TITLE PAGE

**Disentangling influence over group speed and direction reveals multiple patterns of influence in moving meerkat groups**

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**ABSTRACT**

Animal groups that move together must constantly come to consensus on both the direction and speed of movement, often reaching these two types of decisions simultaneously. Contributions to collective decisions may vary among group members, yet inferring who has influence over group decisions is challenging, largely due to the multifaceted nature of influence. Here we collected high-resolution (1 Hz) GPS data from five meerkat groups during foraging and developed a method to quantify individuals’ influence over both group direction and speed. We find that individuals’ influence over direction and speed were roughly correlated, but also exhibited substantial variation. Comparing patterns across social status classes reveals that each group’s dominant female had disproportionately high influence over group direction compared to other individuals, but less consistently influenced group speed. Individuals with high influence were also not necessarily the ones who spent more time in the front of the group, challenging this common assumption. Our results emphasize the importance of integrating multiple perspectives when inferring influence over group decisions, and provide a general approach which can be applied to other species.

**INTRODUCTION**

In wild social animals, individuals often make heterogenous contributions to group decisions. Group members whose actions cause others to change their behavior can be said to exert influence, and the distribution and consistency of influence can vary across decision types, contexts, and species (Strandburg-Peshkin et al. 2018; Garland et al. 2018). Studies of influence over collective movement have been looking separately at questions such as who has influence over direction of travel (Kerth et al. 2006; Nagy et al. 2010; Giuggioli et al. 2015; Pettit et al. 2015), who has influence over timing of departure (Strandburg-Peshkin et al. 2015; Tokuyama and Furuichi 2017; Montanari et al. 2021), or who is in the front of the group (King et al. 2008; Lewis et al. 2011; Van Belle et al. 2013; Smith et al. 2015). A positive link between influence and social rank has often been established (reviewed in Smith et al., 2015), though systems with influential subordinates are also found (Papageorgiou and Farine 2020). Such studies have highlighted the diversity of movement decisions-making mechanisms found in nature, from systems where influence is mostly shared to systems where it is mostly unshared, depending on group characteristics such as size and composition, social structure, or type of movement (Boinski 2000; Conradt and Roper 2005; Conradt and Roper 2009).

Because of this diversity, assessing influence patterns and comparing them between social groups remains challenging. In order to correctly define and quantify influence in a social system, one has to first identify the decision-making mechanisms at play and the type of cues from a given individual that are of particular relevance in influencing the decisions of others (Strandburg-Peshkin et al. 2018). In the context of movement, these cues can include an individual’s position in space, its movement in a given direction, or the production of signals such as vocalizations. Individual influence may also vary depending on the type of decision being considered, with influence over one type of group decision not necessarily translating into influence over other types. In particular, theoretical work has emphasized a fundamental distinction between decisions about movement *direction* and decisions about movement *timing*, with these two types of decisions expected to have different distributions of consensus costs, leading to contrasting predictions about whether they are likely to be shared or unshared (Byrne 2000; Conradt and Roper 2010). It can be particularly challenging to disentangle these two types of influence, as both may occur at the same time when groups travel collectively, continuously needing to come to consensus on both the direction and speed of travel. Very few studies have been looking simultaneously at several measures of influence within one system in the wild in order to evaluate if individuals which have influence over direction of movement also have influence over speed or travel, or to validate the assumption that frontmost individuals do have more influence (but see Herbert-Read et al. 2011; Katz et al. 2011; Jolles et al. 2017 for lab experiments). Because influence is such a versatile notion, it is crucial to define the context in which it is looked at and to have a thorough understanding of the system’s biology to assess it accurately.

We investigated influence dynamics in meerkats (*Suricata suricatta),* social mongooses living in highly cohesive groups of up to 50 individuals, in the arid parts of southern Africa (Doolan and Macdonald 1997; Manser and Clutton‐Brock 2016). Meerkats are opportunistic generalists which forage on small invertebrate and some vertebrate prey distributed across their desert habitat by digging in the ground (S. Doolan and Macdonald 1996). The distributed nature of prey is reflected in the groups’ movement dynamics: meerkat groups typically move in a relatively slow, continuous fashion while simultaneously foraging. Though individuals forage independently from one another, typically 1 to 10 meters from their nearest neighbors (Engesser 2011), groups typically remain highly cohesive throughout the day while navigating 2-5 km2 territories (Kranstauber et al. 2019). Rapid group travel without foraging can also occur, especially during returns to the burrow in the evening (Gall et al. 2017) or when escaping predators (Townsend et al. 2012), and is typically initiated through the use of specific calls. Meerkats have a highly developed vocal repertoire (Manser et al. 2014) and calls have been shown to play an important role in maintaining cohesion (Gall and Manser 2017; Engesser and Manser 2022) and in initiating rapid travel (Bousquet et al. 2011). Yet, the extent to which different group members influence collective decisions about movement speed and direction remains unclear. Though meerkat groups are socially structured with a dominant male and female monopolizing most of the breeding (Clutton-Brock et al. 2001; Griffin et al. 2003), and no strong social hierarchy among subordinate group members, there is currently limited evidence that dominance status also translates to more influence over group movement decisions (Bousquet and Manser 2011; Gall et al. 2017; Strandburg-Peshkin et al. 2020).

Here, we assess the distribution of influence over collective movement decisions in meerkats using high-resolution (1 Hz) GPS data from five social groups of varying size. We develop a simple, general method for quantifying individual influence on the speed and direction of movement over continuous foraging times, which could be applicable to social systems other than meerkats. We use this method to assess whether patterns of influence are associated with social status within groups, as well as whether the two different types of influences correlate with one another. Since frontmost individuals are often assumed to have more influence during collective movement (Barelli et al. 2008; Van Belle et al. 2013; Smith et al. 2015), we also test whether individuals that spend more time in the front of the group have higher influence.

