Dominant Jerks:

People infer dominance from the utterance of challenging and offensive statements

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Abstract

Why do people utter offensive or challenging statements? One reason might be displaying one's dominance: if no one calls out the speaker of a challenging statement, it might be because the audience is afraid to challenge the speaker. In two experiments (N = 635), participants read vignettes in which a speaker uttered either a statement about a mundane topic, or an offensive statement. The statement was either challenging (it clashed with the audience's prior views) or unchallenging (it agreed with the audience's prior views), and the audience either accepted or rejected the statement after it was uttered. Speakers who uttered challenging statements the audience nonetheless accepted were deemed more dominant and more likely to be the boss of the audience members.

In June 2020 across the US (and much of the world), protests against racism and police brutality took place. At one of these rallies, a woman holding a placard with pictures of Black people killed by the police was confronted by a man who, pointing to some of the pictures, repeated “no more felonies.”¹ By implying that these victims somehow deserved to be killed, the man was making a particularly offensive statement. We have likely all faced people who do not directly insult us, but who instead make statements they know we will find outrageous, or even merely challenging (i.e. that directly and knowingly clash with our beliefs).

In this article, we study one reason why people might utter offensive or, more generally, challenging statements: because audience and bystanders might infer from this display that they are dominant. An individual who can challenge their audience without being called out might be deemed to be more dominant or of higher status.

After briefly introducing the literature on dominance and how it can be inferred in humans, we present two experiments testing whether individuals who make challenging or offensive statements that the audience nonetheless accepts are perceived as more dominant.

As in many other species, human groups are structured by status hierarchies (Bernstein, 1981; Drews, 1993). Throughout the animal kingdom, status is typically established through physical conflicts and, when an individual has established its dominance over another, they have preferential access to limited resources such as food or mates. Compared to other animals, humans exhibit more variety in the manner in which status hierarchies are implemented (Charafeddine et al., 2019; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998). First, there is more variation in the importance of status, with some groups enforcing a relatively strict egalitarianism, greatly reducing status-based inequalities in access to resources (Boehm, 2001). Second, humans are more likely to acquire status not only through sheer dominance (e.g. threats of aggression), but

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdcUPfR9QIw>

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also through prestige, when they are recognized as particularly competent, as good leaders, or as wise advice-givers (Cheng et al., 2013; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Maner, 2017). Third, even dominance does not have to come from physical strength, which can be replaced by being in a position of power—from a mafia boss to a manager—to gain dominance over others.

If the most direct way of assessing dominance is a direct physical confrontation, all species have evolved means of assessing dominance that do not require such risky and costly confrontations. In humans, the complex role status and dominance play is reflected in the many, more or less subtle, ways in which they can be inferred by observer, short of a physical confrontation. As individuals develop, physical strength plays an increasingly small role in establishing dominance (Hawley, 1999; Roseth et al., 2007). Instead, individuals turn to more subtle forms of dominance displays. For example, insults are a common way of asserting dominance, particularly in honor cultures (e.g. Cohen et al., 1996; Freeman, 2002). The point of an insult is to challenge someone's status and to assert one's superiority towards them. If the insulted fails to object against the insult, then they implicitly accept their inferior status, such that any audience takes the status difference between the two parties as established.

More subtle cues can also be used to infer dominance: for example, people tend to associate dominance with speaking loudly and quickly in a firm tone, staring at the speaker, and making intrusive gestures such as bending forward (Ridgeway, 1987). Similarly, people can infer the dominance of potential leaders by their facial appearance, voice pitch, political views, and behavior (Petersen & Laustsen, 2020).

We suggest here that one way in which people might infer dominance is by making statements they know, or anticipate, their audience will sharply disagree with, or even find offensive, without trying to blunt the disagreement. Much like insults, the point of making such statements would be to show that one can challenge others without being called out. The lack of a negative response would then be interpreted by the audience, and potentially other

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bystanders, as a cue that the individual who made the challenging statement enjoys a dominant status. However, compared to insults, making challenging statements might be less likely to result in direct retaliation (e.g. Cohen et al., 1996; Freeman, 2002), and might be less frowned upon.

Previous research has shown that the same statement is deemed to be more offensive when it is made by an individual who might be expected to be in a more dominant position (Baron et al., 1991; Cunningham et al., 2009). However, to the best of our knowledge, it has never been shown that, under some conditions, people who make offensive—or, more generally, challenging—statements are deemed more dominant.

