
Institute for Research in Marketing

Press Release

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Evolution, Trivial Insults and Violence: U of M Researcher Finds link between Aggression, Status and Sex

MINNEAPOLIS / ST. PAUL – Have you ever wondered why it seems like the littlest things make people angry? Why a glance at the wrong person or a spilled glass of water can lead to a fist fight or worse? University of Minnesota researcher Vldas Griskevicius has three words to explain why people may be evolutionarily inclined to make a mountain out of molehill: aggression, status and sex.

Although hostility or belligerent acts might not immediately appear to be linked to reproduction, new research forthcoming in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* shows that mating goals may underlie behaviors such as aggression. Griskevicius, a marketing professor at the U of M's Carlson School of Management, and his co-authors have found conclusive evidence that merely activating a desire for status can trigger aggression. Aggressive displays, which may result in enhanced status, indirectly boost an individual's ability to attract a mate and, thereby, reproduce.

"It all boils down to the fact that status for men typically equals sex. Across different cultures and time, the higher status men have, the more sex or better-quality partners they may have," said Griskevicius. "At the gene-level, nobody wants to go down in an evolutionary blaze of glory—no one wants their genes to become extinct. Additionally, unlike low-status women, low-status men are in serious danger of not reproducing, since they make especially undesirable mates."

"Think of it this way," said Griskevicius, "For men, fighting for status is akin to fighting for the survival of their genes. Not caring about status, which can be implied by backing away from a fight, can be evolutionary suicide. Aggression can lead to status. A higher status leads to sex, and that leads to more or higher-quality offspring."

The evolved pull of aggression was shown in a series of three studies. Results showed that if men have status or sex on their minds (e.g., they are thinking about a promotion at work or an attractive opposite-sex individual), they will more quickly respond aggressively to a trivial insult. The slight seems much more substantial when a man has sex or status on his mind. Men are especially likely to respond aggressively when there are other men around to watch the situation, suggesting that much of aggression is about display, rather than self-defense.

Statistics reinforce this idea; police reports show that "trivial altercations" is the leading reason for homicide. But Griskevicius warns that his work should not suggest that people are attracted to aggression. Rather, "it is all about status—the one who wins the game—he's the one that gets the girl. And at the end of the day, if those genes are passed on, the aggressor is the ultimate winner."

Griskevicius's paper "Aggress to Impress: Hostility as an Evolved Context-Dependent Strategy" was written with Joshua Tybur and Steven Gangestad, University of New Mexico; Elaine Perea and Douglas Kenrick, Arizona State University; and Jenessa Shapiro, University of California, Los Angeles. More information on Griskevicius (pronounced greash-caviches) and a copy of the article can be found at www.carlsonschool.umn.edu/marketinginstitute/vgriskevicius. To listen to Griskevicius describe his research, go to <http://mediamill.cla.umn.edu/mediamill/embed/22978>.