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# Complaisant or coercive? The role of dominance and prestige in social influence

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ABSTRACT

Research in evolutionary psychology has identified two general strategies – dominance and prestige - used to attain influence and high social rank within groups. Whereas dominance is defined by the use of force to gain social rank, prestige is defined by the display of valued skills and abilities. Although studies have provided insight into the personality traits and motivations that characterize people high in dominance versus prestige, less is known about specific social influence tactics used by people who adopt those strategies. Participants ($n$ = 207) reported on their use of nine social influence tactics, including both complaisant (e.g., building relationships, using reason) and coercive (e.g., punishing or directly coercing others) tactics. Prestige was positively associated with complaisant tactics but negatively associated with coercive tactics. Dominance was positively associated with both coercive tactics and complaisant tactics. This study provides evidence linking the overarching strategies people use to regulate their social rank to specific forms of social influence.

## 1. Introduction

Interpersonal influence has been central to social life throughout human evolutionary history, and continues to be a pervasive element of human sociality. People constantly influence and are influenced by one other. Individuals garner social support from friends and other group members. Potential romantic partners charm one another into forming a relationship and members of established romantic relationships influence their partners in order to maintain and reap benefits from those relationships. Even young children are active agents in the workings of their social groups, and the playground can quickly become a place of intense manipulation. Interpersonal influence takes many forms and is prevalent across the domains of social life.

One domain in which social influence is especially pervasive involves social hierarchy. In any group, some people – those with high social rank – have a greater capacity for social influence, whereas those at the bottom lack that capacity. Because the influence associated with high social rank brings many benefits to the individual, humans are powerfully motivated to rise to positions of elevated social rank (Anderson et al., 2015).

An emerging framework, Dual Strategies Theory, highlights individual differences in the use of two broad strategies – dominance and prestige – for garnering elevated rank in social groups (Cheng, 2020; Maner & Case, 2016). Although those strategies have inherent ties to social influence, previous research has not directly examined specific social influence tactics associated with those strategies. Our primary goal was to identify specific social influence tactics associated with individual differences in dominance and prestige.

### 1.1. Social influence tactics

Striving for and maintaining high social rank requires one to be adept at influencing others. Social influence involves a range of tactics including intimidation and the threat of aggression, exchanging resources, or creating cooperative alliances. Though specific social influence tactics vary widely across people and situations, they can more parsimoniously be understood in terms of how complaisant (i.e., marked by a proclivity to work with or please others) versus coercive (i.e., marked by the use of force to influence others) the implementation of those tactics are (Hawley et al., 2002).

Some of the more common and effective forms of social influence involve the building of relationships and positive social impressions (Buss et al., 1987). For example, when people engage in socially desirable actions, those actions elicit positive impressions, liking, and helping behavior from others (Bereczkei et al., 2010). When people are perceived as generous, such as by abdicating to a partner a choice

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between two rewards (Kardas et al., 2018), others are more inclined to comply with their requests. Generous individuals are thus able to leverage their social capital to gain favors or resources from others. Children who seek out collaborative relationships with schoolmates report having more influence over those peers (Hawley et al., 2002). Among nonhuman animals, activities such as play or mutual grooming solidify bonds between conspecifics and set the stage for prosocial forms of social influence (Langergraber et al., 2009). Indeed, a range of complaisant tactics can be effective in influencing others.

Not all forms of social influence are complaisant, however, and coercive tactics are common, as well. Such tactics are common among nonhuman animals. Alpha chimpanzees, for example, fiercely defend their social rank with displays of aggression and intimidation (de Waal, 1999; see also Archer, 2006). Although overt physical aggression may not be as common in humans as in other species, nonphysical threats can quickly secure obedience from others (Griskevicius et al., 2009). In the workplace, for example, employee compliance is often held by the threat of job termination or demotion. Children who exploit others can gain social rank within their peer groups (Hawley et al., 2002). Some individuals, such as bullies on the playground (Bullock, 2002) or young teenagers arguing at a party, resort to physical violence as a means of eliciting obedience (Wilson & Daly, 1985). Though they vary in relative intensity, all of these social influence tactics share an underlying coercive tendency.

