, and it was the first time that members of the Orlando, Florida, community, where I resided

at the time, volunteered to host the experience.

Based on the accessibility and timing of the event, Dr. Hastings, my thesis chair, and I,

received permission from the organizers to interview participants at the event. IRB approval was

obtained prior to reaching out to the organizers for permission. Upon arriving, we, along with

every other attendee, received a slip of paper, which served to introduce and contextualize the

event. The front side of the paper contained the title "About the World's Biggest Eye Contact

Experiment 2017 - Orlando," and it read:

> This is the 3rd time this event has been coordinated around the world by The
>
> Liberators International. This is the 1st year Orlando has participated and was
>
> organized through the collaborative efforts of the Elar Institute, Mary Thompson-
>
> Hunt, and Love Schrouder. Today, people in over 400 cities worldwide are
>
> coming together to show they care about our humanity, peace and connection. As
>
> you hold eye contact with another, we invite you to consider the words on the
>
> back of this page.

The back of the slip of paper, entitled "The Five Invitations," an association to Frank Ostaseski's

book, *The Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully*,

contained instructions for internalizing certain quotes by Ostaseski:

Silently repeat a few phrases to emphasize your common ground with the other

person and feel the connection of simple human kindness:

This person has a body, heart and mind, just like me.

This person worries and gets frightened, just like me.

This person is trying their best to navigate life, just like me.

This person is a fellow human being, just like me.

Allow for some benevolent wishes for well-being to arise:

May this person have the strength and support to face the difficulties in life.

May this person be free from suffering and its causes.

May this person be peaceful and happy.

May this person love and be loved.

Following the distribution of the slip of paper, an announcement was made by the organizers,

instructing the attendees to pair with a partner they'd never met. It was explained that the eye

contact exercise would last one minute, where the tap of a gong would signal the beginning and

the end of the minute.

Data collection involved interviewing participants after the eye contact exercise took

place, and thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews was the chosen data reduction

technique. Dr. Hastings and I collectively gathered 35 individuals for interviews. The recordings

were subsequently transcribed and analyzed for thematic patterns, using the categories of

adaptive behaviors, civil inattention, positive face, and negative face as frameworks for

identifying themes. Both Dr. Hastings and I coded the data independently and discussed our

interpretations in intervals, thus establishing intercoder reliability.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The research question that guided this process, "What are the reactions that people have when they engage in extended eye contact with a stranger?," provided a broad net to cast, with several thematic patterns that emerged from the content of participants' responses. Each theoretical category was examined for themes. The theoretical categories examined below are: civil inattention, negative face, and positive face.

Civil Inattention

Several indications of civil inattention permeated through the participants' responses. Patterns included responses labeled as "seeing others without really seeing them," responses that touched on the relationship between civil inattention and the lack of interpersonal connection, and responses that demonstrated the link between civil inattention and technology.

The first theme, categorized as "seeing others without really seeing them," represented a pattern of individuals who reported feeling as though they superficially pass by, and encounter, others on a daily basis, without experiencing a sense of genuine connection. For example, one participant, when asked what prompted them to participate in the event, stated:

Everyday when you meet people you say, "Hi. How are you doing?" You walk by

each other. You don't really see each other. So I think it allows you to really

connect with somebody, and you don't need words to do that.

Moreover, a second participant, who was also one of the organizers of the event, noted that their reasoning for organizing the event was to provide an opportunity for connection, based on the pervasive lack of such on a daily basis:

> So to be able to provide that opportunity for others to have that moment of pause, to be, like, in person with a stranger, because we get so busy in our own little worlds, in our own little lives, and we don't really like be with one another, with strangers. So we'll go to the supermarket, and we see the cashier as just a cashier. It's just a transaction. Get out of there. In and out. We don't really see the people that are around us on a day-to-day basis.

These responses denote a dissatisfaction with the normalized pattern of behavior in public spaces with strangers, as well as a repetitive link between this pattern, civil inattention, as the source cause for prompting the organizer to create the event and for participants to attend. Both responses contained the same descriptor of not genuinely "seeing" others on a daily basis. The organizer's motivation for hosting the event was attributed to the deficiency of connection and depth in daily interactions with strangers, and the participant confirmed the same idea, by not only citing the deficit in interactional depth, but also by mentioning their motivation to pursue this experience as an opportunity to connect.