**METHODS**

**Study site and data collection**

*Study system*

The study was conducted at the Kalahari Meerkat Project (KMP) within the Kuruman River Reserve in South Africa (26°58′S, 21°49′E, (Clutton-Brock et al. 1999) where 7-15 habituated meerkat groups are continuously monitored for group composition, dominance status, life history etc... We collected simultaneous movement data on the majority of individuals within five distinct meerkat groups: HM17 (7 individuals) in August and September 2017, HM19 (18 individuals) in June and July 2019, L19 (19 individuals) in August 2019, ZU21 (13 individuals) in May 2021 and NQ21 (11 individuals) in August 2021. We chose the groups with the highest levels of habituation among the monitored population to enable collars to be deployed without the need for capture (see below and Supplements for tagging methodology). Individuals were attributed one of six different social statuses, based on established protocols at the KMP: dominant females (one per group), dominant males (one per group), other adults (2+ years), yearlings (<2 years), sub-adults (<1 year) and juveniles (<3 months). Over the study period, three individuals were present both in HM17 and HM19, two of which had different statuses in these two years (see Supplemental Table 2).

*Collar design, deployment and duty cycle*

To simultaneously record the trajectories of all individuals in meerkat groups, we designed small (<25 g) collars consisting of a GPS unit (Gipsy 5 in 2017 and 2019, Axy-Trek Mini in 2021; Technosmart, Colleverde, Italy) and a ER14250M battery affixed to a 5 mm-wide leather strap. We protected these electronics from shocks and sand using parafilm and 2-part epoxy glue. Completed collars weighed 22-25g, never exceeding 5% of the animal’s body mass. Juvenile individuals were below the minimal size for fitting a GPS collar, therefore their movement could not be recorded. Once fitted on a meerkat, the GPS board rested on the back of the neck, with the whip antenna pointing down the back of the individual (Figure 1A).Owing to the high levels of habituation of meerkats at the KMP, the collars deployment was minimally invasive (see section 1 of the Supplements for detailed method). All GPS units in a given group were programmed to record simultaneously at 1 GPS fix/second for 3 hours every day during times when meerkats typically forage within their territory while moving as a group (either in the morning after the group had left the sleeping burrow, or in the afternoon before returning to it, depending on the deployment round). Total number of recording days for a single deployment round ranged from 6 to 10 depending on GPS-battery life. See Supplemental Table S1 and S2 for detailed information on deployment timing and group composition.During the recording session, an observer noted the times of any group-level disturbances (predator alarms, inter-group encounters, and complete inactivity) on an all-occurrence basis, and these events were removed from the dataset in subsequent analyses (see below).

*Data pre-processing*

GPS coordinates were first converted from WGS84 to UTM S34 to allow for easier spatial analyses. To increase GPS reliability and reduce sampling biases, we performed minimal pre-processing of GPS data before subsequent analysis. Specifically, when GPS signals were not recorded continuously (for instance if signal was lost after a meerkat entered a bolt-hole) we discarded all GPS fixes taken 30s before signal loss and 30s after signal retrieval, as these positions tended to be unreliable. We also removed fixes with fewer than five satellites detected.  Finally, on six instances we removed data suggesting biologically unrealistic speeds (>10 m displacement between two fixes one second apart) as these likely represented GPS errors.

In some instances, single individuals were away from the rest of the group during recording times, either at the communal burrow babysitting pups, out travelling on their own (“roving” behavior exhibited by adult males before dispersing from their natal territory), and in one case evicted from the group for a few days by the pregnant dominant female. In such instances the GPS trajectory of that given individual was discarded but the analyses were performed normally on the rest of the group.

Due to GPS tag battery failure and unsuccessful collaring attempts, we could not record every adult group member throughout the whole deployment (see Supplementary table S2 for details). We excluded time points when fewer than two-third of the non-juveniles present that day were recorded, to reduce the impacts of “invisible” (untracked) individuals. We also removed non-presentative group movement states such as predator alarms responses, rare instances of complete inactivity due to the heat, one instance of encounter with another meerkat group, and one day when three adult males (including the dominant) were not present with the group. After the removal of these data, we were left with a minimum of 9.5 hours (NQ21) and a maximum of 37.5 hours (HM17) of usable data (see table S1 in supplements).

**Analysis**

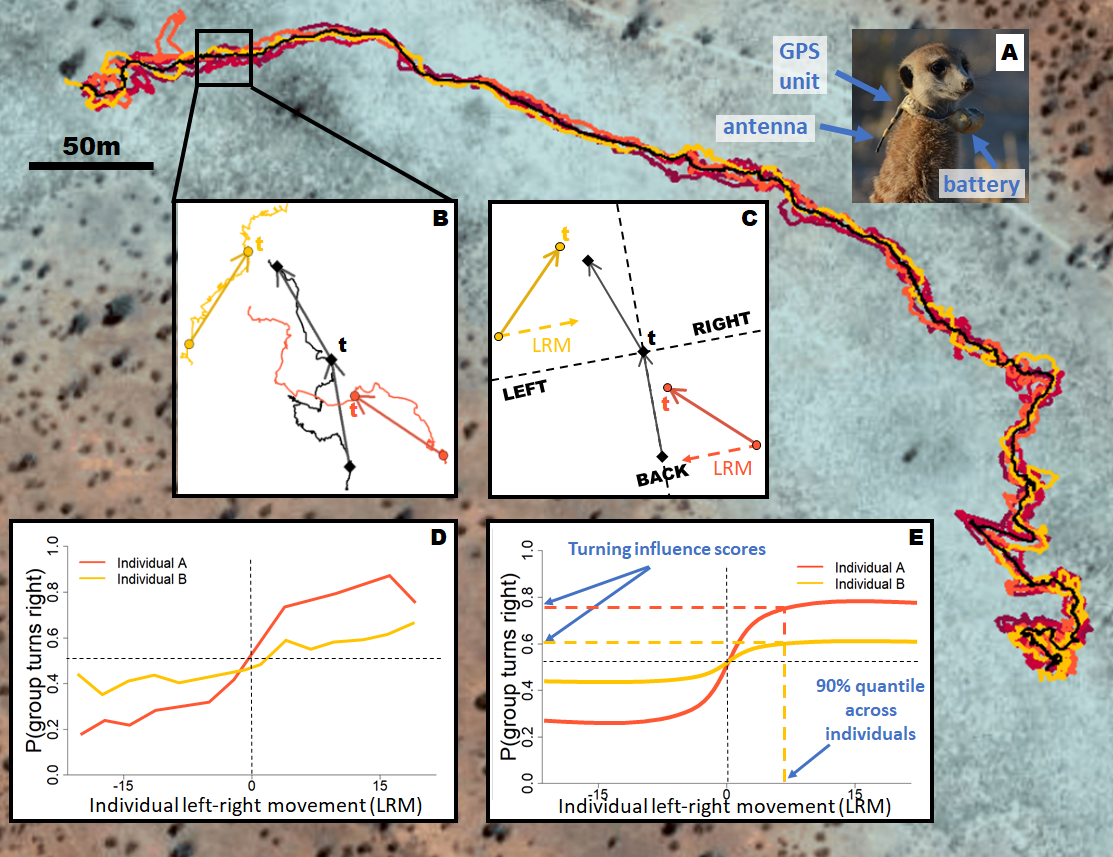
To quantify individual influence from movement data, we defined two complementary metrics, designed to capture influence over group direction (*turning influence*) and influence over group speed (*speeding influence*) separately. For each metric, we evaluated a given individual’s influence on the group by measuring the probability that the group’s movement temporally follows this individual’s past movement. Each metric also describes how these probabilities change as a function of how extreme an individual’s movement is relative to the group. We give a short general description of the approach here, with additional details described in the next section.