### 1.2. The hypothesized role of dominance and prestige

Dual Strategies Theory is an emerging theoretical framework that posits two distinct strategies (dominance and prestige) that people use to increase their social rank (Cheng et al., 2013; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Maner & Case, 2016; Van Vugt & Smith, 2019). Dominance is a phylogenetically ancient strategy used by both humans and nonhuman animals and refers to the use of coercion and aggression to force compliance from others. For example, alpha chimpanzees use the threat of physical violence to manipulate the behavior of subordinates (de Waal, 1999). Because of their coercive style of commanding respect, individuals who rely on dominance may not be especially motivated to maintain positive relationships with others. Even when such individuals utilize alliances to seize social rank, those alliances are typically forced (Nadler, 1976). Dominance as a social rank-striving strategy is thus characterized by a willingness to subvert and exploit others for personal gain (Maner, 2017; Maner & Mead, 2010).[1]

In contrast to dominance, prestige allows individuals to rise in social rank through freely conferred deference from peers (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). In ancestral human groups, social learning was essential for sharing cultural information and ensuring the well-being of the group. Members of the group who possessed skill and knowledge received respect and attention, as other group members sought to emulate their abilities. Such recipients of respect and admiration can be described as having attained high social rank via prestige (Henrich et al., 2015; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Ancestral human groups thus were hierarchical, and high social rank was usually accorded to individuals who possessed valued skills and knowledge. Prestige does not rely on formal authority. Rather, theories of service-for-prestige imply that prestigious individuals gain high social rank through freely conferred deference from others (Price & Van Vugt, 2014; Von Rueden, 2014).[2]

In prestige-based societies, dominance was (and still is) strongly discouraged by group norms (Boehm, 1999). As human societies grew larger and the accumulation of resources was possible, dominance again became a viable strategy for navigating social hierarchies (Van Vugt et al., 2008). Though both dominance and prestige are effective in gaining social rank today (Cheng et al., 2013), individuals who use prestige tend to be more well-liked (Cheng et al., 2013) and are better able than those using dominance to retain positions of high social rank over time (Redhead et al., 2019). Because their rank is based on freely conferred deference, prestigious individuals are often motivated to sustain positive relationships (Case et al., 2018; Case et al., in press). Although positive relationships are not an essential component of prestige and are not necessary for prestigious individuals to acquire high social rank, building collegial relationships is useful, as it increases the likelihood that such individuals will receive freely conferred deference. Conversely, having manifestly poor social relationships could undermine the status of a person who might otherwise gain social rank through prestige.

Although research inspired by Dual Strategies Theory provides evidence for the use of dominance and prestige in social groups, less is known about the specific social influence tactics associated with the use of dominance versus prestige. Although studies have investigated tactics used by dominant individuals (e.g., Benson & Hornsby, 1988), such studies have not sought to differentiate dominance from prestige. In carefully differentiating between dominance and prestige, the current work takes a meaningful step forward in understanding the social influence tactics people use to strive for high social rank in groups.

The present study investigated specific influence tactics used by people scoring high on individual difference measures of dominance and prestige. Because dominance is characterized by a willingness to exploit others for personal gain, we predicted that dominance would be associated primarily with coercive social influence tactics. Conversely, dominant people are not especially interested in fostering positive relationships, and thus we anticipated that dominance would be negatively associated with complaisant tactics. Unlike dominance, the use of prestige is facilitated by positive relationships with others. Additionally, in prestige-based groups, forceful or coercive behaviors are firmly discouraged. Thus, we predicted that individual differences in prestige would be positively associated with complaisant influence tactics, and negatively associated with coercive tactics.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

We conducted a power analysis based on previous research in which social influence tactics were predicted from Dark Triad traits (Jonason & Webster, 2012). Detecting the mean effect size reported in that paper ($r = 0.27$) with 0.80 power required a sample of 102 participants. We sought to amass a conservative sample size, however, so two-hundred seventy-one American MTurk workers participated online. Sixty-four participants were excluded using a priori exclusion criteria because they failed one or both of two attention checks. Two-hundred seven participants remained (89 men, 117 women, 1 unspecified sex). Participants ranged from 18 to 66 years old ($M = 32.71$, $SD = 9.93$).

### 2.2. Measures

This study included measures of dominance, prestige, and social

[1] Our use of the term "dominance" in a within-group context should be differentiated from "social dominance orientation," which refers to the way people think about the relative superiority of groups in an intergroup context (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Integrating the two constructs is an important goal for future research.

[2] Our use of the term "prestige" can be differentiated from its usage as an "end goal" of status-striving. That is, in line with the literature on dual strategies theory, we define "prestige" as a strategy through which people attain high social rank, as opposed to a position of high social rank itself.

influence tactics, all described below. The order in which measures were presented was randomized, as was the order of items within each measure.