For a challenging statement to be interpreted as a cue of dominance, two conditions have to be met. First, the audience to which the statement is addressed must disagree with it: otherwise they do not find it challenging, and thus the statement cannot be used to assert one's dominance. Second, the audience has to accept the statement, even if implicitly: if they call out the speaker, they reject the assertion of dominance. Challenging statements can take many forms; here we focus on two: direct contradiction of the audience's opinion (e.g., "Messi is clearly the best football player ever." / "In fact, Ronaldo is the best football player ever."), and a more extreme form of challenge: offensive (and false) rumors (for example "the Israeli intelligence had warned Jews working at the World Trade Center not to come to work on September 11. Since there were no Jews as victims, this proves that they were well advised, or even that they helped orchestrate the whole thing") (see, Petersen et al., 2020).

In two experiments, we present participants with a series of vignettes in which a speaker utters a statement. Two variables are manipulated: whether the statement is challenging or not (i.e. whether the audience agreed or disagreed with the idea expressed in the statement before it was uttered), and whether the audience then accepts or rejects the statement (by nodding or shaking by shaking their head respectively). Participants are then asked to rate the speaker on

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different traits, of which dominance, and warmth are particularly relevant, and whether they think the speaker is the boss of the audience members. Our main prediction is that participants will be particularly likely to deem the speaker to be dominant, and to be the boss, when he makes a challenging statement which the audience accepts. More precisely:

H₁: Participants rate the speaker as being more dominant when the audience accepts a statement by the speaker that clashes with their stated position (challenging statement), compared to when the audience rejects the speaker's statement.

H₂: Participants rate the speaker as being more dominant when the audience accepts a statement by the speaker that clashes with their stated position (challenging statement), compared to when they accept a statement that did not clash, but agreed with the audience's stated position (unchallenging statement).

H₃: Participants rate the speaker as being more likely to be the boss of the audience members when the audience accepts a statement by the speaker that clashes with their stated position (challenging statement), compared to when the audience rejects the speaker's statement.

H₄: Participants rate the speaker as being more likely to be the boss of the audience members when the audience accepts a statement by the speaker that clashes with their stated position (challenging statement), compared to when they accept a that statement did not clash, but agreed with the audience's stated position (unchallenging statement).

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In addition to these key hypotheses, we predicted that the act of uttering a challenging statement with the audience would make a speaker appear less warm:

H₅: Participants evaluate the speaker less warmly when he disagrees with the audience's position (he utters a challenging statement) compared to when he shares the same position (unchallenging statement).

Finally, we investigated whether a speaker would appear more knowledgeable when the audience accepts a statement by the speaker that clashes with their stated position (challenging statement), compared to when the audience rejects the speaker's statement (RQ₁).

Statistical analyses, sample size, and hypotheses were pre-registered. Data, materials, pre-registrations, and the R scripts used to analyze the data, are available on the Open Science Framework.

Experiment 1

In the first experiment participants were asked to evaluate the personality traits of an individual uttering a statement in front of an audience. We manipulated whether the audience already agreed with the statement or not (challenging or unchallenging statement), and whether the audience reacted by shaking their heads (rejecting the statement) or nodding (accepting the statement).

Participants

Based on a pre-registered power analysis recruited 315 participants (198 women, $M_{Age} = 35.3$, $SD = 12.6$) from the U.K. using Prolific Academic. Participants were paid £0.25.

Design, materials, procedure

We created three topics of discussion (Are Apple phones better than Samsung phones? Is coffee a better hot drink than green tea? Is Messi a better football player than Ronaldo?). For each topic, we created three vignettes in which a speaker addresses an audience. In one vignette, the speaker utters an unchallenging statement (which agrees with the audience's prior opinions), and the audience accepts the speaker's statement. In the other two vignettes, the speaker utters a challenging statement (which clashes with the audience's prior opinions), and the audience either accepts this statement, or rejects it. The positions taken by the speaker and the audience were counterbalanced, leading to a total of 18 vignettes (three topics, three types of vignettes per topic, two orders).

The design was fully between-participants.

Example vignettes are provided below (the square brackets indicate the version of the text in which the point of view taken by the protagonist is counterbalanced):

The statement is challenging yet the audience accepts it.

Four colleagues, Lisa, Sarah, Phil, and Allan are chatting during a coffee break. They start talking about football. Lisa says: "Messi [Ronaldo] is clearly the best football player ever." Phil says, "You're right, he's really the best," and Sarah agrees, adding "there's never been one like him." But Allan says: "in fact, Ronaldo [Messi] is the best football player ever." Lisa, Sarah, and Phil nod along approvingly.