Other participants, in response to what drew them to participate in the event, touched on the topic of connection, as it related to civil inattention. One participant noted, in response to what drew them to the event, that the of lack of eye contact experienced on a daily basis contributed to a feeling of disconnection, which prompted them to participate in this exercise:

"Because people don't really do this on a daily basis, and the world does feel more disconnected from because of it, I think, so yeah." Another interviewee responded by explaining how this unique experience prompted a realization of interconnection with others, based on the lack of opportunities for connection that pervades daily life:

It really cemented me into this connectedness with a lot of people. It honestly hits me right in my heart because getting to see someone else, like, I'm just passing people for a lot of my life.

Moreover, the organizer of the event also commented on the notion of disconnection and isolation, as a response to how they think this experience would benefit others:

I think that nowadays what we're seeing is a lot of is people experiencing loneliness and isolation. We walk around feeling like our experience in the world is different than other people's somehow, like there's something wrong with us and we're different, and what other people are experiencing, this is just very different.

These responses confirmed, in direct language, and extended the idea of "seeing others without really seeing them," by elaborating on the relationship between civil inattention and its consequential feelings of disconnection.

Furthermore, participants commented on technology's role within civil inattention, citing the cell phone, specifically, as a barrier for interpersonal communication. Each interviewee who mentioned cell phones contributed the observation that people are, generally, always on their phones. For example, one participant, when asked what drew them to participate in the event, opened their response by saying "We're

on our phones all the time." When asked why people seem to have trouble with eye

contact, another participant pointed to cell phone use as a possible reason for individuals'

nonverbal communication deficiency, also making a reference to the attachment to cell

phones:

> Well you got people that these days, I don't know, I don't know if there's
>
> anything to blame, but...cell phones and technology... their eyes are always so
>
> glued to their phones, they don't even know how to look at another person no
>
> more other than that screen...you see most people they walking with they phone
>
> and in their car and they can't even look another human being in their eye
>
> [laughter].

This recognition of the omnipresence of technology also got referenced when participants were

asked how this experience could benefit others. They responded similarly, by noting the

observation that most people, in public, were on their phones, and they cited such as the culprit

for the deterioration of interpersonal communication: "Everyone's diverted to technology now.

So, it's like, you go out, and when you look around, everyone's on their phone...what happened to

communication?" The repetitive reference to cell phones revealed its use as a tool for

perpetuating civil inattention, and each response noted its detrimental impact on interpersonal

communication and connection.

<u>Negative Face</u>

Responses that demonstrated negative face referred to the want to exceed comfort zones, to challenge one's self, and to break barriers, as reasons for pursuing this experience. In addition, during the activity, numerous expressed feeling vulnerable, and when prompted to reflect on the benefits that the activity might serve, participants delineated the activity's potential for promoting interpersonal connections.

In regards to exceeding one's comfort zone, several cited their reason for pursuing this experience as an opportunity to place themselves in a situation that would temporarily constrain their personal freedom, in order to improve their nonverbal communication and to explore a new territory. For example, one participant stated:

I was curious about how I would react in such a turn of events. Obviously, the event being the eye contact, something I'm not used to doing. Usually, I stray away from constant eye contact. So, I imagine I would feel very uncomfortable in doing so. I wanted to see if I could break that boundary and maybe leap over a potential occurrence of something that I do not normally do.

While another explained:

I like to do things, like this, that challenge or that, I feel, like develop me more as a person…I call it, human training… I feel like you can always better your skills at non-verbal communication and being more comfortable with that which is normally uncomfortable.

These responses reflect the preemptive awareness of the uncomfortable nature associated with the exercise, and they demonstrate the participants' motivation as twofold: to experience the

exercise for the sake of putting one's self in a challenging situation, to "break that boundary," to develop themselves more personally, and to undergo this experience for the perceived potential benefit of improved eye contact.

In addition to the participants' awareness of the anticipated discomfort associated with the exercise, many described a sense of vulnerability experienced during the exercise. In response to why interviewees thought that eye contact could be so uncomfortable, one illustrated the eyes as a "shield to your inner self," and, soon after, labeled eye contact as "a vulnerable state." Likewise, another characterized it as "a vulnerable position." In less explicit terms, an additional interviewee reported the idea of being seen: "Well, because you're being seen. You're being seen. You can't ... The eyes are the mirror to the soul. You can't really hide." Similarly, another participant stated: "It leaves you a bit exposed, and people don't necessarily see the benefit right away." Other participants commented on the experience of mutual gaze as opening one's self up: "This is very scary to just look at someone in the eye...because you're opening up a lot," while another commented, "You feel like you open yourself up to the person, and maybe, I think, a lot of people are very self-conscious when that happens because its directed, it's like, somebody else's gaze is directed at you." These ideas, of "being seen," exposed, and opened, exemplify vulnerability.

