

The Sense of Being Stared At: Fictional, Physical, Perceptual, or Attentional/Intentional?

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According to a well-known adage of folk psychology, “where there is smoke, there is fire.” In his two-part contribution to this symposium on “the sense of being stared at,” Rupert Sheldrake examines some of the *smoke* (fictional allusions, anecdotal observations and reports, and the persisting lore) surrounding this alleged phenomenon and attempts to determine whether such smoke might indeed be accompanied by some actual *fire* (valid and reliable evidence for the existence of the staring phenomenon). In this effort, he provides an extensive and inclusive account of his own research findings and those of other investigators.

Many contemporary professional psychologists and consciousness researchers would qualify the smoke/fire metaphor. They could suggest that smoke might indicate where a fire may once have been rather than where one presently exists. In their typically skeptical stance, they might question whether there is even smoke at all, but rather a fog, a cloud descended to earth, or an artifact of blurry vision. In this commentary on Sheldrake’s contribution, I will attempt to clarify whether a valid and reliable staring detection process might indeed exist—as a true fire generating all of this smoke or, at least, as some smoldering embers—and offer suggestions about its nature.

Although Sheldrake uses the term “the sense of being stared at,” I will substitute the term *staring detection*. The latter is less awkward, and it does not contain the suggestion that a *sense* is involved. The term *sense* suggests a sensory process that staring detection might not involve. If *sense* is used as a synonym for *feeling*, this usually is most appropriate, in that staring detection often does involve such a subjective feeling, and it also is often accompanied by physiological indicators (e.g., tingling, burning, pressure, hair standing on end) that reflect feelings. However, it is possible for the phenomenon to involve what might better be termed a form of *direct knowing*, rather than a sensing or feeling. In still other cases, *behavioral reactions* might betray the presence of staring detection—with or without accompanying conscious awareness of the staring aspect itself.

In responding to Sheldrake’s papers, I organize my remarks into five categories. These will treat the possible fictional, physical (including physiological), perceptual (chiefly visual), and attentional/intentional aspects of the staring detection process, as well as the implications of staring detection studies.

Is Staring Detection a Fiction?

Sheldrake begins his contribution by indicating how staring detection has been reported in lived experience surveys, treated in fictional stories and novels, and described by police officers, surveillance personnel, soldiers, hunters, photographers, and television

personalities. It would be of great interest to study such field reports more carefully and in greater detail. In addition to such anecdotal reports, however, Sheldrake reviews a not insubstantial number of careful laboratory investigations of staring detection. After reviewing the research evidence that Sheldrake and others have collected, one cannot doubt that staring detection is a real and replicable phenomenon. Statistically significant staring detection effects have been repeatedly observed in Sheldrake's own research and in studies he has conducted with, or prompted in, others. Several meta-analyses have indicated the validity and reliability of staring detection (e.g., Schlitz & Braud, 1997; Schmidt, Schneider, Utts, & Walach, 2004). In short, careful research has supported the conclusion that the staring detection effect is not fictional. It can even be pointed out that Sheldrake's analyses of the reality of staring detection in his own studies are conservative ones. This is because Sheldrake's use of nonparametric tests such as chi-square and sign tests on nominal data do not consider the strengths of his obtained effects, as would analyses based on ordinal, interval, or ratio scores. Of course, not every experiment yields positive outcomes. This is to be expected of a complex human phenomenon that would likely be influenced by individual differences, predispositions, history, set, and setting.

Is Staring Detection a Product of Physical or Other Artifacts?

Given that it has been shown that persons are able to accurately indicate when they are being started at, by someone out of the visual range of the staree, the next step is to determine whether such accurate detection might or might not be contaminated by conventional artifacts or confounding variables such as coincidence, sensory cues (subtle sounds or other physical cues), or biases in the experimental designs. The analyses of Sheldrake and others indicate that such confounding factors can be ruled out as sources of the obtained effects. For example, sensory cues can be ruled out by having the starrer and staree adequately shielded from each other through the use of one-way mirror staring or closed circuit television staring. Appropriate statistical analyses effectively rule out correct guesses attributable to "chance coincidence." Sheldrake addresses well and properly dismisses suggested methodological artifacts such as reporting bias and staring/nonstaring period scheduling in experiments that might introduce systematic biases that could mimic a real staring detection effect. Particularly useful are Sheldrake's observations that the initial findings of skeptical replicators of this work tend to be positive. Sheldrake convincingly argues that the skeptics then reexamine their data in attempts to explain away their positive findings. More trenchant still is Sheldrake's indictment of skeptics who postulate hypothetical processes or changes in their or others' data that might simulate real staring detection effects without demonstrating effectively that such processes or changes really have occurred. Sheldrake is careful to address studies in which possible artifacts have not been adequately controlled (e.g., the so-called NEMO tests), and he properly describes such results as suggestive only.

