

## Friendly Visual Contact ("The Look") as an Essential Principle of a Hostage's Safety

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### Abstract

*Nonverbal communication may prove more effective than words for initiating amicable contact between conflicting sides in dangerous situations. The article presents the results of an experimental study on the significance of eye contact for hostages' survival. It was found that one of the most productive modes of eye contact was one which may be interpreted by the aggressors as friendly. The most dangerous were those showing emotions such as hatred, threat, irritation, and contempt. Demonstrations of fear and indifference were relatively safe. Visual signals were interpreted differently according to gender, which should not be neglected when choosing a behavioral strategy in a hostage-taking situation. The experimental results contradicted a widely adopted recommendation for hostages not to look into terrorists' eyes. The experiment indicated that hostages, especially males, who avoid direct eye contact with their captors, may be perceived as dangerous. Not all experimental participants were able to show the emotion the experimental context demanded, indicating a need for special training in emotional expression for potential victims of terrorism to improve their safety in captivity.*

**Keywords:** visual contact, friendly, psychological experiment, hostage, crime, gender.

### 1. Introduction

In modern social psychology eye contact is seen as a means of nonverbal communication (Labunskaya, 1988; Andreeva, 2009). Some modern psychologists even believe that eye contact is the most important means of nonverbal communication. Thus, exploring the perception of lectures by students, A. A. Leontief (2007) found that the most positive climate in the classroom is created in a situation of high degree eye contact. In a study by E.I. Rogov (2002), it was found that the most annoying companions were those who lowered eyelids during a conversation.

Several lines of eye contact research may be found in the psychological literature relevant to this experimental study: 1. Work on the specific language of visual contact in isolation (Mor, 1992; Rogov, 2002). 2. Research into national peculiarities of visual contact. Thus, N.A. Bagdasarova (2006) notes that even the number of lexical items denoting the word 'eye' varies in different languages. 3. The study of emotional intelligence as the basis of perception and understanding of nonverbal messages (Bradberry and Greaves, 2005; Andreeva, 2006). 4. Analysis of the problem of trust or distrust of the other party according to the criteria of visual interaction. The issue of trust or distrust of the other partner in a situation of dissonance of sight and speech was addressed by Andreeva (2009). Little research has been conducted into how friendly visual contact influences non-conflict situation communication as non-verbal means of communication relating to friendliness were investigated only in the course of mime and gesture studies (Larina, 2009).

Based on these aspects of research, we assumed that the training of potential hostages' ability to portray emotions and intentions required in situations and to transfer them into visual looks would become their personal means of psychological defense in criminal situations. However, which precise 'looks' carry the attribute of psychological protection, can only be ascertained in a dedicated experimental study.

Terrorism and other modern criminal threats make studies in the field of nonverbal communication important if we look at them from the victims' self-protection perspective.

Russian investigative practice, in a case where visual contact between a policeman and a terrorist suicide bomber actually prevented a terrorist attack in the Moscow metro in 2004, is described. There was no hostage-taking situation, but it was an example of practical evidence of the psychological impact of visual contact on the behavior of the individual. The careful look of the policeman embarrassed a suicide bomber: she did not go down into the subway, but detonated a bomb near the entrance, resulting in a significant decrease in the number of victims. This moment was recorded on a surveillance camera. The policeman himself then said that he classified the suicide bomber's look as 'bad' and thus paid attention to her.

Our hypothesis is also based on the psychological analysis of some real-life facts described in memoirs. Thus, it

was a friendliness glance that rescued the French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery from death in 1942. In his story 'Letter to a Hostage', he wrote that when he was captured by Spanish anarchists, they initially did not look into his eyes and showed extreme hostility and aggression. The writer noted that their view rested on the knot of his tie, which personified for them, native peasants, the symbol of the enemy. Attitudes towards him changed dramatically when his request for a cigarette made the guard look into his eyes. The friendly gaze of the writer changed their attitudes toward him.

