

Awkward! New study examines our gazes during potentially offensive behavior

March 5 2008

It's happened to all of us: While sitting at the conference table or at dinner party, a friend or colleague unleashes a questionable remark that could offend at least one person amongst the group. A hush falls and, if you're like most people, your eyes will dart towards the person most likely to take offense to the faux pas. It's a doubly unpleasant experience for the offended: Not only have you been insulted, but you have also suddenly become the center of unwelcome attention.

This almost instinctive stare toward the potentially offended has garnered the attention of researchers seeking to understand why this phenomenon occurs. Psychologist Jennifer Randall Crosby of Agnes Scott College and her colleagues created an experiment using the especially sensitive topic of race in order to take a closer look.

In a study appearing in the March issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, the researchers had participants watch recorded discussions between four males (three White and one Black) that dealt with university admissions. In the course of the video, one of the white males makes this potentially controversial remark:

“I think one problem with admissions is that too many qualified White students are not getting the spots they've earned. These students work hard all through school and then lose their spots to members of certain groups who have lower test scores, and come from less challenging environments. They get an unfair advantage.”

In one condition, an off-screen narrator explicitly states that all participants are involved in the discussion. In the other, the narrator states that only two of the discussants (both white) could hear what was being said. The researchers then tracked participants' eye movements as they watched the videos to examine when their gaze would shift toward the Black discussant.

Their results show that participants fixed their eyes on the Black discussant four times longer when they believed he could hear what was being said. According to the authors, this demonstrates that complex cognitive processes are at work when we glance at potentially insulted persons. According to the researchers, “participants are simultaneously attending to what is said, who can hear what is said, the social identity of the listeners, and the possible reactions of the listeners.”

Why we do this behavior is still a somewhat of a mystery, but the authors suggest that people may be seeking out the responses of potentially victimized group members to help them assess the situation. "Additional research is needed to address these issues," write the authors, "but we believe this paradigm is rich with possibilities and can help illuminate how people go about answering the thorny question of what is appropriate and what is offensive."

Source: Association for Psychological Science

Citation: Awkward! New study examines our gazes during potentially offensive behavior (2008, March 5) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-03-awkward-potentially-offensive-behavior.html>

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