Furthermore, the interviewees detailed how they thought this experience might benefit others, to which many of the responses relayed not only the same ideas, of others being able to exceed their own comfort zones, but also reasons for why exceeding one's comfort zone had positive implications for promoting interpersonal connections. Respondents noted that this challenging exercise provided the benefit of "breaking down the social barriers" and of giving

people "a new perspective on how they not only approach people, but how they think about people before they've met them." Another participant stated that this exercise could also promote feelings of trust and optimism: "I believe it could...get them out of their shell a little bit and kind of show that you are able to trust another human being and be able to better the world." These reported benefits were the products of exploring the new territory, beyond the boundaries of their comfort zones.

Positive face

Responses that characterized positive face were the descriptions of connection felt during the activity, as well as the comments that reflected realizations of interpersonal homogeneity. As the negative face responses have noted, participants saw the benefit of challenging their comfort zones as an opportunity to initiate interpersonal connections, thus satisfying their fellowship face needs, defined as the want to feel connected to and included with others (Lim & Bowers, 1991). The logic behind the proposed benefit made sense, as numerous interviewees reported profound feelings of connection during the eye contact experience. For example, one participant described the experience as "the purest form of connection, the purest form of us being human beings," while another recounted feeling as though they were "staring at the person's soul."

Additionally, participants elaborated on the positive benefits of feeling connected. For example, a participant noted that "whenever we connect with anybody or anything... it enriches our experience and adds to our lives." Another interviewee specified connection as a remedy to isolation:

So, if we could pause and really just share a connection, we realize we're not

alone here. We're not alone in our city. We're not alone as we go about our day.

We've got tons of people around us who are just like us, simply because we're all

human.

This response introduced the second theme of interpersonal homogeneity, the idea that

individuals are more alike than different; the deep sense of connection felt by participants

translated, to some, into this recognition of similarity. One participant, for example, explained:

When you take the time to see that we are more alike than not, we all have the

same basic needs, to love, to be seen, to see, to be fed, have shelter…we're more

alike than different, and when I see you as my sister, and I see you as me, then I

have no qualms with you.

Another interviewee recounted a similar realization that they had:

When you have that eye contact experience with someone, with a complete

stranger even, it's like you realize, "Hey. We're both human. We can at least go

through this struggle of being human together in this one moment that we have."

You know what I mean?

These statements extended beyond the sense of connection felt by participants, by

revealing the profound realizations induced from this experience

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The goal of this study was to understand what reactions people would have when they experienced extended mutual gaze with a stranger. As a result, the patterns of responses overlapped into a story: the norm of civil inattention contributed to many feeling disconnected and isolated, during their daily lives, and this underlying factor was what prompted individuals to seek out this experience, in order to exceed their comfort zones and to experience social connection.

The comments made by participants, regarding superficial interactions, denoted the lack of interactional depth experienced by individuals on a daily basis. The repetitive idea of "seeing others without really seeing them" described the inherent purpose of civil inattention: to acknowledge another's presence, to "display disinterestedness without disregard" (Hirschauer, 2005), and to pursue no further contact beyond acknowledgement. While civil inattention was conceived by Goffman as a form of politeness, the responses gathered unveiled an unintended, negative consequence to this institutionalized norm; the same responses that described the essence of civil inattention, "seeing others without really seeing them," were framed as an adverse concept. Participants, directly and indirectly, mentioned feeling disconnected as a consequence of the lack of eye contact on a daily basis, an extension of civil inattention, and the inherent restrictiveness for pursuing interactional depth with strangers, imposed by civil inattention. These feelings of isolation simultaneously served as the motivation to attend the event, and they confirmed Wesselmann, Cardoso, Slater, and Williams (2012), contention that looking towards the direction of a person, without making eye contact, is enough to make one feel invisible.

Furthermore, cell phones were referred to as a hindrance, not only for nonverbal communication (specifically, eye contact), but also for the potential to form interpersonal connections. The observation that people are on their phones all of the time denotes an added dimension to civil inattention, where individuals utilize their phones as a social crutch. In this day and age, 95% of Americans own a cell phone of some kind ("Mobile Fact Sheet," 2018), and most people tend to carry their cell phone with them during a majority of the day, especially when outside of the home. The pervasiveness of cell phone ownership, and the accessibility of such when out in public, provides individuals the opportunity to engage with their cell phone as a means for perpetuating civil inattention; instead of making brief eye contact with another in public, or actively avoiding eye contact at all, one can simply engage with their cell phone, thus withdrawing themselves from the potential for interaction completely. The responses that reflect civil inattention confirm Simmel's (1908) idea that the lack of eye contact associated with civil inattention makes individuals feel "surrounded on all sides by closed doors" (p. 361), or more suitably, surrounded on all sides by the backs of cell phones.