While formulating our hypotheses, we also relied on the findings of psychological service specialists from the USA. The FBI created a set of generalizations about the behavior of hostages from genuine criminal situations. On the basis of these studies the FBI formulated 'Rules for hostages'.

Different sources contain about twenty of these recommendations, including:

- if possible take yourself in hand, be calm and do not panic;
- prepare physically and mentally for what could well be a testing time;
- do not try to run if you lack confidence in the success of the escape, etc. (Ovchinnikova, et al., 2001).

One recommendation, "Do not look into the eyes of criminals", in our opinion required additional experimental verification, as it did not appear to be supported by incidents from real life. Thus, we decided on the following supposition: teaching potential hostages the skill of friendly visual communication as a psychological means of self-protection, would help them in life threatening situations. A description of our experimental scheme follows.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Research hypothesis**

We have assumed:

1. Visual aspects of individual hostages may have implications for their security.
2. The gender of the hostage and the gender of the hostage-taker may be of psychological significance.
3. Recommendations contained in the FBI 'Rules for hostages' requiring the avoidance of eye contact with hostage-takers are psychologically flawed.
4. One of the most effective visual contacts is 'a friendly look'.

### **2.2 Description of the participants:**

The experiment was attended by 40 groups of participants, students from different faculties of the Elets State University. Of the 458 people students, 188 were male, 270 female. Size of the groups: 12 to 14 people. Age: 19 to 22 years. The role of the 'invaders' was shared equally between genders: 60 men, 60 women (total: 120).

### **2.3 Duration of the experiment: from 2008 to 2014.**

#### **2.3.1 Progress of the experiment**

The experiment was conducted according to the same pattern with each successive group of participants. A large number of groups of subjects were recruited to ensure greater representativeness and reliability of data. In addition, it allowed us to identify both general psychological factors ensuring the safety of hostages, and situational factors resulting from the composition of the hostages and the invaders according to gender, the ability to represent specific views, etc.

In each experimental group 2-4 people played the role of 'invaders', the rest assuming the role of 'hostages'. Initially, the experimenter asked the invaders to leave the room where the experiment took place and gave instructions to the hostages. Each subject performing the role of hostages received a particular card on which was written the content of the view, expressing a particular view to the 'invader': hatred, contempt, indifference, friendliness, love, boredom, a threatening attitude, irritation, or fear. Some of the subjects were never to look at the invaders, averting eye contact. The experimenter asked the hostages to look at the invaders for a period of 5 minutes with the prescribed view or, in some cases, to hide their eyes from the invaders.

The experimenter then went into the hall and gave instructions to the 'invaders'. They were asked 5 minutes after the capture of the 'hostages' to classify each of the hostages by two criteria: a) which of them represented a threat to the invaders, rendering it desirable for them to be isolated in terms of real captive situations; b) which of the hostages was *not* dangerous. Each invader was required to give the surnames of the 3 most and 3 least dangerous hostages from the invaders' perspective.

### 3. Results

Summarizing the results obtained from the experimental groups, it is possible to identify the most typical reactions of 'invaders' to the 'hostages' performances, dependent on the views offered by the latter.

1. The least danger in all cases, according to the invaders, came from those hostages who tried to convey by their looks a state of fear or indifference. At the same time it is noteworthy that the subjects who pretended indifference were almost never cited in either the group of dangerous or the group of non-dangerous hostages. It can be assumed that their 'security' lay in being part of the general background of 'hostages', perceived as insignificant additions to among the participants with other views. A vivid observation from one of the subjects performing as an 'invader' was: "Here's a look that is not clinging".
2. The most worrying views were those depicting hatred, a threatening attitude, irritation, and contempt. The strongest effect was the look perceived as hatred. 100% of the subjects performing the role of 'invaders' highlighted this view as the most dangerous. This can be explained by the fact that the content of other messages from this group – threat (47% of invaders overall considered this look as dangerous), irritation (41% of invaders overall saw this as dangerous) and contempt (7% of invaders) – includes not only the transfer of specific negative emotions, but also an intelligent component, meditation (assessment) of situation or personality, which reduces the power of their influence. Invaders had to strain to understand the precise meaning of these emotions and thoughts while the period of thinking switched their attention to something else in the situation. At the same time, the emotion 'hate', unencumbered by an intellectual component, as more definite, immediately stimulated negative responses (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Ratio allocated by 'invaders' views of 'hostages' by raising their estimated subjective 'security hazard'