The statement is challenging and the audience rejects it.

Four colleagues, Lisa, Sarah, Phil, and Allan are chatting during a coffee break. They start talking about football. Lisa says: "Messi [Ronaldo] is clearly the best football

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player ever.” Phil says, “You’re right, he’s really the best,” and Sarah agrees, adding “there’s never been one like him.” But Allan says: “in fact, Ronaldo [Messi] is the best football player ever.” Lisa, Sarah, and Phil shake their heads in disagreement.

The statement is unchallenging and the audience accepts it.

Four colleagues, Lisa, Sarah, Phil, and Allan are chatting during a coffee break. They start talking about football. Lisa says: “Messi [Ronaldo] is clearly the best football player ever.” Phil says, “You’re right, he’s really the best,” and Sarah agrees, adding “there’s never been one like him.” and Allan says: “yes, Messi [Ronaldo] is the best football player ever.” Lisa, Sarah, and Phil nod along approvingly.

Participants read one vignette and answered questions about the personality of the speaker (Allan). First, they rated how well each of six words (dominance, leadership, kindness, warmth, cleverness, competence), presented in a randomized order, described him on a seven-point Likert scale (1 [Not at all] to 7 [Extremely well]). We were only interested in the answers to the dominance dimension (composed of the dominance and leadership questions) and the communion dimension (composed of the warmth and kindness questions), but added the competence dimensions to avoid potential task demands. We selected the items in the scale based on previous work on the Big Two (Abele et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2002; Gebauer et al., 2013; Trapnell & Paulhus, 2012), in particular empirical studies distinguishing between competence and assertiveness/dominance (e.g., Abele et al., 2016; Altay & Mercier, 2020).

Second, participants rated how likely the speaker is to be the boss of the audience members on a seven-point Likert scale (1 [Very unlikely], 2 [Unlikely], 3 [Moderately unlikely], 4 [Neither likely nor unlikely], 5 [Moderately likely], 6 [Likely], 7 [Very likely]). Third, participants rated how much they thought the speaker to be more knowledgeable than

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the audience members about the topic (1 [Much less knowledgeable], 2 [Less knowledgeable], 3 [as knowledgeable], 4 [more knowledgeable], 5 [much knowledgeable]). Fourth, participants rated how offensive they found the speaker's statement on a five-point Likert scale (1 [Not offensive at all], 2 [Somewhat offensive], 3 [Offensive], 4 [Very offensive], 5 [Extremely offensive]) (this question is particularly relevant for comparison with Experiment 2).

Finally, we gave participants an attention check (see ESM), which all participants passed, and the participants provided basic demographic information.

Results and discussion

All statistical analyses were conducted in R (v.3.6.2), using R Studio (v.1.1.419). In the analyses below, we conducted Welch's t-tests. We refer to 'statistically significant' as the p-value being lower than an alpha of 0.05. We display the distribution of our main dependent variables split by condition in the top panel of Figure 1. In the ESM we report the results for the individual items composing the communion, dominance, and competence dimension.

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Figure 1. Dominance ratings, and likelihood of the speaker being deemed to the boss across the two experiments are represented as a function of whether the audience initially agreed or disagreed with the statement being shared, and whether they reacted by nodding in sign of agreement or shook their heads in sign of disagreement.

In line with H_1 , participants deemed the speaker more dominant when the audience accepted a challenging statement ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.07$), compared to when the audience rejected a challenging statement ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.07$; $t(206.9) = 3.80$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.53$).

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In line with H₂, participants deemed the speaker more dominant when the audience accepted a challenging statement ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.07$), compared to when the audience accepted an unchallenging statement ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.59$; $t(206.9) = 9.52$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.31$).

In line with H₃, participants deemed the speaker more likely to be the boss of the audience members when the audience accepted a challenging statement ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.15$), compared to when the audience rejected a challenging statement ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.11$; $t(206.8) = 7.32$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.01$).

In line with H₄, participants deemed the speaker more likely to be the boss of the audience members when the audience accepted a challenging statement ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.15$), compared to when the audience accepted an unchallenging statement ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.11$; $t(198.9) = 7.13$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.98$).

In line with H₅, participants deemed the speaker to be less warm when he uttered a challenging ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.07$), compared to an unchallenging statement ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.01$; $t(208.2) = 4.25$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.59$).

