

## DO WOMEN PREFER “NICE GUYS”? THE EFFECT OF MALE DOMINANCE BEHAVIOR ON WOMEN’S RATINGS OF SEXUAL ATTRACTIVENESS

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We examined whether or not different behavioral expressions of dominance by a male affected how introverted and extraverted women rated his sexual attractiveness. We assessed 81 women on the extraversion scale of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire–Revised Short Scale (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1991), and they then watched a 1-minute silent video of a male confederate in 3 dominance conditions (closed body posture [low], open body posture [medium], and open body posture with gesticulation [high]) and rated the male for sexual attractiveness. Results showed that higher dominance behavior significantly increased the confederate’s attractiveness, accounting for 10% of the variance in attractiveness ratings. However, the women’s personalities appeared to have no significant effect on these ratings. These results are discussed in relation to extant literature on the phenomenon that women do not select “nice guys” in preference to other men.

*Keywords:* male dominance behavior, nice guy, extraversion, introversion, body language, sexual attractiveness.

There is a stereotype in popular culture that women do not choose “nice guys” over other men (Desrochers, 1995; McDaniel, 2005; Urbaniak & Kilmann, 2003). According to this view, there is a discrepancy between women’s stated preference for “nice guys” (i.e., kind, sensitive men with feminine personality

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traits) and their actual choice for not-so-nice men (typically conceptualized in terms of dominance; McDaniel, 2005). In empirical research on the nice guy phenomenon, the topic has been approached in 1 of 2 ways: either comparing men's personality traits with their sexual success or examining women's self-reports and behavior. In the former approach, researchers including Bogaert and Fisher (1995) reported significant associations between the number of sexual partners a man had and traits such as dominance, hypermasculinity, and sensation-seeking.

Many researchers have examined the women's self-reports approach, for which the evidence is mixed (for a review, see Graziano & Bruce, 2008). Thus, in studies in which women were presented with vignettes of men with different personality types, a preference has generally been reported for nice guys (e.g., McDaniel, 2005; Urbaniak & Kilmann, 2003). A limitation of these studies, however, is that the use of verbal scripts possibly resulted in a social desirability bias favoring niceness over dominance or insensitivity (Urbaniak & Kilmann, 2003). It has also been shown that although dominant men were not rated as more desirable than nondominant men, dominance enhanced physical attractiveness for men who also had a high prosocial orientation (i.e., agreeable and altruistic; Jensen-Campbell, Graziano, & West, 1995).

In contrast, it has been reported in at least one study that dominant men are rated as more sexually attractive than nondominant men. In a series of four studies in which dominance was manipulated by having a confederate engage in specific dominant or nondominant behaviors, Sadalla, Kenrick, and Vershure (1987) reported that dominance increased the attractiveness of men but not of women. The authors also reported that this effect did not include related constructs (e.g., aggressiveness), and dominance did not increase the likeability of men. Similarly, in an observational study, Renninger, Wade, and Grammer (2004) showed that men who successfully initiated courtships with women exhibited different nonverbal behavior from unsuccessful men, including more glancing behavior, space maximization movements, sexual touching, and fewer closed body movements.

It would appear, then, that evidence for the positive influence of male dominance on attractiveness ratings is mixed and is influenced by the type of measurement used and the way in which dominance is operationalized (Herold & Milhausen, 1999). The primary aim in the present study, therefore, was to examine the effect of male dominance behavior on women's ratings of a confederate's sexual attractiveness. Specifically, we followed Sadalla et al. (1987) in presenting women with 1-minute silent videos of a confederate in different dominance conditions. We also extended earlier research by adding a dominance condition, simplifying the experimental environment, and eliminating as many external factors as possible. On the basis of the results of the study

conducted by Sadalla et al. (1987), we expected that expressions of dominant nonverbal behavior would be rated as more sexually attractive than nondominant behavior.

A further limitation of the extant literature on dominance and sexual attractiveness is that researchers have not considered the influence of the observer's characteristics on interpersonal ratings (for a review, see Swami, 2011). Therefore, we examined the influence of women's personalities (operationalized in terms of the Big Five personality dimension of extraversion-introversion) on ratings of sexual attractiveness. There is reason to expect that this personality dimension should be associated with attractiveness ratings (Swami, 2011). Therefore, initially we hypothesized that women scoring higher on the extraversion scale would be more likely to rate dominant male behavior as sexually attractive than would women scoring low on this scale, owing to a strong association between high extraversion and elevated status (Anderson, John, Keltner, & Krings, 2001).

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 81 female psychology undergraduates from a university in London (mean age = 22.75,  $SD = 4.48$ ).

### Materials

**Dominance videos.** The dominance videos used in this study were based on those developed by Sadalla et al. (1987), in which participants viewed a confederate entering a room, choosing a chair, and then performing either closed body movements (low dominance) or open-body movements with a higher rate of gesticulation (high dominance). We minimized the external environment by creating one zero-acquaintance situation, namely a male confederate sitting on a sofa and conversing with two unseen confederates (one seated out-of-frame in front of the target confederate and the other to his left, also out-of-frame). In addition, we operationalized dominance expression in 1 of 3 ways: (1) closed-body posture (low dominance; arms folded across the chest and legs in a contracted parallel position); (2) open body posture without gesticulation (medium dominance; arms stretched across the sofa and legs in an open position); and (3) open body posture with gesticulation and sexual touching (high dominance; open body posture with frequent gesticulation, and touching of an out-of-frame male confederate).