	'hatred'	'contempt'	'indifference'	'friendliness'	'love'	'boredom'	'threat'	'irritation'	'fear'	'hiding eyes'
% of participants who rated glance as safe	0%	7%	0%	81%	85%	9%	6%	7%	94%	30%
% of participants who rated look as dangerous	100%	57%	0%	3%	2%	12%	47%	41%	0%	70%
% of participants who did not allocate an opinion, neither as dangerous nor as safe	0%	36%	100%	16%	13%	79%	47%	52%	6%	0%

Note: Inaccurately depicted hostage looks were excluded from the recorded responses.

3. The looks of hostages with 'love' or 'friendliness' content, were interpreted differently by invaders when gender differences were taken into account. If the role of the invader was performed by a young man, and the apparently loving or friendly looks came from the female hostages, the hostages were perceived as safe by the invader. If the same types of look came from male hostages, their actors were only sporadically seen as representing a hazard (8 % for a look of friendliness, 4% for a look of love by male invaders; 2 % in both cases by female invaders (see Table 2), and more often as non-dangerous, but thought-provoking for their unusual behavior given the situation.

It is noteworthy that the depiction of 'love' by a male hostage was in some experiments perceived as harmless, even when portrayed by a physically powerful man. This indicates that the invaders did not view all men as primarily the most dangerous hostages, including even the apparently strongest of them. Information transmitted by the look seems to have influenced the experimental situation.

If the role of invaders was performed by girls, they liked the looks of male hostages who expressed friendliness or love, but expressed the view that those males they considered as being physically superior could not be classified as safe, although they were not considered to be seriously dangerous.

4. When assessing the risk of hostages who demonstrated negative views, an influential gender component was also identified. Thus, the male invaders in most cases classified as dangerous female hostages who depicted hatred. Female invaders particularly classified as hazardous for themselves female hostages with other types of look, such as contempt (contempt portrayed by women hostages was rated as dangerous in 33 % of cases by female invaders, but only by 14% of male invaders). The female invaders invested in semantic definitions of the looks given by female hostages, suggesting elements of female rivalry and female intuition, expressed in a

general formula: "Why does she show off?"

5. Gender differences emerged in the assessment of the danger of hostages hiding their gazes. Male hostages who did not look at the invaders were generally perceived as threatening. Female hostages who hid their gazes in almost half of the cases were considered to be safe. The concealed looks were associated in some cases with stealthy intentions, but in others with fear. Some of the invaders felt safer if hostages did not to look at them. (See Table 2).

**Table 2.** Comparative data evaluation perception of 'danger – security' viewpoints based on the gender of 'hostages' and 'invaders'

	hatred'	contempt'	indifference'	friendliness'	love'	boredom'	threat'	irritation'	fear'	hiding eyes'
% of female invaders perceiving the look of male hostages as dangerous	100%	43%	0%	2%	2%	4%	29%	51%	3%	79%
% of female invaders perceiving the look of female hostages as dangerous	100%	33%	0%	7%	2%	5%	36%	38%	2%	42%
% of female invaders perceiving the look of male hostages as safe	0%	10%	0%	83%	81%	92%	14%	15%	81%	21%
% of female invaders perceiving the look of female hostages as safe	0%	9%	0%	76%	93%	87%	7%	6%	91%	58%
% of male invaders perceiving the look of male hostages as dangerous	100%	51%	0%	8%	4%	10%	60%	63%	1%	52%
% of male invaders perceiving the look of female hostages as dangerous	100%	14%	0%	0%	3%	2%	11%	21%	0%	38%
% of male invaders perceiving the look of male hostages as safe	0%	11%	0%	71%	69%	77%	9%	15%	60%	48%
% of male invaders perceiving the look of women hostages as safe	0%	25%	0%	100%	100%	89%	27%	31%	78%	62%

Note: Inaccurately depicted hostage looks were excluded from the recorded responses.

