

THE SKEPTIC

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**Are skeptics
happy?**

+ INTERVIEW
**Ray Hyman
& the birth of
the skeptical
movement**

Kids & belief
Kids in buckets

POWER BANDS
Test & non-test



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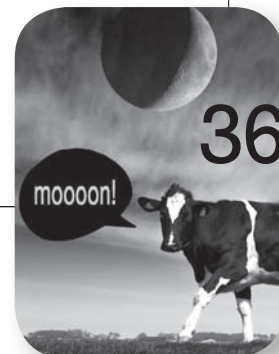
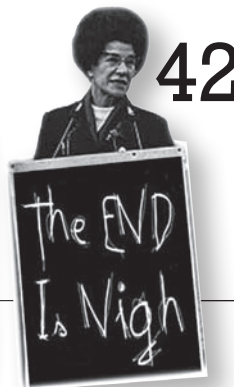
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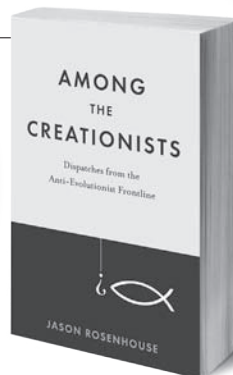
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It's Behind You!

Adam van Langenberg takes on an urban myth, and gives it a bucketing.

part of the school uniform.)

A randomly generated number was projected onto a screen. This told the audience who to stare at. When a new number appeared, everybody in the room was instructed to stare intently at that person for 60 seconds. Any of the bucket wearers who felt that they were being stared at were to raise their hands.

The buckets prevented the participants from seeing the number and from being swayed by the actions of others.

The participants were aware that the numbers were totally random and that it was entirely possible that they would be selected several times in a row or not at all. They were told they should wait until they felt that they were being stared at.

We ran 18 trials, which took us almost the entire lunchtime, including time taken to set up and explain the experiment. I recorded the results by marking down which number appeared for each trial and a series of crosses and ticks. A cross meant either raising your hand when you weren't being stared at, or failing to raise your hand when you were. A tick only occurred if you raised your hand at the right moment. Blank spaces referred to people not raising their hand while not being stared at.

Some stared in the traditional way. Other took a more direct approach, raising finger to their temples and concentrating real hard.

They were nervous in the first round; nobody raised their hand. No doubt they were terrified of the jeers they were expecting. Eventually a few hands started rising, unfortunately none at the right time. Participant number 4 remained calm, leaving his hand by his side right up till round seven, when he was actually being stared at! Not only was it a hit, it was a perfect one.

Do you ever get that feeling that you're being stared at? Then, when you turn around, you notice somebody looking right at you? Sometimes with a knife?

I do, and I suspect that most other people do as well. There are lots of reasons why this could happen. It could be a case of confirmation bias. If somebody happens to be staring at you, you file it away as evidence of your psychic powers. If nobody is staring at you, you quickly forget about it.

Alternatively, it could simply be that when somebody turns around, you look at them. Your very act of turning around is what is causing people to stare.

Either way, having a psychic ability that alerts you whenever you're being observed is the least likely explanation.

Recently I ran an experiment with my SceptiKids – members of the student skeptical society at the high school where I teach - to determine if anybody had this power. This was based on a Richard Saunders video I saw a couple of years ago: *Can You Tell If Someone Is Staring At You?**

I chose six volunteers who each claimed to have experienced the sensation. They sat in numbered chairs where I promptly placed a bucket on each of their heads. (I wish this was a

All photographs courtesy of Andrew Krause.

Unfortunately, as the trials progressed his powers left him, causing him to become nothing more than a statistical anomaly.

In fact, the results show only one hit in total. Hands were raised a total of 17 times yet only once was that person actually being stared at. If this had been an actual test, I would have been keeping these kids in at lunchtime.

Failures! All of you!

It was a fun experiment and a good way to kill a rainy lunchtime. Of course, we can hardly consider this to have been a rigorous scientific study, but it served its purpose. One of the messages I am trying to get across to my kids is something I once heard Steven Novella say on the Skeptics' Guide to the Universe podcast: "Anything that can be observed, can be observed scientifically."

Any time somebody claims to have a power of some kind, it can be tested. Any time. You can tell who's ringing before you pick up the phone? Testable. You know whether or not an envelope will contain bad news? Testable. You can cure somebody's cancer with cabbage supplements? Testable.

I aim to be testing more of these types of claims as the weeks go by. If anybody has any requests, let me know! ■

**http://www.metacafe.com/watch/467114/can_you_tell_if_someone_is_staring_at_you/*

About the author:

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Left and above: The bucketeers try to figure out who's watching them and, below, the watchers think real hard to send their message



I'm Brian Dunning from Skeptoid.com

A weekly science podcast dedicated to furthering knowledge by blasting away the widespread pseudosciences that infect popular culture.

<http://skeptoid.com>