

Dominance and Prestige: A Tale of Two Hierarchies

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Abstract

Dominance and prestige represent evolved strategies used to navigate social hierarchies. Dominance is a strategy through which people gain and maintain social rank by using coercion, intimidation, and power. Prestige is a strategy through which people gain and maintain social rank by displaying valued knowledge and skills and earning respect. The current article synthesizes recent lines of research documenting differences between dominance and prestige including personality traits and emotions observed in dominance-versus prestige-oriented individuals; strategic behaviors deployed by dominance- versus

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## RUNNING HEAD: DOMINANCE AND PRESTIGE

Hierarchy is a ubiquitous feature of human social groups. Throughout human history, a small number of people at the top have enjoyed the benefits of high social rank (e.g., greater resources, autonomy, health, happiness, and well-being), whereas a larger number of people at the bottom have been deprived of those benefits. Consequently, the desire for high social rank has been likened to other fundamental motives such as the need for social belonging (Anderson, Hildreth, & Howland, 2015).

An emerging theme in recent research distinguishes between two strategies used to navigate social hierarchies: dominance and prestige. Although both strategies serve as viable routes to attaining social rank (Cheng et al., 2013), the two strategies diverge from one another in important ways (Cheng & Tracy, 2014; Maner & Case, 2016). While previous social psychological frameworks have delineated specific forms of leadership and social hierarchy, evolutionary theories that distinguish between dominance and prestige provide an ultimate perspective that illuminates the underlying adaptive strategies people use to regulate their place in the hierarchy and links those strategies to their ancestral roots.

### THE EVOLUTION OF DOMINANCE AND PRESTIGE

Dominance and prestige reflect distinct patterns of behavior, each aimed at helping people ascend to positions of high rank, as defined by possessing elevated capacity for social influence (see Table 1). Dominance is a phylogenetically ancient strategy shared with many other group-living species. Most animal hierarchies are regulated through dominance such that individuals achieve social rank based on their size, strength, and ability to intimidate. The biggest and strongest use agonistic behavior to rise through the ranks, while weaker and less assertive individuals typically reside within lower ranking echelons of the hierarchy. Chimpanzee groups, for example, are marked by steep hierarchies in which an alpha male dominates his subordinates through fear, intimidation, and (as a last resort) direct aggression (de Waal, 1999). Dominance often involves forming coalitions to gain social rank, but those coalitions are fickle, as individuals turn their backs on one another when it is in their best interest (Nishida, 1983). Such behavior can be seen throughout many group-living species including humans. With dominance, high social rank is not freely conferred by others; it is seized and maintained through the use of power, fear, intimidation, and coercion (De Waal-Andrews, Gregg, & Lammers, 2015).

With prestige, in contrast, high social rank is freely conferred (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Prestige involves displaying skills and knowledge valued by the group, which in turn brings respect, admiration, and, ultimately, high social rank. Compared with dominance, prestige is more socially malleable, as the skills and knowledge valued by others varies across groups and cultures. For example, intelligence may garner respect in academia, whereas physical prowess may do so on a sports team. Individuals adopting a prestige-oriented strategy tend to be well-liked (Cheng et al., 2013), and they typically prioritize the well-being of the group and its members (Henrich, Chudek, & Boyd, 2015). Prestige is a phylogenetically younger strategy than

dominance, and is arguably unique to humans (Van Vugt, 2006). With the advent of human culture, evolution favored mechanisms that led people to attend to and copy highly successful group members, and the group members being copied could be described as having earned high social rank via prestige (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001).

### **THE USE OF DOMINANCE AND PRESTIGE IN SOCIAL GROUPS**

Work by Cheng and colleagues (2013) suggests that both dominance and prestige serve as viable strategies for attaining influence within newly formed groups. After a group task, undergraduates rated one another on dominance and prestige. Both dominance and prestige predicted people's influence over group decisions. Moreover, those high in dominance and prestige received more than their fair share of attention from outside observers. People's substantive contributions accounted for the link between prestige and their level of influence, but dominant people exerted influence apparently because they talked more and were more assertive (Cheng & Tracy, 2014; cf. Anderson & Kilduff, 2009).

Although both dominance and prestige both serve as viable routes to high social rank, the propensity to use one strategy over the other varies across individuals. Some work indicates no correlation between people's use of dominance and prestige (Cheng et al., 2013), suggesting that use of one strategy is not contingent on use of the other. Other work suggests a positive correlation, as both strategies share in common the motivation for high rank (Maner & Mead, 2010).

The two strategies have different implications for groups and the individuals who comprise them. For example, the two strategies are characterized by different personality traits. Whereas people who use dominance are relatively aggressive, disagreeable, manipulative, and high in dark triad traits (Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy), people who use prestige instead are high in self-esteem, agreeableness, need for affiliation, social monitoring, fear of negative evaluation, and conscientiousness (Case & Maner, 2017; Cheng, Tracy, & Henrich, 2010; Semanya & Honey, 2015).