Additional evidence indicative of real staring effects, as opposed to artifactual ones, are the significant *correlations* that have been found between staring detection accuracy and scoring on personality tests and similar standardized assessments administered to starees.

Such correlations have been found in studies by Braud, Shafer, and Andrews (1993b) and by skeptic Susan Blackmore's student, Jonathan Jones (1996).

Is Staring Detection a Perceptual (Chiefly Visual) Process?

Throughout the two Parts of his contribution, Sheldrake appears to treat staring detection as a perceptual—i.e., visual—process, in which the starrer somehow “reaches out and touches” the staree. This sort of spatial model/metaphor is an obvious first interpretation, given the circumstances and belief contexts in which this phenomenon originally was, and continues to be, observed. Such a view, however, does not plausibly account for laboratory findings that staring detection can successfully occur when the staree is viewed *indirectly*, via one-way mirrors or via closed circuit television. In such cases, it seems more appropriate to conclude that staring detection may be one of many manifestations of the causal efficacy of remote *attention* and *intention* (treated below). Also, the resultants of visual and other perceptual processes are definite subjective experiences; usually, these are specific and clear. Although such subjective experiences—albeit sometimes relatively vague ones—often accompany staring detection, this is not invariably the case. Staring detection can be indicated by physiological (especially autonomic) or behavioral (movements, turnings) reactions of which the staree might be unaware or only vaguely aware. Such reactions may be indicative of a form of knowing or a sensitivity that would seem to fit the outcome of remote attention or intention more closely than that of a visual or other *perceptual* process.

In my view, an interpretation that posits a kind of reaching out and touching process indicates a general discomfort with action at a distance. Just as nature abhors a vacuum, so, too, does human intellection and understanding abhor seeming *gaps* in observed phenomena. We are strongly disposed to fill such gaps with bridging, continuously connecting processes such as material substances, channels, and “energies”; and it is tempting to attempt to do this with respect to staring detection. There are, of course, cases in which action at a distance now is accepted as a truism in several areas of conventional, relativistic, and quantum physics, although such actions were vigorously opposed when first suggested. The positing of fields is one approach to explaining some instances of action at a distance. Sheldrake's own notions of morphic or morphogenetic fields illustrate such an attempt. In cases of more conventionally recognized fields (such as gravitational and electromagnetic fields), however, the presence and strengths of such fields can be indicated mathematically and the fields can be operationally detected. One wonders what the notion of a morphic or morphogenetic field really adds, in an explanatory sense, if such fields cannot be detected, operationalized, or characterized apart from reactions or outcomes that such fields are invented to account for in the first place. Are such fields truly explanations or simply renamings of already observed outcomes and of things to be explained?

Is Staring Detection an Indicator of the Efficacy of Remote Attention and Intention?

Staring at another person is one way of paying attention to that person. Often, this attention is mixed with a specific intention—perhaps getting the other person's attention,

an attempt to make contact with the person, or some other motivated observation. It is possible that such instances of strong, focused attention and/or intention may be sufficient to induce staring detection or “the sense of being stared at” *whether or not looking or staring actually occurs*.

In our own laboratory research (Braud, Shafer, & Andrews, 1993a, 1993b), we began studying staring detection because of our curiosity about whether remote attention alone might be accompanied by distinctive physiological reactions of the remote object of such attention. We had been conducting studies in which we had found that specific, directional intentions of one person—e.g., intentions or wishes to calm or activate—were accompanied by those intended reactions in remotely situated other persons (Braud & Schlitz, 1989; Braud & Schlitz, 1991; Radin, Taylor, & Braud, 1995; Schlitz & Braud, 1997). We recognized that in these experiments, the influencer’s *intention* (for a specific physiological and subjective change) was mixed with her or his *attention* (i.e., paying attention to the person whom one wished to remotely influence). So, we designed experiments in which one person simply attended to another, remotely situated other person, without intending for any particular reaction in the latter. In these experiments, one person watched the image of the remote person on a closed circuit television monitor as a way of focusing attention on the remotely situated person during certain periods, compared to other periods in which attention was not deployed in this manner. We used measures of sympathetic autonomic nervous system activity (skin conductance reactions) as a measure of the detection of this increased attention by the “target” person. As Sheldrake indicated in his contribution, and as in other similar studies, we obtained evidence for successful autonomic staring detection in these studies (Braud, Shafer, & Andrews, 1993a, 1993b). Several meta-analyses of these, and similar, experiments have indicated the significance and reliability of such studies (e.g., Schlitz & Braud, 1997; Schmidt, Schneider, Utts, & Walach, 2004).

