

Warning: This Face Is Dangerous

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If you're a little, soft-spoken guy, duking it out *mano-a-mano* with a tough, masculine type probably isn't in your best interest — and a fair amount of research on threat perception and dominance explores why men perceive (and presumably avoid) threats differently. But what if you're a little, soft-spoken gal?

Christopher D. Watkins and his coauthors write in the [European Journal of Personality](#) that, similar to men, less-dominant women tend to perceive women with masculine-looking faces as more dominant than women with feminine-looking faces. In Watkin's experiments, less-dominant individuals were identified by their smaller stature, their low scores on a dominance questionnaire, and a greater tendency to view their interactions with other women as competitive.

Watkin's team suggests that like less-dominant men, less-dominant women have more to lose if disagreements get physical. Therefore, a keen ability to detect dominance among potential female rivals may be important for their safety. And while woman-on-woman violence may not loom large in popular imagination, scientists say that it's a well-documented reality in societies in which resources are scarce.

Intriguingly, the team found that both low physical dominance (i.e., short stature) and low social dominance (as indicated by the written test) predicted a tendency to see masculine female faces as more dominant. Women who have high physical dominance, but low social dominance, might have just as much to lose in a violent fight because they may not be very good at making allies.

So far, little research has been published on how social and physical dominance contribute to alliances and relationships among women. However, Watkins and his colleagues think it's a promising topic for future studies. In the meantime, if you're a meek gal, evolution may have you covered when it comes to avoiding fights you can't win — at least when it comes to identifying a tough face.

Christopher D. Watkins, Michelle C. Quist, Finally G. Smith, Lisa M. Debruine, and Benedict C. Jones

(2012). Individual Differences in Women's Perceptions of Other Women's Dominance *European Journal of Personality*, 26 (1), 79-86