Participants didn't deem the speaker more knowledgeable when the audience accepted a challenging statement ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.07$), compared to when the audience rejected a challenging statement ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.01$; $t(206.9) = 0.60$, $p = 0.55$, $d = 0.08$).

All our hypotheses were confirmed, suggesting that participants can use the simple utterance of challenging statement, in conjunction with the reaction of the audience, as a cue to infer dominance.

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 is a replication of Experiment 1 with offensive rumors. That such rumors can be used to infer—and thus potentially to assert—dominance is particularly relevant, since it could help understand their cultural success.

Participants

Based on a pre-registered power analysis recruited 320 participants (215 women, $M_{Age} = 34.95$, $SD = 11.73$) from the U.K. using Prolific Academic. Participants were paid £0.25.

Design, materials, procedure

The design and procedure are identical to Experiment 1, with only the materials being modified. Instead of using challenging statements about mundane topics, we used three offensive rumors found online against either Jewish people, Black people, or Muslim people, as in the following example (complete list available in ESM):

The statement is challenging yet the audience accepts it.

Four colleagues, Lisa, Sarah, Phil, and Allan are chatting during a coffee break. They start talking about conspiracy theories involving Jewish people. Lisa says: “it’s clear that all of these conspiracy theories are false.” Phil says “I don’t believe in these conspiracy theories either” and Sarah agrees, adding “me either,” but Allan says: “actually, the Israeli intelligence had warned Jews working at the World Trade Center not to come to work on September 11. Since there were no Jews as victims, this proves that they were well advised, or even that they helped orchestrate the whole thing.” Lisa, Sarah, and Phil nod along approvingly.

The statement is challenging and the audience rejects it.

Four colleagues, Lisa, Sarah, Phil, and Allan are chatting during a coffee break. They start talking about conspiracy theories involving Jewish people. Lisa says: “it’s clear that all of these conspiracy theories are false.” Phil says “I don’t believe in these

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conspiracy theories either” and Sarah agrees, adding “me either,” but Allan says: “actually, the Israeli intelligence had warned Jews working at the World Trade Center not to come to work on September 11. Since there were no Jews as victims, this proves that they were well advised, or even that they helped orchestrate the whole thing.” Lisa, Sarah, and Phil shake their heads in disagreement.

The statement is unchallenging and the audience accepts it.

Four colleagues, Lisa, Sarah, Phil, and Allan are chatting during a coffee break. They start talking about conspiracy theories involving Jewish people. Lisa says: “it’s clear that all of these conspiracy theories are true.” Phil says “I also think many of these conspiracy theories are true,” Sarah agrees, adding “me too,” and Allan says: “for example, the Israeli intelligence had warned Jews working at the World Trade Center not to come to work on September 11. Since there were no Jews as victims, this proves that they were well advised, or even that they helped orchestrate the whole thing.” Lisa, Sarah, and Phil nod along approvingly.

Before the attention check and the demographics, participants were debriefed regarding the inaccuracy of the rumors and the purpose of the experiment.

Results and discussion

First, participants deemed the offensive rumors to be offensive ($Median = 3$ $M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.42$). By comparisons, participants deemed the statements of the first experiment to be not offensive at all ($Median = 1$, $M = 1.11$, $SD = 0.38$).

We display the distribution of our main dependent variables split by condition in the bottom panel of Figure 1. In line with H_1 , participants deemed the speaker more dominant when

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the audience accepted a challenging statement ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.38$), compared to when the audience rejected a challenging statement ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 1.56$; $t(210) = 2.61$, $p = 0.009$, $d = 0.36$).

In line with H_2 , participants deemed the speaker more dominant when the audience accepted a challenging statement ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.38$), compared to when the audience accepted an unchallenging statement ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.47$; $t(208.8) = 3.80$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.52$).

Contrarily with H_3 , participants didn't deem the speaker significantly more likely to be the boss of the audience members when the audience accepted a challenging statement ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.52$), compared to when the audience rejected a challenging statement ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.56$; $t(210) = 0.73$, $p = .47$, $d = 0.1$).

In line with H_4 , participants deemed the speaker more likely to be the boss of the audience members when the audience accepted a challenging statement ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.52$), compared to when the audience accepted an unchallenging statement ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.31$; $t(209) = 3.70$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.51$).