6. Where some 'hostages' were not able to express the desired emotion by their look and 'invaders' did not understand the content of the view, the uncertainty caused them trouble, but at the same time, as a rule, such views were not associated with a particular risk. Only in one case, when one of the hostages could not adequately portray the view expressing 'love', it was classified as 'dangerous'. This female was perceived as the head of the hostage group. Apparently here, on the one hand, the effect of authority took place, as described by Fromm (1998), where the invaders saw in the hostage an elder or boss. On the other hand, the female participant appeared to have a fixed authoritarian style of communication with her classmates, and conceivably failed to adjust to a different role.
7. The significance of visual identity as a means of assessing security was manifested in different ways. For example, even in cases where participants who before the experiment were on good terms with each other, a negative hostage role in the 'hostage – invader' dyad provoked in the 'invader' feelings of resentment and irritation. Here is manifested the effect established in the famous 'prison' experiment of Zimbardo (Aronson, 1995).

#### 4. Discussion

In the methodology of science, there are two main criteria of good experimental modeling.

1. If the model shows similarity to the original behavior, i.e. if it performs similar functions.
2. If on the basis of studying the behavior and structure of the model, we can detect new, hitherto unknown features or properties of the original, which were not contained explicitly in the source of factual material (Shtoff, 1966).

The validity and reliability of our data have been confirmed in practice. Libyan rebels who in April 2011 seized Russian journalists from the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and NTV were alarmed by the 'hard look' of the newspaper journalist. They began to suspect him of being the spy of Colonel Gaddafi or an employee of the Russian special services. On the contrary, the demonstration of humor and friendliness towards the invaders by NTV correspondents helped to defuse the situation and the journalists were released. This event confirmed that the model of visual contact which we have built, not only reflecting the original's function, but also helping to identify new, previously unknown psychological properties within the hostage situation.

In the psychological literature devoted to the psychological security of the individual, the investigations concerning

personal anxiety and stress are the closest to the range of problems of this article. Among the latest works in this area the study considering anxiety as an indicator of acquiring strategies of coping with it is the most interesting (Lvova, et al., 2015). Although, the authors chose questionnaires as a method for the research of anxiety coping strategies, rather than an experiment, which increases the subjectivity factor in the interpretation of the results of this study. However, the tendency to look for the ways to overcome anxiety corresponds to the problem of searching rational methods of behavior in the hostage-taking situation.

In the same aspect, the studies on victim behavior are most notable. Victimization is a behavior promoting to convert a person into a crime victim. This includes provoking the offender and flippant attitude to the issues of personal safety (Rivman, 2002). However, questionnaires predominate in the victimhood studies as major methods and experiments are practically not applied. It fails to give an opportunity of getting more objective information on the advantages or disadvantages of different psychological tools used by a person in the situation of danger. Because of this, our experimental studies have proven the benefits of an experiment in studying the personality's security safeguards.

At the same time scientific literature describes some phenomena stipulating psychological safety of the person. Among them:

- a) politeness phenomenon;
- b) the 'Stockholm syndrome' phenomenon;
- c) humor phenomenon.

The meaning of non-verbal communication tools to ensure the security of relationship is virtually not investigated in the structure of all these phenomena. Our research fills this gap to some extent.

Thus, for about ten years a special scientific journal has been issued in Germany which is devoted to the problems of politeness in different contexts: linguistic, social and psychological, ethical, etc.: it is the Journal of Politeness Research. Language, Behavior, Culture. The publications of the journal raise issues of tolerance in building contacts of people of different cultures, the need to consider the parameters of civility in building positive relations (Arundale, 2006; Ohashi J., 2010; Kádár, Pan, 2012).