As a relatively pure test of the relative contributions of physical staring versus attention alone, a comparative experiment readily could be conducted. In such a study, persons would stare (via closed circuit television) versus not stare at others, whose physiological reactions would be monitored during multiple staring and nonstaring periods. In another part of the study, persons would strongly focus attention or not, upon physiologically monitored persons, but would do this without actually staring at the TV monitor images of the “target” persons. The study could be extended even further by including four types of conditions: physical staring with no (or minimal) attention (this could be accomplished by a more passive form of staring, which would involve very nonmotivated, “witnessing” looking); strong, focused attention but without physical staring; both staring and attention; and neither staring nor attention. Comparing results for the various conditions could greatly illuminate the roles of (physical) staring and (psychological) attention in staring detection experiments.

Additionally, the variability of results in staring studies—both across different investigators and at different times and circumstances within the work of a given investigator—seems more consistent with an attentional/intentional interpretation than with a physically effective staring interpretation, in that physical staring would be

expected to be rather straightforward and consistent across many experiments, whereas great variations might be expected in the ability of starees, starers, and investigators to strongly and consistently focus their attentional and intentional skills in these experiments.

In still other experiments bearing on attention, we have found evidence that it is possible for persons to facilitate the attention (in the form of concentration on some centering object) of other, distantly situated persons, through deploying their own attention in a similar “distant helping” manner (Braud, Shafer, McNeill, & Guerra, 1995).

In all of the above, we are interpreting staring, intention, and attention as having *causal efficacy* in actively producing changes in distant persons. Such an interpretation, of course, can be qualified by the possibility that what we are witnessing in all of these experiments is the appropriately aligned simultaneous co-arising of the staring/intention/attention activities of the starers and the reactions of the starees, in ways that have been conceptualized as *synchronicity* (by Carl Jung and his followers) or as *dependent origination* (by those within various Buddhist traditions).

What Are the Implications of Staring Detection Findings?

The experimental results of Sheldrake and others indicate that accurate detection of an unseen gaze (called *staring detection* in this article) is an ability that seems to be relatively widespread in the human population. As in the case of other abilities or skills, this staring detection skill may be present to varying degrees. Differences found across various studies might be attributed to differences in the sensitivity of the starees and to differences in the staring skills of starers. These differences, in turn, may be due to differences in the abilities of starers and starees, alike, to fully deploy their attentional and intentional processes.

In the most general sense, the positive outcomes of studies of this kind extend our appreciation of the range of our human potentials and of the exceptional experiences and abilities of which we are capable, which cannot be explained adequately by the constructs, theories, and worldviews of conventional science. The studies suggest a profound interconnectedness among the participants in such studies. This interconnectedness, in turn, has important implications for our understanding of our full nature, as humans, and of the range and limits of the consciousness-mediated influences that we may exert on one another. In the view of the present writer, the most important of the consciousness-related processes implicated in the staring detection effect are the fundamental ones of attention and intention. Studies addressing a variety of forms of attention and intention, in connection with staring detection, can readily be designed and conducted, and such studies should greatly expand and illuminate our understanding of this curious effect and of the nature of consciousness itself. Perhaps the most important implication of staring detection findings for consciousness studies is their indication that, under certain conditions, consciousness may have nonlocal aspects.

I began this article with an allusion to folk psychology. I think this allusion is apropos in an additional way—in terms of Sheldrake’s ongoing championing, in many of his writings, of a popularization or democratization of psychology, research, and of science itself. He has done this by urging research on commonly experienced, albeit unusual, processes and phenomena, and by encouraging research by students and by members of the general public. Such more democratized inquiry can serve to complement and balance the typically exclusionary versions of research and inquiry practiced by professionals. Such an approach might encourage a greater interest in, and participation, in consciousness studies and in science and disciplined inquiry in general.

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