The dissatisfaction with the lack of depth in public interactions is, therefore, a byproduct of civil inattention, which gets exacerbated by the use of the cell phones. This dissatisfaction produced positive face want, specifically fellowship face, in the individuals who sought out this event. The interviewees described, some explicitly and others implicitly, feeling disconnected and isolated from others in their daily life, which alluded to a lack of fellowship face. This face want, produced in part by civil inattention, was the motivation for the organizer to create the event and for others to attend. In order to satisfy this face want, individuals had to threaten their own negative face.

Since negative face is defined as the need or want to retain one's personal autonomy and freedom, and to avoid imposition, it can be argued that the participants willingly subjected themselves to an exercise that would threaten their negative face. This exercise provided a unique opportunity for people to engage in a highly non-normative, intimate experience. The essence of the activity, staring, uninterrupted, into the eyes of a stranger, for a minute, denotes a temporary sacrifice of personal freedom; to agree to participate in this exercise means to agree to the constraints posed by the exercise. This experience was, however, dual in nature. The exercise simultaneously expanded their negative face, by allowing participants the opportunity to engage with a stranger in a way that they would normally not be able to. By temporarily forfeiting their own personal freedom during that one minute, they were granted the freedom to gaze into the eyes of a person they'd never met before, and they were able to expand the boundary of their comfort zone, by exploring a new interpersonal experience. This conception is synonymous to Simmel's (1908) idea that "The eye of a person discloses his own soul when he seeks to uncover that of another" (p. 358). Therefore, the duality of this experience, for each partner, manifested into feelings of vulnerability.

Livingston (2004) contextualized vulnerability as an internal experience, one that "lies in the subjective sense of newness and risk" and "in the sense of being "seen," rather than in the specific content of any particular situation" (p. 442). When individuals experience "vulnerable moments," they lower their defenses, and these moments can serve as opportunities for pivotal change (Livingston, 2004, p. 442). Despite Livingston's (2004) intended audience being therapists, the contextualization of vulnerability and the idea of "vulnerable moments" (p. 442) applies well to this experience. Moreover, adventure education literature has introduced a

"Comfort Zone Model," depicted as two concentric circles, with the innermost circle labeled as the "Comfort zone," the outermost circle labeled as the "Growth/learning Zone," and the "Panic Zone" lying beyond the boundary of this outermost circle (Brown, 2008, p.3). Similarly, the "comfort zone model," while borne out of adventure education literature, also applies to this experience.

Participants, with no existing mutual relationship, equally relinquished their personal freedom, in order to adhere to the constraints of the exercise, and the newness of this experience imposed a sense of risk. This subjected each partner to vulnerability, supported by their descriptions of "being seen," of feeling open and exposed, which can be characterized as the "vulnerable moment." This "vulnerable moment" ultimately did lead to pivotal change, where this moment of vulnerability led to profound, positive results. Because of these results, by applying the "comfort zone model," the "vulnerable moment" would be synonymous to the "Growth/learning Zone."

The transition from feeling uncomfortable, open, and exposed, led to "breaking down the social barriers." By challenging themselves to exceed their comfort zones, participants found themselves experiencing a deep sense of connection with their partners, described by one as "the purest form of connection," a powerful allusion to Simmel's (1908) conception of eye contact as "the most direct and purest reciprocity which exists anywhere" (p. 358). This sense of connection can be characterized as meeting fellowship face needs, satisfying the want to feel connected to others. As aforementioned, civil inattention was deemed by participants as the contributor to their reported feelings of isolation during daily life. The byproduct of civil inattention, then, is a collective consciousness associated with public spaces, which causes individuals to feel as

though they are metaphorically alone, even if surrounded by numerous strangers, affirming, once again, the idea of being "surrounded on all sides by closed doors" (Simmel, 1908, p. 361). This isolation, therefore, contributed to the deficiency in people's fellowship face needs, due to the lack of perceived inclusion. The perceived exclusion, as an element of the people's collective consciousness, is perhaps an exclusion to a sense of shared experience; if everyone feels as though their life experience is unique, that no one shares the same thoughts, desires, or fears, then it's understandable why people might feel isolated, when around unfamiliar others. This idea was touched on by one of the participants, who noted that "We walk around feeling like our experience in the world is different than other people's somehow. Like there's something wrong with us and we're different." However, if everyone feels the same way, then that, in and of itself, is a unifying element.