However, the opening of borders, and increased flow of tourists make relevant not only the issues of tolerance to the culture of different nations, but also to those elements of culture that will allow surviving in extreme situations. Tourists quite often become the hostage-taking victims. Unfortunately, the relevance of psychological studies on the tourists' survival in the situation of capture and release of the hostages is increasing every year. At the same time, the issue of possibility for the hostages to make a positive contact with the terrorists, ensuring the survival of the hostages, is practically uninvestigated. Apparently, the attitudes that terrorists are criminals and they should only be feared and hated serve as a barrier in this situation. Such barriers reduce the chances of hostages to survive. Our research has shown that in an extreme situation paradoxical attitude in terms of setting positive contact with the terrorists fulfills the function of lowering the aggression tone and establishing trust relationship. In this case facial expressions and emotions transmitted by eyes act as a significant moment in the intercultural interaction, but these moments were not studied in the context of a continuing offense (Beeman, 2001).

New data on the gender aspects of anti-victim behavior were also the result of our research. Many researchers paid attention to the importance of gender factor in the process of victimization (the conversion of a person into the victim). However, the role of gender (social sex) in establishing a positive relationship between hostages and their capturers was studied only from the perspective of the 'Stockholm syndrome' phenomenon (Fuselier, 1999). The essence of this phenomenon is that the hostages begin to sympathize with the 'capturers' or even fall in love with them. However, the importance of gender factor in hostage-taking situation, according to our study, is not limited to these manifestations. A friendly look, in particular, stimulates also the corresponding forms of mutual friendly behavior, excluding the 'capturers' attitude to harm his 'situational friend'.

In our opinion, studies on the impact of humor on the discharge of disturbing situations have great potential. This is evidenced by the research identifying the impact of humor on the discharge of family conflicts, the study of its psychotherapeutic potential (Brooks, Guthrie, Gaylord, 1999). The investigations of non-verbal reactions to humor are also close to the problem of security of person (Caucci, Kreuz, 2012).

Our empirical research has allowed drawing some conclusions that can form the basis for the recommendations on the psychological behavior of the hostages.

## 5. Conclusions

1. Our first hypothesis was fully confirmed: the content of the hostage's look may really have implications for his or her security. Demonstration of the personality's positive trends with the help of visual contact is more

- important for a hostage's subsequent security than demonstration of fear, for example. Expression of negative attitude towards invaders using eye contact can have negative consequences for the hostage.
2. Positive attitudes transmitted by a look can be projected at invaders even from the starting position of apparently dangerous male hostages of athletic physique. Thus, the 'friendliness' look of male hostages may evoke a sense of trust towards the hostage, or failing that, one of being suspect but not identifiable as being harmful.
  3. Our second hypothesis, that the psychological significance of visual contact can be differentiated according to the hostage's gender and the invader's gender was confirmed, as well. Male invaders used different criteria as opposed to female invaders to assess the danger of male hostages and female hostages. The phenomenon of gender identity is manifested here; for a man it appears easier to predict the behavior of men and for a woman to predict the behavior of women.
  4. Finally, our third hypothesis was also confirmed. It has been experimentally proven that the recommendations contained in the FBI 'Rules for hostages' imposing the requirement not to look at hostage-takers is psychologically flawed. This tactic would appear to be only sporadically safe. The experiment showed that such behavior on the part of male hostages was often perceived as very dangerous, stimulating the thoughts of 'invaders' in the directions of conspiracy and disobedience.

As a result, some practical recommendations on the psychological behavior of hostages or kidnapped persons are formulated here:

- for those taken hostage or kidnapped, it is better for their own safety not to refrain from eye contact;
- for hostages it is better not to show hostility or similar emotional content in their visual signals;
- possibly, captured hostages need to look at thieves or invaders in a friendly and welcoming way, or in extreme cases with calmness or indifference.

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