**Turn influence** is defined as the probability that the group turns in a given direction as a function of the focal individual’s velocity along the left-right axis of movement. Similarly, **speed influence** is defined as the probability that the group speeds up as a function of the difference between individual and group velocity along the front-back axis of movement. We also defined alternative versions of these influence metrics based on the spatial location of individuals within the group rather than their movement, and compared the outcome of the two versions (described in section 2 and 3 of the Supplements). For each individual for each metric, we fit a curve to describe the relationship between its movement and the group’s subsequent movement, using a modified version of a logistic function. We then used these models to attribute a “turn influence score” and a “speed influence score” to each individual for both metrics. Finally, we fit Generalized Linear Mixed Models (GLMMs) for each influence score to compare their value between individual social statuses.

*Detailed explanation of the approach:*

To compute the influence metrics of a given individual, we first computed the track of the group centroid by averaging the position of all individuals recorded (other than the focal individual) at each time point (figure 1B). For every time point *t*, we then calculated the *future* and *past* velocity vectors of the group centroid (figure 1C). The *future velocity vector* was defined as the vector pointing from the position at time *t* (henceforth ‘current position’) to the next recorded position that was at least 10 meters away (henceforth ‘future position’). The *past velocity vector* was defined as the vector pointing to the current position from the most recent position that was at least 10 meters away (henceforth ‘past position’). We chose to use spatial rather than temporal thresholds to define these headings because of the stop-and-go nature of individual meerkat movement, which makes the temporal scale at which movements occur highly variable. Such a spatial approach also avoids introducing noise in the headings due to small fluctuations in the GPS data when groups are relatively stationary (Farine et al. 2017). Both of these features also make this spatial approach broadly applicable to tracking data from many systems, especially terrestrial species which do not move continuously. We chose 10 meters as the step length for spatial discretization as this reflects a biologically meaningful spatial scale for the system (see section 4 of the Supplements). To check for robustness, we repeated the analysis with thresholds of 5, 15 and 20 meters and obtained broadly similar results (see section 5 of the Supplement).

The group centroid’s current position and the group centroid’s past velocity vector were also used to define the y-axis of an orthonormal basis relative to which the position and movement of the focal individual could be computed (henceforth group frame of reference, figure 1D). The group reference frame was thus defined such that the direction of motion pointed along the y axis in the positive direction, with the x axis representing the left-right axis of the group. We also calculated the past velocity vector of the focal individual at each time point, defined in the same way as for the group past velocity vector, and projected it into the group frame of reference to describe the individual’s movement relative to the group. From this, we computed two variables corresponding to the two metrics of influence: the y component of the individual’s past velocity vector (=left-right movement, corresponding to **turn influence**), and the difference between the x component of the centroid’s past velocity vector and the x component of the individual’s past velocity vector (=front-back movement, corresponding to **speed influence**)

Figure 1. Summary of the data processing pipeline to calculate the turning influence scores of each individual, from collection of individual meerkat trajectories to spatial discretization, modeling of the turning influence curve and computation of the influence score. Background shows the trajectories of six meerkats from group HM17 recorded over a three-hours time period at one fix / second from GPS collars. The black line represents the trajectory of the group centroid over the same time-interval, obtained by averaging the coordinates of every individual in the group at each time step. (A) Picture of a meerkat wearing a custom-made collar recording its movement at high resolution. (B) Close up on a portion of the trajectory, with only the group centroid and two individuals shown, in yellow and orange, for clarity. At a given time t, velocity vectors (solid arrows) are calculated from the points ten meters in the past (centroid and individual tracks) and ten meters in the future (centroid track only). (C) The velocity vector of the centroid from the past is used to define an orthonormal basis (group reference frame, dashed lines) relative to which the position and movement of individuals are calculated. Based on the centroid velocity vector from the future, the group is defined as either turning left or turning right at time t (turning left in the example). Individual left-right movement (LRM, dashed arrows) is calculated as the x-component of the individual velocity vectors from the past in the group reference frame. In this example, the orange individual has a positive turning influence at time t, despite being in the back of the group, because it was moving towards the left side of the group before the group turned left. On the other hand, the yellow individual has a negative turning influence at time t, despite being in the front of the group, because it was moving towards the right side of the group before the group turned left. (E) After doing the calculations for every available time step, the probability of the group to turn right is plotted as a function of an individual’s left-right speed. This shows that as individuals move faster towards the right (positive x-values), the probability of the group to turn right increases (and vice-versa), but the extent and rate of the increase varies for different individuals, reflecting differences in influence. Here the orange individual has a higher influence on the rest of the group than the yellow individual. (F) The influence curves are modelled using a modified logistic function, and the 90% quantile of the left-right movement across all individuals of a given group is used to compute a single turning influence score for each individual. The speeding influence score is calculated analogously, using instead the probability of the group to speed up and the difference between group and individual front-back speed (not shown, see main text). Note that in the real analyses, the data for a given individual whose influence is being measured is excluded from the computation of the centroid location and movement, to avoid circularity.

