

## Decoding Visual Dominance Among Pakistani College Students

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**ABSTRACT.** Twenty Pakistani college students viewed videotapes of a male stimulus person, whose visual behavior was systematically varied, engaged in a conversation with another male. The experiment attempted to replicate cross-culturally the finding that judgments about status and dominance are consistently related to patterns of visual dominance behavior, defined by the ratio of the proportion of time spent looking while speaking to the proportion of time spent looking while listening. The stimulus person displayed three different visual dominance ratios: 67%/42%, 36%/60%, and 10%/82%. The results indicated no evidence that this group of Pakistani students responded to the differences in gaze patterns in the same manner as the American students in previous studies.

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SEVERAL RESEARCHERS (Ellyson, Dovidio, Corson, & Vinicur, 1980; Exline, Ellyson, & Long, 1975) have shown that power or dominance differences between two persons engaged in an interaction are reflected in the ratio of the percentages of time spent looking while speaking to looking while listening. Exline et al. labeled this the *visual dominance ratio*. Low status persons typically look a lot less while speaking to their partners than while listening. As status relative to the partner increases, however, the amount of looking while speaking and while listening becomes more equal, increasing the value of the visual dominance ratio. Recent experiments with American college students (Dovidio & Ellyson, 1982; Ellyson, Dovidio, & Fehr, 1981) have demonstrated that subjects can reliably decode the visual dominance behavior of videotaped stimulus persons and that they make judgments about the dominance, control, and status of the stimulus person in accordance with

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what the visual dominance ratio shown by that person would predict. Inasmuch as the norms governing the use of nonverbal behaviors such as gaze vary widely from culture to culture (Hall, 1966), however, it is important to determine how culture specific a mechanism like the visual dominance ratio is. In fact, LaFrance and Mayo (1976) found that even within American society there seem to be different norms governing looking behavior while speaking and listening for blacks than there are for whites. Thus, the degree to which judgments about dominance based on visual behavior can be made by people other than white Americans is still a completely open question. The goal of the current study was to replicate the decoding of visual dominance ratios in another society.

## Method

### *Subjects*

Subjects were 20 Pakistani undergraduate students (17 male, 3 female) studying in the United States; all were paid for their participation.

### *Procedure*

Students reported to a classroom in small groups for an experiment described as an investigation of how they make judgments about other people. The students were told that they would see videotapes of the same person engaged in three different conversations and that they would be making judgments about that person's relationship with and attitudes toward his partner.

The procedure was similar to that used in previous studies on the decoding of visual dominance. Silent prerecorded black and white videotapes of a 38-year-old white male confederate engaged in a conversation with another male provided the stimuli for the students. During the production of the videotapes, the camera was angled over the right shoulder of the other discussant creating a full frontal view of the stimulus person's (SP) head and shoulders. An out-of-focus view of the right rear side of his partner's head was visible on the extreme left side of the picture. There were three different videotape segments, each of which was 180 s in duration. In one segment, the SP showed high visual dominance behavior, with the proportions of looking while speaking and looking while listening being 67% and 42% respectively. In the low visual dominance segment, the ratio of look-speak to look-listen was 10%/82%, and in the moderate dominance segment the ratio was 36%/60%. The segments were presented in three different counterbalanced orders, with eight students seeing the videotapes in the sequence of high-moderate-low visual dominance, six seeing them in the sequence moderate-low-high, and six low-high-moderate.

All students received a questionnaire preceded by brief instructions written in both English and Urdu. The questionnaire was modified from one developed by Dovidio and Ellyson (1982). There were three copies of the questionnaire, one for each of the videotaped conversations. At the conclusion of each segment, students answered the 11 descriptive items corresponding to the conversation they had just seen. For the first 5 items, they were asked to rate on a scale from *not at all* (1) to *very much* (7) how satisfied and happy, influential, interested, and confident the person on the videotape was and how much he liked his partner. The next 6 items involved describing the person on the videotape along a 7-point bipolar dimension: hopeless-hopeful, bored-interested, submissive-dominant, subordinate-superior, tense-relaxed, and not at all-very responsible for controlling the course of the conversation.

At the conclusion of the session the experimenter answered questions and informed the students about the general nature of the study. All students received a detailed written debriefing at the conclusion of the experiment.

### Results and Discussion

Although the gaze patterns used by the stimulus person were clearly different in each of the three segments, there was no evidence that these Pakistani students as a group, were in any way basing their attributions of power and dominance on the visual behavior of the stimulus person. A repeated measures analysis of variance failed to reveal a significant effect of gaze pattern on any of the relevant items. The  $F$  values (all nonsignificant;  $df = 2, 38$ ) were .81 for satisfaction/happiness, .27 for influence, 2.4 for liking, 1.22 for confident, 1.63 for hopeful-hopeless, .95 for interested-bored, .34 for dominant-submissive, .87 for responsibility for controlling the course of the conversation, 1.72 for superior-subordinate, and .55 for tense-relaxed. The conclusion then, is that the Pakistani students did not seem to be using the proportion of looking while speaking and looking while listening as an important cue for making judgments about dominance, and they certainly were not responding to these cues in the same manner that the Americans in previous studies had.

It is reasonable to assume that the rules governing how much looking is appropriate during different parts of a conversation is one of the more subtle and hence most cross-culturally variable norms to be found in nonverbal behaviors. Therefore it is not surprising that attributions based on such behaviors might not be consistent from one society to another, especially when the societies in question are very different. Pakistan and the United States have almost no cultural heritage in common, and on a society-wide basis there is relatively little contact between Pakistanis and Americans. These cultural differences seem to be paralleled by differences in the use of nonverbal behaviors as well. A subjective impression is that Pakistanis seem to do a lot more

looking at their partner than Americans do during conversations, especially when they are speaking. If gaze levels are already at a very high level, it may simply be ineffective to signal dominance by increasing it further. Other techniques for signalling dominance would be required in a culture with such different gazing norms.

What are the implications of having subjects from one culture rate a stimulus person from a different culture as was done in this study? The answer is not readily apparent, and there are several possibilities: (a) the students were not aware of any gaze differences between the two societies and therefore judged the stimulus person by the same standards they would apply to someone from their own culture; (b) the students believed that differences in gaze patterns between Pakistanis and Americans *do* exist, and they tried to interpret gazing by an American differently than gazing by a Pakistani; and (c) because the students were in the United States, they no longer retained their Pakistani interpretation of gazing and instead adopted American interpretations of gaze patterns. Given the failure to replicate previous findings, the third alternative seems unlikely, and either of the other two options would have revealed whether or not gaze was a crucial variable in the judgments being made by the students, although it would not be immediately clear whether they would interpret gaze the same way in both countries. In any event, it was clear that gaze patterns did not affect the judgments being made on any of the dependent measures. The visual dominance phenomenon would no doubt be more easily replicated in a country that is more similar nonverbally to the United States.

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