

Feelings of power change people's non-verbal responses to dominance displays

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Feelings of power determine how people respond non-verbally to dominance displays such as a staring gaze, new research led by a psychologist at the University of Kent, UK, has found.

People tend to shy away from individuals who display domineering behaviour such as a staring [gaze](#). These instinctive reactions to others' dominance displays are assumed to have evolutionary roots and help establish hierarchical relations in humans and other species.

But the new findings, by Dr Mario Weick of Kent's School of Psychology, along with Dr Cade McCall of the University of York, UK, and Professor Jim Blascovich, of the University of California at Santa Barbara, USA, show that reactions to staring gaze displays can be changed when people feel powerful. The research was conducted using fully immersive virtual environments and involved [participants](#) walking around computer-rendered human characters that in some instances stared at the participants, and in other instances looked elsewhere.

In one study, participants were made to feel powerful or powerless before entering the [virtual world](#). In another study, the researchers varied participants' body height in the virtual world to make participants feel more or less powerful during interactions with shorter and taller virtual human characters. Throughout the task, the researchers used motion tracking to measure participants' movements and the distance kept to the human characters. The researchers found that participants moved closer towards staring onlookers, but only when they felt powerful; otherwise

they moved away. Feelings of power did not change participants' behaviour towards human characters that looked elsewhere.

Dr Weick explained that the team's findings advance our understanding of how social relations are manifested non-verbally. One of the functions of eye gaze is to communicate and thereby regulate social relations and interactions, which includes hierarchical relations of dominance and control, he said. Responding boldly to the staring gaze of onlookers may give people with fleeting experiences of [power](#) an upper hand in competitive situations such as negotiations or job interviews, Dr Weick noted.

The paper, entitled Power Moves Beyond Complimentary: A Staring Look Elicits Avoidance in Low Power Perceivers and Approach in High Power Perceivers (Mario Weick, University of Kent, UK; Cade McCall, University of York, UK; Jim Blascovich, University of California at Santa Barbara, USA) is published in the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

More information: *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0146167217708576](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167217708576)

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