Exploratory analyses showed that the probability of a group turning right increased sharply as a given individual’s movement towards the right increased before plateauing, and conversely for probability to turn left, resulting in a sigmoid-like curve (Figure 1E and section 7 of the Supplements). A similar shape was observed for speed influence (see section 7 of the Supplements). For each influence type, we therefore modelled the probability of a binary group response (turn left / right, speed up / slow down) as a function of a continuous individual predictor (movement relative to the group reference frame). Specifically, turn influence is the probability of the group to turn right as a function of an individual’s speed along the group’s left-right axis, and speed influence is the probability the group to speeds up as a function of the difference in speed between an individual and the group along the group’s front-back axis.

To model these probabilities, we fit a modified version of the logistic function to both types of influence, for each individual (equation 1):

(1)

Here, *x* represents the individual behavior (left-right or front-back movement) and *f(x)* represents the probability of the group turning right or speeding up. α and β are variable parameters which were fit for each individual separately, while γ is a fixed parameter which we set as described below. This modified sigmoidal shape was chosen due to its empirical correspondence with the data, as well as the interpretability of its parameters. In particular, α can be interpreted as the probability that the group is influenced by the focal individual at a given time point, and in practice controls the height of the curve. β can be interpreted as the logistic growth rate (steepness) of the curve and hence the strength of influence relative to how much an individual moves. γ is the baseline probability of the group either turning right or speeding up. For turning influence, γ was set to 0.5 (assuming an overall equal probability to turn left or right), whereas for speed influence, γ was fixed to the aggregate probability of a given group to speed up across all the data. Because groups tend to accelerate in rapid bursts but decelerate over longer time periods, the overall probability of a group speeding up is lower than the probability of the group slowing down, hence the value of γ ranged from 0.24 to 0.37.

We fit the values of α and β for each influence metric using maximum likelihood estimation, enabling us to define, for each individual, two curves representing its turning and speeding influence. For ease of interpretation and subsequent modeling, we also defined an aggregate “influence score” as the value of the individual’s fitted curve at the 90% quantile of either continuous predictor variables across all individuals of a given group (figure 1F). This influence score therefore corresponds to the probability that the group is positively influenced by the focal individual for a fixed amount of movement (either left/right or front/back) relative to the group centroid. The model fits for each individual are shown in section 7 of the supplements.

To test if there are consistent differences in influence based on individual social status, we fitted binomial GLMMs to predict influence score as a function of status (dominant female, dominant male, adult, sub-adult, juvenile), for both types of influence. Each individual was considered as one data point in the models, and we included group as a random effect to control for non-independence of data within each group. We also conducted post-hoc Tukey tests to compare the influence of each pair of social statuses (section 6 of the supplements).

Finally, we tested whether speeding and turning influence were correlated with one another by computing the Spearman multilevel correlation with group as a random factor.

*Proportion of time in the front:*

To assess whether individuals differ in their propensity to be at the front of the group, we quantified for each individual the distribution of their front-back position relative to the direction of group travel. We also calculated the proportion of time each individual spent in the front half of the group, as a simple metric of ‘frontness’, to allow comparison with our influence scores. At time t, a given individual was considered in the front half of the group if its front-back position was positive. To quantify the variation in the propensity to be in the front between individuals and across groups, we computed the proportion of time points an individual was in the front half of the group in time segments of one hour.

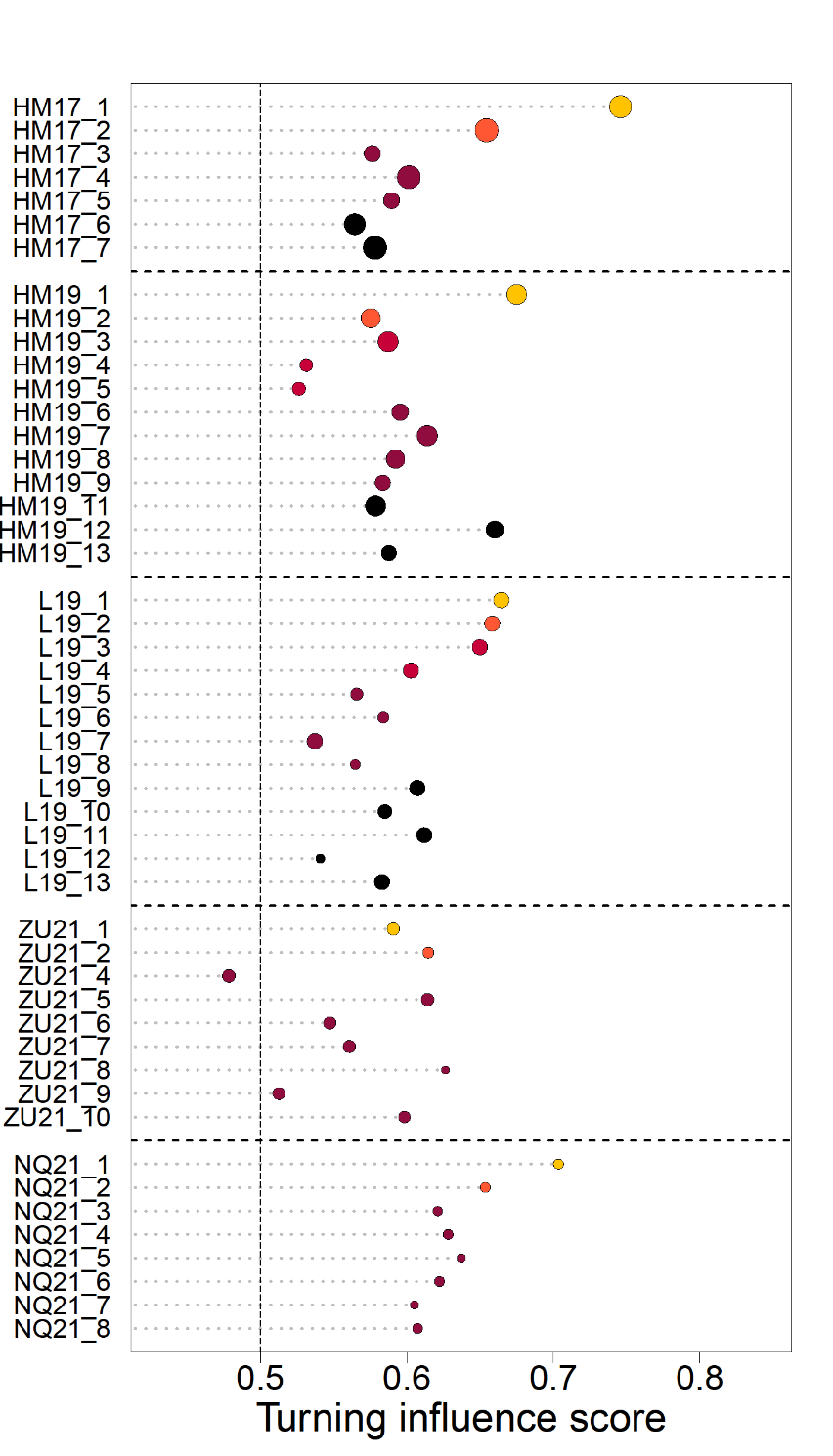
To test whether individuals at the front of groups have greater influence, we computed Spearman multilevel correlations between the total proportion of time spent in the front for each individual and their turning and speeding influence scores, controlling for group as a random factor.