Several participants gained a profound realization, one that hinted at the unifying elements among apples who think every other apple is an orange: that we, as humans, are fundamentally much more alike than we are different. This exercise unveiled, for some, the illusion that our experiences are exceptional and dissimilar, based on the responses that illuminated how "We all have the same basic needs to love, to be seen, to see, to be fed, have shelter," and that "We're not alone in our city. We're not alone as we go about our day. We've got tons of people around us who are just like us simply because we're all human." The realization of interpersonal homogeneity would, therefore, serve as the remedy to this illusion that permeates our collective consciousness and detriments our fellowship face needs.

One minute of uninterrupted eye contact with a stranger managed to produce fascinating results, with several significant implications. The first significant contribution is the relationship

between civil inattention and its negative impact on people's fellowship face needs; what was once established as a form of politeness, civil inattention can facilitate the inadvertent consequence of individuals feeling disconnected from the people they pass on a daily basis. More profoundly, these feelings of isolation may originate from shared belief that our experiences are inherently dissimilar from others, which is perpetuated, in part, by civil inattention. Furthermore, the excessive utilization of cell phones in public, as a social crutch, makes civil inattention that much more pronounced and easily enacted. The responses that negatively framed civil inattention, such as "seeing others without really seeing them," demonstrate the constraint posed by civil inattention and the underlying motivation to participate in this exercise, so that, perhaps, they can be seen, opened, and exposed, and so that they can see an opened, exposed counterpart. Thus, the second significant contribution is the proposition regarding the simultaneous relinquishment and expansion of negative face. The constraints of the exercise called for both participants to temporarily forfeit their personal freedom, which imposed a constraint on their comfort levels, but at the same time, granted each person the freedom to participate in an activity that most people never experience in a lifetime, leading to profound results. This moment of give and take can be characterized as the experience of vulnerability, which is the third contribution. The impactful results derived from the "vulnerable moment" demonstrates the power and potential of participating in activities that lie not too far beyond the boundary of one's comfort zone. The fourth, and final, contribution is the overlap between negative face and positive face, since this exercise provided a platform for people to temporarily threaten their negative face, in order to enhance their fellowship face.

The limitations of this study include the slip of paper distributed to participants prior to the exercise, the characteristics of the sample who showed up, the number of participants interviewed, and the location. The slip of paper, which contained "The Five Invitations," served to contextualize the event for those participating and to influence the participants' mindsets for approaching the activity. This likely influenced their experience and, thus, their responses. Furthermore, the sample consisted of people who arrived and participated on their own accord, pointing to the potential for volunteer bias. The number of people interviewed might have also been a limitation, since perhaps more interviews might have unveiled different results. Lastly, as an event that occurred within a particular cultural context, it's possible that the results yielded might have turned out differently in a different location and culture.

Implications for future research include further investigation on the adverse effects of civil inattention, through facework or through an alternative framework, as well as additional analyses on the role of technology as a crutch within civil inattention. There is also the opportunity to expand on the application of negative face to the "comfort zone model;" more specifically, an exploration of the relationship between negative face and exceeding one's comfort zone might add a new dimension to the role of negative face. Furthermore, the demonstrated potential of extended eye contact to induce a deep sense of connection can serve as measure to prevent bullying among children, and it might be beneficial for individuals pursuing couples or family therapy; however, it must be noted that a willingness to participate in the exercise would be a necessary prerequisite, in order for the exercise to yield any potential therapeutic benefit. Moreover, the results of this study reflect the limitation of Equilibrium Theory's positivist interpretation, due to the affective responses and sense of connection

produced between individuals in non-intimate relationships. Lastly, there is room for additional discussion on the concurrent threat and expansion of negative face, along with the overlap between negative and positive face.

This study uncovered the positive and profound impact that can occur from one minute of mutual gaze with a stranger. The results revealed how civil inattention has created adverse implications for people's fellowship face needs, and they point to the existence of a deep-rooted illusion of difference and separation within the collective consciousness. The deficit of fellowship face needs served as the foundation for people to seek out this challenging exercise, and by subjecting themselves to this exercise, participants were able to exceed their comfort zone, to make themselves vulnerable, and to experience a unique and intimate opportunity with a stranger. This led to the fulfillment of fellowship needs and to the insightful understanding that individuals are fundamentally more alike than different. All of this, from one minute of uninterrupted eye contact with a stranger.

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What drew you to participate in this event?

2. How did you feel during the experience?

3. How would you describe the experience?

4. Why do you think that eye contact can be so uncomfortable?

5. In what way do you think that this experience could benefit people?

6. What have you learned from this experience?

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