In contrast to Sadalla et al. (1987), we included two open body posture conditions, as frequent and expressive hand gestures are known to indicate social power and status, independent of body posture (Renninger et al., 2004). All other

cues were held constant by having the same male confederate (a 23-year-old Caucasian) appear in all three dominance conditions. We obtained a 20-minute video clip for each dominance condition and selected 1-minute clips from each recording, which were presented to participants without sound<sup>1</sup>.

In a pilot study, 18 women viewed each video clip (presented in a randomized order for each participant) and were asked to rate the target for dominance (1 = *not at all dominant* to 5 = *very dominant*). A repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed a significant difference between the three conditions (low dominance  $M = 1.83$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ; medium dominance  $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ; high dominance  $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ),  $F(2, 34) = 28.87$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .63$ , and pairwise comparisons showed that each level was significantly different from one another at  $p < .05$ . This suggests that our manipulation of dominance in the video clips was successful. In the final experiment, participants rated the confederate in each clip for sexual attractiveness (1 = *not at all sexually attractive* to 7 = *very sexually attractive*).

**Eysenck Personality Questionnaire-Revised Short Scale** (EPQ-R Short Scale; Eysenck & Eysenck, 1991). The EPQ-R Short Scale is a 48-item forced-choice scale used to measure the personality dimensions of extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism. A sample item is "I am the life of the party". The measure also contains a lie scale to assess an individual's willingness to conform. Each personality dimension and the lie scale is measured by 12 items. Participants completed only the extraversion subscale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .86$ ).

## Procedure

Once ethical approval had been obtained from Goldsmiths, University of London, participants were recruited opportunistically by approaching individuals at various campus locations. When participants had agreed to take part and provided informed consent, they completed the EPQ in a cubicle. They were then seated in front of a computer screen and asked to provide sexual attractiveness ratings as described above. Participants were randomly assigned to view only one of the dominance video clips. All ratings were made on a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. Lastly, participants were asked to provide their demographic details and were verbally debriefed. All participants took part on a voluntary basis and were not remunerated for participation.

## Results

Initial analyses showed no significant between-group differences in participant age,  $F(2, 72) = 0.27$ ,  $p = .760$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ . Multiple regression analysis was

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<sup>1</sup> Video clips are available from the corresponding author.

conducted to examine the influence of confederate dominance on attractiveness ratings. To represent the interaction between dominance and personality, the variables were centered and then multiplied together. Analysis of main effects revealed a significant effect of dominance behavior on attractiveness ratings,  $\beta = .32$ ,  $t(2, 81) = 2.82$ ,  $p = .001$ . Dominance behavior explained 10% of the variance in attractiveness ratings. There was no main effect of extraversion,  $\beta = .04$ ,  $t(2, 81) = .32$ , *ns*. Lastly, there was no significant interaction between dominance behavior and personality,  $\beta = .01$ ,  $t(2, 81) = .05$ , *ns*. Extraversion did not moderate the relationship between dominance behavior and attractiveness ratings.

## Discussion

The results showed only partial support for our hypotheses. First, we found a significant main effect of the dominance condition on ratings of attractiveness, which generally supports previous research in which similar experimental methods were used (e.g., Renninger et al., 2004; Sadalla et al., 1987). It is noteworthy that, even in this highly controlled experimental setting, slight changes to the posture (i.e., sitting position) of a male significantly increased his levels of attractiveness. This indicates that women may use simple nonverbal signals of dominance as criteria for male attractiveness. Thus, our results contribute to extant literature on the “nice guys finish last” phenomenon by showing that dominant body postures do result in higher ratings of sexual attractiveness. Of course, this is not to argue that other variables, such as prosocial orientation, do not mediate these results. Rather, when operationalized independently, dominant nonverbal behavior appears to increase women’s ratings of men’s attractiveness.

Neither a significant main effect of participant personality nor a significant interaction between personality and dominance conditions was found. These results suggest that extraverted and introverted women both perceive dominant men as being higher in sexual attractiveness. It may be the case that dominance, as an interpersonal trait, is a desirable trait, regardless of the observer’s personality. Alternatively, it is possible that personality differences become more pronounced when different rating scales are used. For instance, extraverts may place greater emphasis than introverts on dominance when seeking a short-term partner, than in long-term romantic relationships. Future researchers could examine this possibility by including a wider range of interpersonal ratings other than sexual attractiveness.

Other limitations in the present study include the fact that we did not examine the effects of dominance on men’s ratings of women. However, previous researchers have shown that dominance does not increase men’s perceptions of women’s physical attractiveness (Sadalla et al., 1987). Future researchers should

also examine the interaction between dominance and other nonverbal behaviors, such as prosocial orientation and masculinity, as it seems unlikely that these aspects of male behavior should be mutually exclusive (Graziano & Bruce, 2008). It may also be useful to examine the influence of dominance among men who vary in physical attractiveness.

These limitations notwithstanding, our results support previous research in which it was shown that dominant male behavior results in higher ratings of sexual attractiveness by women, and such ratings do not appear to vary as a function of the observer's personality. Overall, our results may help explicate some of the equivocal findings in the "nice guys finish last" literature. Specifically, the use of video clips has greater validity than vignettes and, as such, allows for a more realistic test of the nice guy stereotype. We strongly urge future researchers to make use of recent developments in technology, such as 2D and 3D video, in order to further our understanding of the influence of nonphysical dimensions on interpersonal attraction.

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