

Reading the look of love

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How fast you can judge whether a person of the opposite sex is looking at you depends on how masculine or feminine they look, according to a new study. The researchers speculate that there may be an evolutionary advantage to quickly noticing when a hottie is looking at you.

Psychologists have debated how we determine whether someone else is looking at us or not. One point of view is that "it's almost a geometric problem," says Benedict C. Jones, of the University of Aberdeen in Scotland - that people just look at the whites of the eyes and other features of the face, without being influenced by the face in general. But Jones and his colleagues, Julie Main, Lisa DeBruine, and Lisa Welling of the University of Aberdeen and Anthony Little of Stirling University, thought there was more to it. They designed an experiment to see whether how masculine or feminine the face was affected how quickly a viewer could assess its gaze.

Volunteers looked at faces with exaggerated or reduced male or female features; the faces had been morphed to look either more or less masculine or feminine. As the faces flashed on a computer screen, the volunteer was supposed to hit a key as quickly as possible to indicate whether the face was looking at them or away from them. Both women and men could do that more quickly when the face had exaggerated sexual characteristics. "Women were quickest to classify gaze direction when they were looking at hunky, masculine-looking guys. Guys were quicker when they were looking at pretty, feminine women," says Jones. The research is published in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

Jones speculates that this ability to perceive things about attractive people faster may have been useful to [early humans](#). Previous research shows that feminine women and [masculine men](#) make the healthiest mates. "There's likely to be quite a big advantage to detecting when a particularly good potential mate's looking at you," says Jones. "If I'm in a bar and there's a pretty woman looking at me - if I wasn't married - I would want to catch her eye before someone else did."

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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