**RESULTS**

**Turning influence and speeding influence scores across social statuses:**

We found that individual varied substantially in their influence on group direction and speed (figure 2 and section 7 of the supplements). There was a significant effect of status on turning influence score (figure 5a, F = 7.217 ; DF = 40 ; p-value < 0.0001), with the dominant female’s score consistently being the highest or second highest of her group across all groups. Post-hoc Tukey tests (see section 6 of the Supplements) showed that the score of dominant females was overall significantly higher than the scores of all subordinate status (i.e. non-dominant adults, yearlings and sub-adults), whereas the score of the dominant male was not significantly different from the scores of subordinates.

There was also a significant difference between the movement speeding influence score of different statuses, with group taken into account as a random factor (figure 5b, F = 3.95 ; DF = 40 ; p-value < 0.0001). Post-hoc Tukey tests (see section 2 of the Supplements) showed that the score of dominant females was significantly higher than the score of yearlings and sub-adults but was not significantly different from the score of dominants males and non-dominant adults. The score of the dominant male was not significantly different from the scores of subordinates.



**A**

**B**

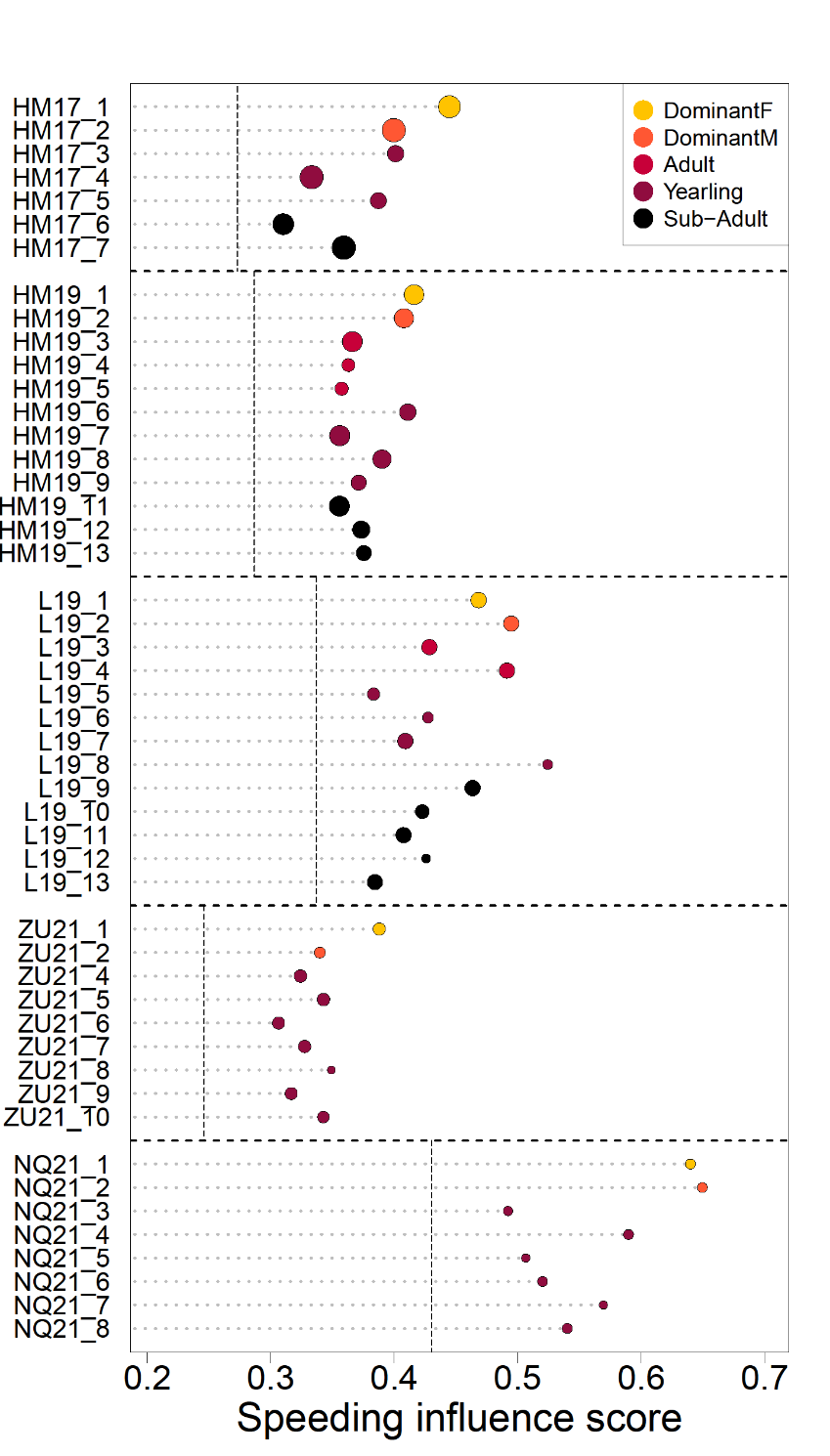


Figure 2. Predicted influence scores for each recorded individual (colored dots) in the 5 study groups (vertical axis). Dot color indicates individual status as shown in the legend, dot size is proportional to the quantity of data available. Dotted vertical lines represent baseline probabilities for the outcome of group decision (50% percent chance of turning left or right for turning influence and overall probability to speed up for each group for speeding influence). (A) Turning influence score represents the probability that the group turns toward the same direction (left or right) that individual was moving to. (B) Speeding influence score represents the probability that the group speeds up after that individual had sped up towards the front of the group.

**Influence vs time spent in the front:**

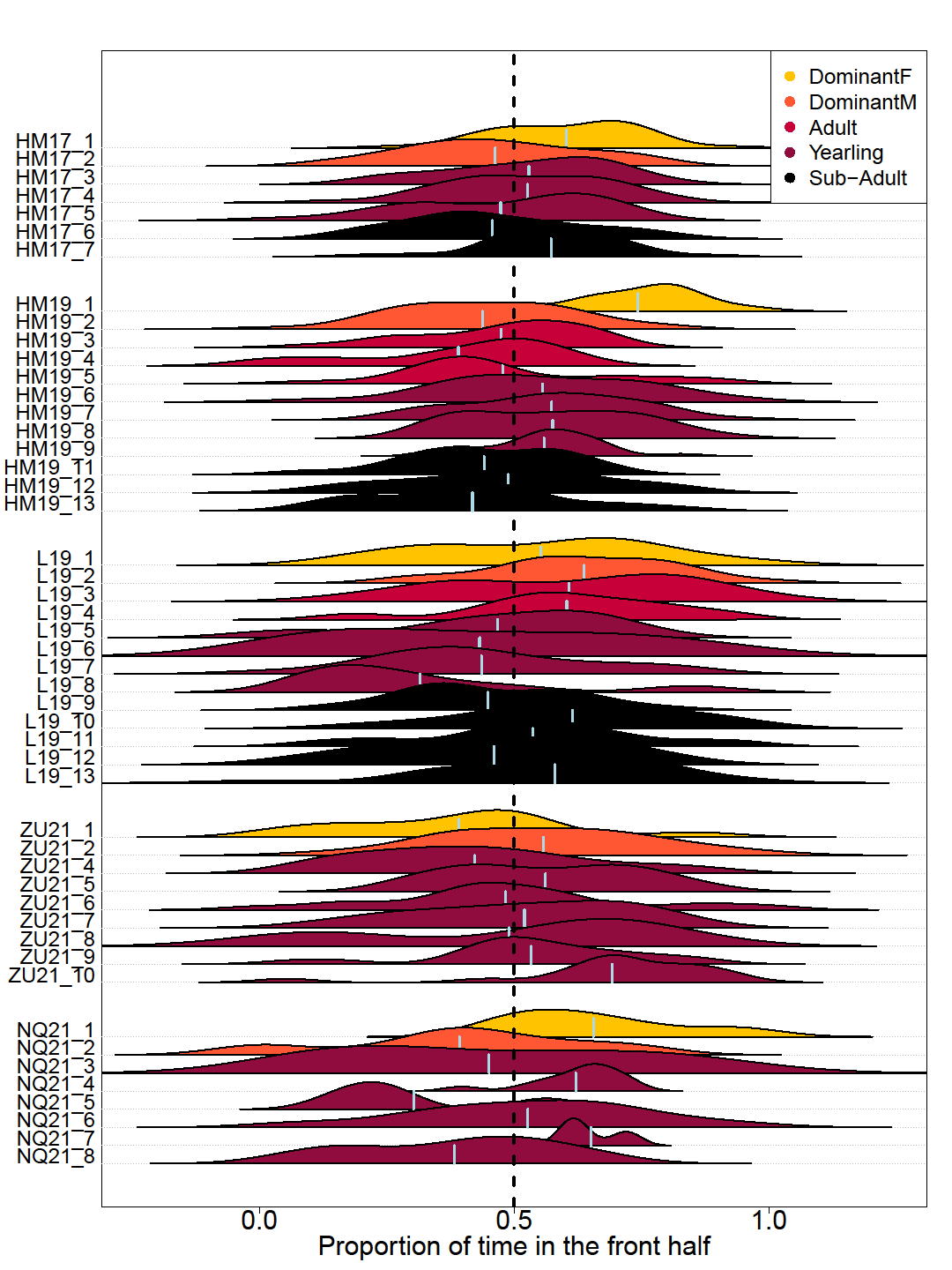
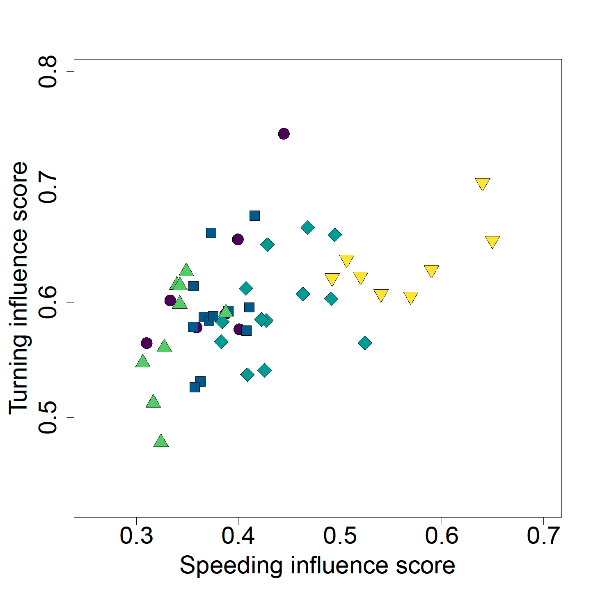
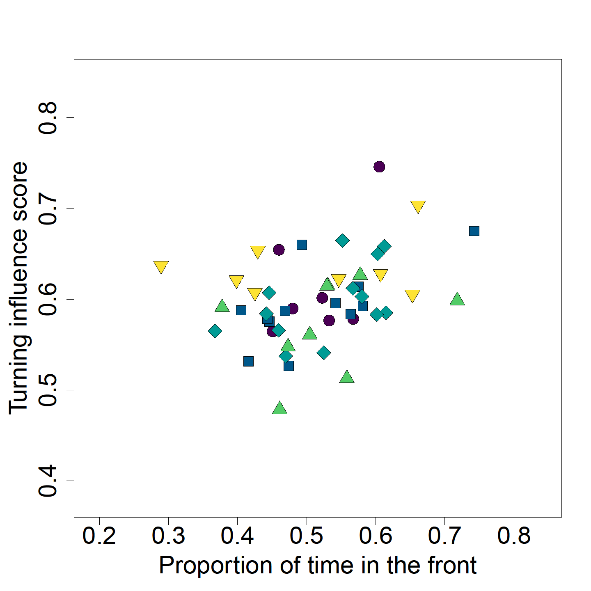
We found that the association between the time spent in the front half of the group and the social status of individuals varied between groups (figure 6), with some showing a trend towards more time spent in the front by the dominant female (HM2017, HM2019, NQ2021), some showing the opposite effect (ZU21) and others no effect (L2019). The dominant male was always more in the back half of the group, except in L2019.

