

Staring Contests Are Automatic: People Lock Eyes to Establish Dominance

February 25, 2011

Imagine that you're in a bar and you accidentally knock over your neighbor's beer. He turns around and stares at you, looking for confrontation. Do you buy him a new drink, or do you try to outstare him to make him back off? New research published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, suggests that the dominance behavior exhibited by staring someone down can be reflexive.

Our primate relatives certainly get into dominance battles; they mostly resolve the dominance hierarchy not through fighting, but through staring contests. And humans are like that, too. David Terburg, Nicole Hooiveld, Henk Aarts, J. Leon Kenemans, and Jack van Honk of the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands wanted to examine something that's been assumed in a lot of research: that staring for dominance is automatic for humans.

For the study, participants watched a computer screen while a series of colored ovals appeared. Below each oval were blue, green, and red dots; they were supposed to look away from the oval to the dot with the same color. What they didn't know was that for a split-second before the colored oval appeared, a face of the same color appeared, with either an angry, happy, or neutral expression. So the researchers were testing how long it took for people to look away from faces with different emotions. Participants also completed a questionnaire that reflected how dominant they were in social situations.

People who were more motivated to be dominant were also slower to look away from angry faces, while people who were motivated to seek rewards gazed at the happy faces longer. In other words, the assumptions were correct—for people who are dominant, engaging in gaze contests is a reflex.

“When people are dominant, they are dominant in a snap of a second,” says Terburg. “From an evolutionary point of view, it's understandable—if you have a dominance motive, you can't have the reflex to look away from angry people; then you have already lost the gaze contest.”

Your best bet in the bar, though, might just be to buy your neighbor a new beer.