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Strange-face illusions during interpersonal gazing and personality differences of spirituality

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Title: Strange-face illusions during interpersonal gazing and personality differences of spirituality

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Abstract

Strange-face illusions are produced when two individuals gaze at each other in the eyes in low illumination for more than a few minutes. Usually, the members of the dyad perceive numinous apparitions, like the other's face deformations and perception of a stranger or a monster in place of the other, and feel a short lasting dissociation. In the present experiment, the influence of the spirituality personality trait on strength and number of strange-face illusions was investigated. Thirty participants were preliminarily tested for superstition (Paranormal Belief Scale, PBS) and spirituality (Spiritual Transcendence Scale, STS); then, they were randomly assigned to fifteen dyads. Dyads performed the intersubjective gazing task for ten minutes and, finally, strange-face illusions (measured through the Strange-Face Questionnaire, SFQ) were evaluated. The first finding was that SFQ was independent of PBS; hence, strange-face illusions during intersubjective gazing are authentically perceptual, hallucination-like phenomena, and not due to superstition. The second finding was that SFQ depended on the spiritual-universality scale of STS (a belief in the unitive nature of life; e.g. "there is a higher plane of consciousness or spirituality that binds all people") and the two variables were negatively correlated. Thus, strange-face illusions, in particular monstrous apparitions, could potentially disrupt binding among human beings. Strange-face illusions can be considered as 'projections' of the subject's unconscious into the other's face. In conclusion, intersubjective gazing at low illumination can be a tool for conscious integration of unconscious 'shadows of the Self' in order to reach completeness of the Self.

Keywords: intersubjectivity; numinosity; projection; self; self-other boundary; spirituality; strange-face illusion.

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