#### 2.2.1. Dominance and prestige

Dominance and prestige were measured using seventeen items developed by Cheng and colleagues (Cheng et al., 2013). Nine items were averaged to assess prestige (e.g., "I am held in high esteem by those I know"; α = 0.69); eight items were averaged to assess dominance (e.g., "Others know it is better to let me have my way"; α = 0.84). Items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

#### 2.2.2. Social influence tactics

Social influence tactics were measured with items from the Tactics of Manipulation scale (Buss et al., 1987). That scale originally assessed social influence in the context of intimate relationships. We altered the items to be neutral with respect to social context (i.e., aimed at another person in general rather than an opposite-sex intimate relationship partner for example, "I yell at him so he'll do it" was changed to "I yell at them so they'll listen to me"). Previous research has used similar adaptations of this scale (Jonason & Webster, 2012). *Charm* (α = 0.78) was measured with five items including "I compliment them so they'll listen to me." *Silent treatment* (α = 0.88) was measured using four items including "I refuse to do something that they like until they listen to me." *Coercion* (α = 0.90) was measured using five items including "I demand that they listen to me." *Reason* (α = 0.73) was measured using five items including "I explain why I want them to listen to me." *Regression* (α = 0.87) was measured using two items including "I sulk until they listen to me." *Debasement* (α = 0.59) was measured using three items including "I act humble so they'll listen to me." All items corresponding to each tactic were averaged to create a composite score.

We also generated thirty-five new items to measure facets of social influence not captured by the Tactics of Manipulation scale. We piloted an initially longer set of items, and removed several items that did not correlate well with other items. For each item, participants indicated how likely they would be to use the tactic to influence others (1 = Very Unlikely, 5 = Very Likely). We conducted an item-level factor analysis to distill those items into a smaller set of tactics. Factor analyses revealed three factors. All items and factor loadings can be found in supplemental materials. The first factor (eigenvalue = 10.27) corresponded to 12 items related to leveraging a sense of authority to influence others (e.g., "Threaten to take something valuable away from them"), so we referred to that tactic as *authority* (α = 0.94). The second factor (eigenvalue = 4.86) corresponded to 9 items related to relationship formation (e.g., "Be generous to them"), so we referred to that tactic as *relationship building* (α = 0.81). The third factor (eigenvalue = 1.98) corresponded to 6 items related to logical explanation (e.g., "Tell them that what I'm asking them to do is important"), so we referred to that tactic as *explanation* (α = 0.80). Eight items did not load onto any of these three factors, and were not considered for the remainder of analyses.[3]

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Relationships among dominance and prestige

All data and data analytic syntax are in supplemental materials. Consistent with previous research (Cheng et al., 2013), dominance ($M$ = 2.46, $SD$ = 0.85) was unrelated to prestige (M = 3.81, SD = 0.49), $r$ (206) = −0.10, $p$ = .138.

[3] Participants also completed the Achievement Motivation Scale (Cassidy & Lynn, 1989), the Short Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) and the MachIV scale (Christie & Geis, 1970) but those data were not used to test hypotheses of interest in this article.

### 3.2. Predictors of social influence tactics

Means and standard deviations for all tactics are found in Table 1. We used multiple regression to regress each tactic on dominance and prestige, simultaneously (See Table 1). To take into account multiple analyses, we used a Bonferonni alpha correction and considered only $p$-values below 0.006 to be statistically significant. (Although we had no a priori predictions regarding effects of participant gender or age, we provide analyses controlling for those variables in Supplemental Materials.)

#### 3.2.1. Dominance

Only *relationship building* ($p$ = .352) and *reason* ($p$ = .009) were unassociated with dominance. *Charm* ($p$ < .001), *silent treatment* ($p$ < .001), *coercion* ($p$ < .001), *regression* ($p$ < .001), *debasement* ($p$ < .001), *authority* ($p$ < .001), and *explanation* ($p$ < .001) were all positively associated with dominance.

#### 3.2.2. Prestige

Prestige was unassociated with *charm* ($p$ = .514), *reason* ($p$ = .017), *debasement* ($p$ = .041), and explanation ($p$ = .026). It was positively associated with only *relationship building* ($p$ < .001). Prestige was negatively associated with *silent treatment* ($p$ < .001), *coercion* ($p$ < .001), *regression* ($p$ = .001), and *authority* ($p$ < .001).