Contrarily with H_5 , participants didn't deem the speaker to be significantly less warm when he uttered a challenging ($M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.22$), compared to an unchallenging statement ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.16$; $t(207.7) = 0.26$, $p = 0.8$, $d = 0.04$). This might be explained by the fact that, in every condition, the speaker shared an offensive rumor.

Participants didn't deem the speaker more knowledgeable when the audience accepted a challenging statement ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.53$), compared to when the audience rejected a challenging statement ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 0.51$; $t(208.7) = 0.58$, $p = .56$, $d = 0.08$).

Overall, Experiment 2 replicated the results of Experiment 1, suggesting that participants can use the uttering of offensive rumors as a sign of dominance, in particular when the rumors are offensive to the speaker's audience, and when the audience accepts the rumors. The only exception to this pattern is that participants deemed the speaker more likely to be the

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boss whenever he uttered an offensive rumor that challenged the audience (i.e. a rumor with which the audience initially disagreed), even if the audience rejected it. Given the offensiveness of the rumor, it is possible that the way in which the audience rejected it (i.e. by shaking their heads) was deemed suspiciously weak, suggesting that the audience had reasons to show restraint in their rejection of the speaker.

Conclusion

Why do people sometimes say things they know will challenge or even offend their audience? Here, we have suggested that bystanders (and potentially audience members) might use the utterance of such challenging statements to infer the dominance of the speaker. In two experiments, we found that speakers who uttered challenging statements that nonetheless were accepted by the audience, compared to speaker who uttered unchallenging statements, or whose challenging statements were rejected by the audience, were deemed more dominant and more likely to be the boss of the audience members. In Experiment 1, the challenging statements bore on mundane disagreements (e.g. who's the best football player), while Experiment 2 used offensive rumors. Note that in both experiments, speakers were deemed to be more dominant when they uttered a challenging rather than an unchallenging statement, even if that statement was rejected by the audience. This might reflect the meekness of the rejection (shaking one's head), which might not have been deemed commensurate to the challenge raised by the statement. A more pronounced rejection should have led to lower dominance ratings.

If bystanders sometimes infer dominance from the uttering of challenging statements, this offers a way for people to assert their dominance. Our results thus suggest that people who are keen on displaying their dominance might choose to utter challenging or even offensive statements. Some evidence suggests that this is the case. People preoccupied with achieving higher status appear to be responsible for most of online political hostility (Bor & Petersen,

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2019). Indeed, people who seek status specifically via dominance (but not those pursuing prestige) are particularly likely to engage in offensive forms of political discontent; for example, they share hostile rumors and take part in political fights (Petersen, Osmundsen, & Bor, 2020).

Even if the present results might help understand why people who want to assert their dominance utter challenging or offensive statements, it is unclear whether this strategy is in fact effective, since both the prior opinion of the audience, and the audience's reaction are harder to assess online. For example, someone who sees an inflammatory post on Facebook only has access to what the people who have reacted to the post think: if no one interacts with an inflammatory post, is it because they are cowed by the dominance of the poster, or because they can't bother engaging? Future research should thus investigate whether the strategy of uttering challenging or offensive statements to express one's dominance can be effective in a variety of online settings.

Another important result of our experiments is that even if people who utter challenging statements can be deemed more dominant, they are consistently rated as being less warm. There is thus a clear tradeoff, which helps explain why even people who might want to assert their status generally refrain from uttering statements that clearly clash with their audience's views (see, e.g., (Gerber et al., 2012).

A limitation of our experiments is that they were conducted with participants from Anglo-Saxon countries, with a convenience sample. The latter point is likely unproblematic, as such experimental manipulations tend to replicate between convenience samples and representative samples (see, Coppock et al., 2018). The former point is more important, since expressions of dominance are known to vary across cultures (see, e.g., the importance of insults in cultures of honor, Cohen et al., 1996; Freeman, 2002). Indeed, even within a given culture, there will be substantial contextual variation in the appropriateness of different dominance

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displays. As a result, our results only suggest that in some cultural contexts the uttering of challenging statements is used to infer dominance.

If our account is correct—even if only in some cultural settings—and people sometimes share challenging or offensive statements because others infer they are dominant, the strategies for fighting dominant jerks should be adapted. Highlighting the offensive nature of these statements isn't a promising strategy because their offensiveness is precisely the reason why they have been shared in the first place. By contrast, mocking the statements might be more promising, as mockery constitutes a direct attack on the speaker's dominance (e.g. Appiah, 2011).

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