Dominance and prestige are also marked by different types of emotion. Dominance is associated with feelings of arrogance, superiority, and conceit (hubristic pride; Cheng et al., 2010), whereas prestige is associated with feelings of achievement, but without a sense of superiority or arrogance (authentic pride; Cheng et al., 2010; see also Liu et al., 2016). Another emotion that distinguishes dominance from prestige is humility (Weidman, Cheng, & Tracy, in press). Prestige, but not dominance, is associated with appreciative humility, which results from a sense of personal success and leads people to celebrate others. Given these distinct profiles of personality and emotion, it comes as no surprise that people adopting a prestige strategy tend to be more well-liked than people adopting a dominance strategy (Cheng et al., 2013).

Clear evidence for physiological correlates of dominance and prestige is limited. Many findings have linked dominance to high levels of testosterone (Mazur & Booth, 1998), yet studies in humans have tended not to differentiate between dominance and prestige. One study that did so found no correlation between dominance and testosterone; instead, the study documented a negative relation between testosterone and prestige (Johnson, Burk, & Kirkpatrick, 2007), consistent with the hypothesis that prestige is associated with an active downplaying of aggression and competitiveness. Another found that testosterone was linked with use of

dominance but not with one's actual rank in the hierarchy (Van der Meij et al., 2016). Dominance (but not prestige) has been linked with wider facial width-to-height ratio (Mileva et al., 2014) – a morphological cue associated with greater testosterone, aggressiveness, and unethical behavior (Carré et al., 2009; Lefevre et al., 2013; but see Bird et al., 2016). The literature on physiological aspects of dominance and prestige would benefit from further development.

In face-to-face interactions, dominance is associated with lowering one's vocal pitch (Cheng et al., 2016) and displaying expansive power poses (Tracy & Robins, 2004) as ways of asserting oneself. Prestige is linked with neither of those behaviors, and instead involves exerting influence by displaying skills and knowledge, as well as authentic pride and other indicators of confidence. Unlike prestige, dominance is often displayed by those who feel they lack the skills and knowledge to assert their social rank through those means (Fast & Chen, 2009).

People pursuing a dominant strategy tend to be highly calculating and view others as allies or foes, as those who might either help or hinder their own efforts to augment their social rank (Maner & Case, 2016). Those high in dominance display a strong thirst for power, that is, control over resources (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), because power enables them to coerce others through reward and punishment. Recent lines of research suggest that, when placed into a leadership position, those high in dominance go to great lengths to safeguard their power, even if it means sacrificing the well-being of the group. For example, when it helped protect their power, they refused to share information with other group members, instead keeping that information for themselves (Maner & Mead, 2010). Such leaders view talented group members as potential threats, and respond by demoting and closely controlling the most talented members of their group (Maner & Mead, 2010; Mead & Maner, 2012a). In one experiment, dominance-oriented leaders ostracized a talented group member, and chose instead to work with an incompetent one (Maner & Mead, 2010). They also isolated their subordinates and prevented them from bonding with one another, because alliances among subordinates were viewed as posing potential threats (Case & Maner, 2014).

Notably, leaders adopting a prestige strategy tend not to show such group-harming behaviors, even when their own power is at risk. Instead, they tend to prioritize the good of the group by, for example, encouraging (rather than preventing) strong, positive relationships among subordinates (Case & Maner, 2014). The prosocial behavior of prestige-oriented leaders is consistent with their desire to maintain positive relationships with others, because those relationships serve as a foundation for respect and admiration.

The negative and antisocial behavior of dominance-oriented leaders is moderated by two situational factors. First, although selfish behavior was observed when they were worried about losing their power, assuring them that their power was secure caused dominant leaders to prioritize the good of the group (Maner & Mead, 2010; Mead & Maner, 2012a). Second, the negative behavior of dominance-oriented leaders was undercut by the presence of intergroup competition. When their group was competing against an outgroup, even leaders high in dominance prioritized the success of their group over their own personal power (Mead & Maner, 2012b). Indeed, in times of intergroup conflict, people prefer dominant leaders, who are perceived as well-suited to resolve antagonistic engagements with other groups (Van Vugt & Grabo, 2015). Throughout history, intergroup conflict often involved physical strife, and traits associated with dominance (e.g., physical formidability) were helpful in resolving such conflicts.

Conversely, the presence of intergroup conflict can reduce the value placed on prestige, because behaviors associated with prestige (e.g., altruism) can be seen as undermining the interests of the ingroup (Halevy et al., 2012). Prestige-oriented leaders are preferred in times of intragroup (rather than intergroup) conflict, as their more prosocial style and ability to earn trust are best suited to resolving interpersonal conflict.

### **INTEGRATING EVOLUTIONARY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**

The distinction between dominance and prestige – borne out of the evolutionary literature on social hierarchy – shares elements in common with the social psychological literature on power and status. From an evolutionary perspective, dominance and prestige represent strategies people use to navigate social hierarchies (Cheng et al., 2013; Maner & Case, 2016). From a social psychological standpoint, power and status are typically conceptualized as structural elements of social hierarchies. Power represents a person's relative control over resources (Keltner et al., 2003; Magee & Galinsky, 2008), whereas status represents the level of respect one receives. Recent social psychological studies have manipulated the type of hierarchy (power versus status) to investigate implications for social psychological processes (Anicich et al., in press; Blader et al., 2016; Hays & Bendersky, 2014).