### 3.3. Exploratory factor analysis

For the purposes of generating a parsimonious model that accounted for links among dominance, prestige, and the various social influence tactics, we sought to distill those tactics into their broad underlying components. We submitted them to an exploratory factor analysis, using principal axis factoring with promax (non-orthogonal) rotation. We observed two factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. The first factor (eigenvalue = 4.80) corresponded to the more coercive tactics (e.g., *coercion* and *punishing*). The second factor (eigenvalue = 1.80) corresponded to the more complaisant tactics (*reason*, *explanation*, and *relationship building*). See Table 2 for factor loadings. We calculated factor scores by averaging all individual items within each respective factor. Coercive ($M$ = 2.12, $SD$ = 0.85) and complaisant ($M$ = 3.92, $SD$ = 0.49) tactics were positively correlated ($r$ = 0.21) and served as outcome variables in the next analysis.

### 3.4. Predicting broad tactic use from dominance and prestige

We used multiple regression to predict the use of coercive (overall $R^2$ = 0.43) and complaisant (overall $R^2$ = 0.10) tactics from dominance and prestige, simultaneously. Prestige was negatively associated with coercive tactics, $\beta$ = −0.21, $t$(204) = −3.94, $p$ < .001, while dominance was positively associated with coercive tactics, $\beta$ = 0.60, $t$(204) = 11.29, $p$ < .001. Prestige was positively associated with complaisant tactics, $\beta$ =

**Table 1**
Standardized regression coefficients for dominance and prestige and overall $R^2$ in predicting nine social influence tactics.

| Tactic | M (SD) | Dominance | Prestige | $R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Charm | 2.66 (0.96) | 0.48** | −0.04 | 0.23** |
| Silent treatment | 2.21 (1.10) | 0.43** | −0.26** | 0.28** |
| Coercion | 1.85 (1.01) | 0.55** | −0.24** | 0.39** |
| Reason | 3.85 (0.75) | 0.18 | 0.17 | 0.05 |
| Regression | 1.93 (1.18) | 0.47** | −0.21* | 0.29** |
| Debasement | 2.66 (0.88) | 0.52** | −0.12 | 0.30** |
| Authority | 1.88 (0.92) | 0.58** | −0.20** | 0.40** |
| Relationship building | 4.22 (0.54) | −0.06 | 0.36** | 0.14** |
| Explanation | 3.53 (0.82) | 0.42** | 0.14 | 0.18** |

* $p$ = .001.
** $p$ < .001.

**Table 2**
Social influence tactic factor loadings.

| | Coercive tactics | Complaisant tactics |
|---|---|---|
| Charm | 0.65 | 0.35 |
| Silent treatment | 0.85 | −0.06 |
| Coercion | 0.93 | −0.17 |
| Reason | 0.02 | 0.82 |
| Regression | 0.86 | −0.06 |
| Debasement | 0.70 | 0.15 |
| Authority | 0.94 | −0.12 |
| Relationship building | −0.30 | 0.63 |
| Explanation | 0.33 | 0.54 |

0.29, $t(204) = 4.39$, $p < .001$. Dominance was also positively associated with complaisant tactics, $\beta = 0.15$, $t(204) = 2.19$, $p = .030$.

## 4. Discussion

Throughout the history of human social groups, acquiring and maintaining high social rank has been inextricably linked to the ability to influence others. In highlighting the role of dominance and prestige, Dual Strategies Theory provides an overarching framework with which to understand the strategies people use to strive for high social rank and, in turn, the social influence tactics people use to navigate social hierarchies. The current study is the first to delineate specific social influence tactics associated with dominance versus prestige.

One of the more crucial findings of the present study is that prestige tends to be positively associated with complaisant, and negatively associated with coercive, tactics. Previous work emphasizes that prestige is based on freely conferred deference from group members, and followers autonomously choose to follow those who are valuable to the group (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). The current results suggest that avoidance of coercive influence tactics may help those who rely on prestige ensure that any influence they wield over others is not forced. Instead, using more complaisant tactics may help prestigious individuals gain influence through popularity and positive relationships (cf. Case et al., 2018). The present study is among the first to identify specific social influence tactics used or avoided by individuals who use prestige to navigate social hierarchies.

Unlike prestige, dominance does not involve freely conferred deference, and instead allows individuals to garner influence by forcing their control onto others (Cheng et al., 2013). The present findings fit with theories that define dominance in terms of coercive social influence. The current research adds to existing work (e.g., Hawley et al., 2002) providing insight into specific antagonistic and coercive social influence tactics, such as punishment and debasement, used by people high in dominance.