Figure 3. Distribution of the proportion of time steps spent in the front half of the group over one-hour time periods, for each individual in the 5 study groups (vertical axis). Shape color indicates individual status as shown in the legend. Light vertical lines within each shape indicates the overall mean proportion of time spent in the front half of the group for that individual. Vertical dotted line indicates equal amount of time spent in the front and in the back half of the group.

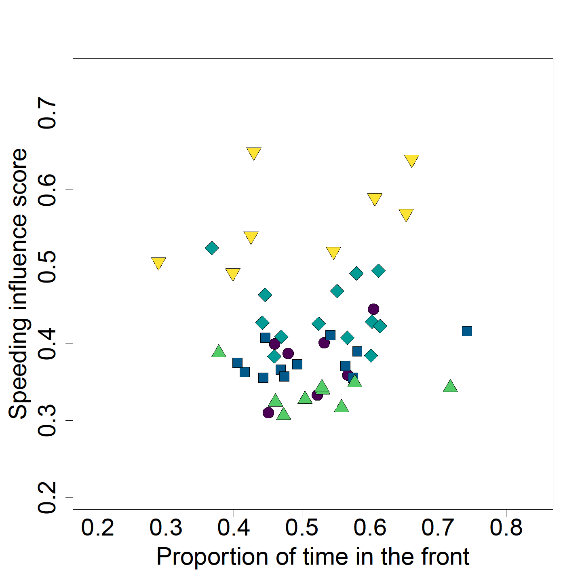
With group controlled for as a random factor, we found weak positive correlations between turning influence scores and speeding influence scores (r=0.48, p < 0.001, figure 4.a), turning influence scores and overall proportion of time spent in the front half (r=0.39, p=0.006, figure 4.b), and speeding influence scores and overall proportion of time spent in the front half (r=0.21, p=0.141, figure 4.c).



**A**



**B**



**C**

Figure 4. Correlation between the different individual metrics. (A) Turning influence as a function of speeding influence. (B) Turning influence as a function of proportion of time spent in the front. (C) Speeding influence as a function of proportion of time spent in the front. Each dot represents one individual, with color and shape indicating group membership, as shown in legend.

**DISCUSSION**

Using a suite of metrics to quantify influence, we analyze high-resolution tracking data across five different social groups to reveal how influence is distributed in meerkat social groups. Individual influence over group movement has been assessed in multiple ways in social mammal species, and a link with social status has often been found, with socially dominant individuals, and particularly dominant females, being the most influential individuals (Holekamp et al. 2000; Barelli et al. 2008; Van Belle et al. 2013; Tokuyama and Furuichi 2017). Here, we found that meerkat’s likelihood to influence the group’s direction increases with the speed at which they move in particular directions, and that individuals differed substantially in the amount of influence that their movement exerted on the group. More importantly, we found that these differences were linked with the social status of individuals within their group, with each group’s dominant female being a clear outlier in terms of turning influence across the five social groups we monitored. Dominant females had significantly higher movement turning influence, meaning that the rest of the group was more likely to follow their movement directions than that of any of the other statuses. In contrast, dominant males did not appear to have outsized influence relative to other adults in their social groups. In mammals, the finding that dominant females appear to wield more influence than dominant males is often interpreted in light of the higher energetic requirements of reproduction in females, with leadership potentially providing females with priority of access to higher-quality resources, therefore compensating the costs of pregnancy and/or lactation. The extent to which these arguments also apply to meerkats is debatable. Indeed, meerkats are notable cooperative breeders (Clutton-Brock et al. 1998), so even though dominant females are usually the only ones in their group to bear pups, after birth the cost of reproduction is distributed among group members. In our study, we also found that dominant females wielded outsized influence over group direction regardless of their reproductive status (see table S2 in the Supplements). An alternative explanation could be that experience drives influence patterns, with individuals more experienced in the territory more often influencing the group direction. Meerkat group territories usually vary little over the course of individuals’ lives (Kranstauber et al. 2019), therefore individuals who have spent more time within a given group might have the most experience navigating within the group’s home range. Because meerkat males disperse when they reach sexual maturity, dominant males, though often older than their female counterparts, are typically non-natal and hence have usually not spent as much time in the group territory (S.P. Doolan and Macdonald 1996; Griffin et al. 2003; Mares et al. 2014). As a consequence, dominant females are usually the eldest natal individuals of their groups. This was the case in HM19, L19 and ZU21. In HM17 and NQ21, the dominant male (HM17\_2) and two subordinate individuals (NQ21\_3 and NQ21\_4) respectively, had spent the same amount of time in the group as the dominant female (see table S2 in Supplements), and it is noteworthy that all three had fairly high turning influence scores (see figure 2). However according to this reasoning, we would expect higher influence in older subordinate statuses than in younger ones, which was not the case in our data. It is therefore likely that experience is not the only factor explaining the turning influence differences observed.