The constructs of dominance and power share certain elements in common. For example, both are thought to involve the use of coercion and interpersonal force to influence others. People who use a dominant strategy to achieve high rank typically do so by seeking and wielding power. Such people greatly desire power, because power allows them to coerce others through the hope of reward or the threat of punishment (Maner & Case, 2016). One difference between power and dominance is that, whereas power implies the institutionalized control of resources (e.g., a CEO who controls a company's budget), dominance can involve informal use of intimidation and coercion (e.g., a schoolyard bully; see Cheng et al., 2014).

The constructs of status and prestige also share much in common. Whereas status is conceptualized as the degree of respect and admiration one receives (Fast et al., 2012), prestige reflects a strategy aimed at attaining high social rank via respect and admiration. While the social psychological literature on status acknowledges that some people receive more respect than others, the evolutionary literature on prestige specifies the qualities (specific types of knowledge, skill) that determine one's level of respect.

### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

The distinction between dominance and prestige provides a useful theoretical framework for generating novel predictions about group behaviors and the strategies that underlie them. For example, little research has investigated the basic cognitive mechanisms that differentiate the two strategies. Future lines of research would benefit from investigating whether dominance-versus prestige-oriented individuals attend to, encode, and remember different features of their social interactions.

Another valuable direction for future research is identifying factors that cause people to prioritize one strategy over the other. Those factors could include individual differences (e.g., physical formidability; the extent to which one possesses particular skills and knowledge) and

situational variables (e.g., cultural and group norms that reward competitive versus prosocial behavior), as well as other developmental and physiological variables.

A third direction for research involves investigating potential interplay between dominance and prestige. For example, using coercion and other facets of dominance to gain a high ranking group role may ultimately help one gain respect and, conversely, gaining respect can give people the ability to dominate others through power. Understanding how dominance and prestige may feed into (or inhibit) one another is an important goal.

Fourth, research would benefit from examining potential sex differences. Although several studies find little evidence for sex differences in the use of dominance and prestige (e.g., Maner & Mead, 2010; Cheng et al., 2013), a large evolutionary literature suggests a greater orientation toward dominance among men than among women (Wilson & Daly, 1985).

Finally, greater attention could be devoted to the psychology of followership. Whereas prestige typically garners more liking and social approval than does dominance, dominance sometimes elicits submission (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003). Systematic examination of those who follow prestige- versus dominance-oriented leaders is warranted.

### **CLOSING**

Distinguishing between dominance and prestige provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding the motivations, cognitions, and behaviors involved in social hierarchies. Although both strategies serve as viable routes to attaining high social rank, they diverge considerably with respect to a number of phenomena including personality traits, emotions, and leadership styles. This theoretical framework provides a number of valuable opportunities for future research. In tackling new questions, researchers would benefit from integrating this framework with social psychological theories of power and status.

Table 1. Profiles that characterize dominance and prestige, which represent dual strategies for navigating social hierarchies.

|   | Dominance   | Prestige  |
|---|---|---|
| When did the strategy evolve?   | Phylogenetically ancient, dating back to common ancestors of humans and other non-human primate species | Unique to humans; emerged with the rise of cultural communities, when humans lived in small hunter-gatherer societies           |
| What are the personality profiles associated with dominance and prestige? | High in narcissism, hubristic pride, aggressiveness, disagreeableness, Machiavellianism, psychopathy    | High in agreeableness, self-esteem, need for affiliation, social monitoring, fear of negative evaluation, and conscientiousness |
| How do people gain and exert social influence?                            | Coercion, intimidation, aggression, power, manipulation of reward and punishment                        | Admiration, respect, liking, social modeling, freely conferred deference  |
| What are the pitfalls in leadership behavior?                             | Leaders prioritize power over group goals; view other talented group members as threats                 | Leaders sometimes prioritize social approval over group goals   |

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### Recommended Readings

Cheng, J. T., Tracy, J. L., Foulsham, T., Kingstone, A., & Henrich, J. (2013). Two ways to the top: Evidence that dominance and prestige are distinct yet viable avenues to social rank and influence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *104*, 103-125.

A seminal empirical paper demonstrating the use of dominance and prestige in newly formed groups.

Henrich, J., & Gil-White, F. J. (2001). The evolution of prestige: Freely conferred deference as a mechanism for enhancing the benefits of cultural transmission. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, *22*, 165–196.

This paper helped popularize the construct of prestige – and the distinction between prestige and dominance – in the evolutionary psychological literature.

Maner, J. K., & Case, C. R. (2016). Dominance and prestige: Dual strategies for navigating social hierarchies. In J. Olson & M. Zanna (Eds.) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology (Vol 54)* (Ch3, pp.129-180). San Diego, CA: Elsevier Academic Press.

A comprehensive review paper detailing the recent literature on dominance and prestige.