One unexpected finding was that dominance was positively associated with complaisant tactics. One interpretation is that dominant individuals are willing to use any means they can to influence others, and complaisant tactics often work better than coercive tactics. If complaisant tactics fail, dominant individuals may resort to more coercive tactics. A second interpretation is that, whereas prestigious individuals are earnest in their use of complaisant tactics, dominant individuals may be less genuine. Such individuals tend to view others as a means to an end, and feigning a desire for positive relationships likely allows them to gain influence over others in situations in which coercive tactics would be ineffective (Christie & Geis, 1970). In dominant chimpanzees, for example, alpha males form social alliances in order to battle competitors. Though dominant chimpanzees are often strong and powerful, others in the group may band together to challenge their authority, and gaining allies is an effective way to maintain social rank (de Waal, 1999; DeVore & Hall, 1965). Alliance-building among other primates may reflect the use of coalitions that appear to be friendly and collaborative, but are actually backed up with threats of aggression. Future work should seek to further understand the apparently complaisant tactics used by dominant individuals.

An important limitation of the present study was a reliance on self-report measures. People are sometimes biased in their self-perceptions (Alicke & Govorun, 2005), and this bias may be pronounced when individuals are asked about socially undesirable traits, such as their tendency to manipulate others (Pedregon et al., 2012). Moreover, not all social influence is "tactical" in the sense of being conscious and intentional. Sometimes people influence others in spontaneous and unintentional ways. Prosocial behaviors, for example, sometimes are performed without any explicit goal of influencing another person, but such behaviors can nevertheless elicit reciprocity. Future work in this area would benefit from examining both intentional and spontaneous forms of social influence. Future research would also benefit from studies that include behavioral measures. Some studies of dominance and prestige have utilized group tasks in which participants work together toward common goals to assess how individual differences in dominance and prestige are related to overall levels of social influence (Cheng et al., 2013). Future research could use such paradigms to examine specific tactics used in group contexts in order to reduce potential biases associated with self-reports.

Future research would also benefit from examining moderating effects of the social context in which influence occurs. Though the present study only asked participants about influencing others in general, it is likely that specific tactics vary based upon the target of influence, as well as the behavior to be influenced. For example, some people (e.g., those high in social dominance orientation) are more receptive than others to being influenced by relatively coercive tactics (Aiello et al., 2013; Tesi et al., 2019). Consistent with such evidence, one might predict that, while dominant individuals apparently use a range of social influence tactics, they may lean toward more coercive tactics when they believe others will be tolerant of such tactics. Relying on punishment, for instance, may have more utility in a military setting than within a group of friends. Indeed, most individual differences interact with situational factors, and it is likely that the relationship between individual differences and the prioritization of particular social influence tactics is similarly sensitive to context.

Future research should also examine the efficacy of social influence tactics used by people high in dominance and prestige. The present study suggests that certain tactics are used more frequently than others, and that those tactics are differentially associated with the two strategies for navigating social hierarchies. Some work suggests that prestigious individuals are able to maintain their influence for longer than dominant individuals are (Redhead et al., 2019) and it is possible that the efficacy of tactics used by those individuals play into their long-term success. Dominance enables influence in short-term contexts (Cheng et al., 2013; Redhead et al., 2019), suggesting that tactics used by dominant individuals may be more effective in the short-term than in the long-term. Chimpanzee hierarchies, marked by both broad dominance and specific coercive attempts to influence conspecifics, can be highly unstable (Sapolsky, 2005), and it is possible that tactics used by dominant individuals may contribute to similar patterns in human social groups (Cheng, 2020). Research aimed at assessing the efficacy of specific tactics is needed to draw firmer conclusions about which ones work better than others, both in the short- and long-term.

In closing, social influence is an essential aspect of human social life, and having high levels of social influence is a central component of what has made high social rank so beneficial throughout human history. The present work is one of the first to use Dual Strategies Theory to evaluate specific social influence tactics associated with dominance and prestige – two overarching strategies people use to navigate social hierarchies. The current findings suggest that dominance and prestige are uniquely related to relatively coercive versus complaisant forms of social influence, respectively. As such, the current work provides an overarching and integrative theoretical framework with which to conceptualize and study social influence.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Alexandra B. Ketterman:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Jon K. Maner:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2021.110814.

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