When moving cohesively, social animal groups constantly have to make decisions regarding where to go and how fast to go there. Because these decisions happen simultaneously, it is non-trivial to assess individual contribution to these two decision types, and to our knowledge few studies have attempted it in the wild. The method we used was designed specifically to not only infer individual influence on group direction, but also on group speed. We found that though individuals with high influence on group turning also tended to have high influence on group speed, there were less striking intra-group differences between status in terms of speeding influence in contrast to turning influence. In particular, all adult statuses (dominant female, dominant male and other adults) had a similar chance of speeding the group up when they were moving faster than the centroid, or slowing it down when moving slower than the centroid. The dominant female therefore seems to have more influence over the direction of travel of the group, than over its speed. Interestingly, this reflects recent results found about sleep site selection in meerkats. Strandburg-Peshkin et al. 2020, which looked at burrow switches (influence on direction) found a stronger influence of the dominant female, whereas Gall et al. 2017, which looked at the timing of return to the communal burrow (influence on speed) did not. Decisions about direction of movement and decisions about speed of movement usually differ in that the former are discrete whereas the latter are continuous (Conradt and Roper 2010). In the case of meerkats, this means that contrary to timing decisions, wrong decisions regarding the direction of movement could end up being very costly for all individuals in the groups, as they could end up in a location with little food, or no sleeping burrows, or in rival territories. Thus, it makes sense that experienced individuals, such as the dominant females of the group, are more likely to influence decisions involving directions than decisions involving speed. Given our results, influence over group speed could be either distributed, with all or most adults contributing to the decision to speed up or not at a given moment, or varying in time between group members, with individuals taking turns influencing others to speed up or slow down. Unfortunately, our methodology does not allow us to disentangle between these two options. Because speed of the group could have repercussions on individuals’ ability to locate food, and because quorum mechanisms, akin to a voting process by which a certain threshold of individuals giving a specific type of call is required for the group to start moving, have already been shown in meerkats (Bousquet et al. 2011), in future works it could be very interesting to incorporate data about individual foraging success, as well as vocalizations, within our influence framework, to further our understanding of the interactions between these aspects. These results highlight the fact that influence is not an absolute notion, with individuals exerting influence in one particular context not necessarily exerting it in others.

The tendency to be in the front of the group is also often taken as a proxy for leadership in studies of group movement. Here we did find a positive correlation between movement turning influence and proportion of time spent in the front half of the group. However when looking specifically at the status with the highest turning influence within their group, dominant females, we see that they are not necessarily more in the front than other members of the group. In particular, in L19, the dominant female spent a similar amount or less time in the front than many other individuals in her group, and in ZU21, she was the individual who spent the least amount of time in the front of the group, despite both of these dominant females having the highest turning influence scores of their groups. These results highlight that individuals in moving social groups don’t necessarily need to be at the front position in order to influence group direction. Being in the front is most likely to be linked with influence in environments where visibility is high and in species where information is transferred primarily through vision (e.g. fish, Rosenthal et al., 2015; Strandburg-Peshkin et al., 2013). However in the meerkats’ habitat, tall sour grass or bushes often impede visibility , and meerkats are known to use a variety of vocalizations to coordinate movement (Bousquet et al. 2011; Reber et al. 2013; Manser et al. 2014; Gall and Manser 2017). Thus, they have the potential to convey information, and therefore influence others, from anywhere in the group. This decoupling of front position and influence over direction highlights that, depending on the species, the ordering of individuals along the axis of movement alone might not necessarily be a reliable metric to infer influence and should be used in complement with other metrics. Moreover, understanding when and how individuals are able to exert influence from the back of groups, and how this is linked to the mechanisms of information transfer employed, are important questions for future work. Interestingly, in our data the one dominant female that spent more time in the back (group ZU21) had by far the longest tenure at the time of data collection amongst dominant females of our study (104 weeks against 38 weeks maximum, see table S2 in Supplements). This suggests the intriguing possibility that as a female’s dominance becomes better and better established within a group, she might become more and more able to influence the group from any position.

**CONCLUSION**

Overall our results show that dominant females have the most influence over the direction of travel but not necessarily over speed of travel, highlighting the importance of disentangling these two components of influence even in groups where both operate concurrently. Furthermore, the finding that the most influential individuals are not always the ones located in the front of the group emphasizes the need to critically evaluate the common assumption that those at the front take the lead.

The methodological approach developed here is species-general and could be applied more broadly across different species, or under different environmental conditions, to disentangle influence over timing and directional decisions. Because our approach by design captures influence aggregated over time, it could be interesting in future work to contrast it with complementary approaches, for instance approaches that identify particular events in the trajectory such as sharp changes in direction or increases in speed during movement, in order to gain a more complete picture of the distribution and variability of influence in social groups. The method could also be used in combination with other features, such as vocalizations, to assess how such features impact influence dynamics. The results presented here highlight the complexity of the concept of influence, and demonstrate the need to study it from different perspectives across multiple groups to begin to reveal a more complete understanding of collective decision-making in animal societies.

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**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

**Competing interests**

The authors declare no competing interests.

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**Ethics**

All research was conducted under the permission of the ethical committee of Pretoria University (permit number: EC031-17) and the Northern Cape Conservation Service (FAUNA 192/2014), South Africa.

**Author contributions**

BA, VD, GG and ASP collected the data, with support from MM. BA, VHS and ASP analyzed and interpreted the data. BA wrote the manuscript, with inputs and revisions from all authors.

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