

# Dominant people can be surprisingly social

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In contrast to the lay stereotype, dominant people prove to be avid social learners, just like dominant individuals in the animal kingdom.

Neuroscientists from Radboud University show this with a complex decision task published in *Current Biology* on November 20. They offer a more subtle perspective on the lay view wherein dominant individuals ignore others' views and advice.

Dominant individuals typically get what they want, but use various strategies to achieve this goal. Socially dominant people make allies and try to convince others with good arguments, whereas aggressive dominant people use a more dictatory 'my way or the highway' strategy. The current paper - the first study of dominance and [social learning](#) in humans - shows that socially dominant people value their independence but, paradoxically, show an enhanced reliance on social learning in a complex decision task. In contrast, aggressively dominant individuals do not rely on social learning.

## Learning from the animal kingdom

First author Jennifer Cook, researcher at Radboud University's Donders Institute and London City University, explains: 'In many species of animals the leader of the pack is typically really good at social learning. Completely the opposite of what we tend to believe with people! In Harris' Sparrows for instance, dominant birds follow other birds that make smart decisions. We wanted to see whether this is true, not just in birds, but also in humans.'

## Rating dominance

Participants filled in a questionnaire about their style of dominance. High scores on questions like 'I generally put people into contact with each other' indicated social dominance and high scores on questions as 'I

like it when other persons serve me' indicated aggressive dominance. A decision making task on the computer indicated whether participants primarily learned from their own [personal experience](#), or from the experiences of others.

## The positive side

'Our study shows that whereas aggressively dominant individuals prefer to rely on their personal experience, well-liked socially dominant individuals are biased towards using information that comes from other people', Cook explains. 'It shows the positive side of [social dominance](#).' And if you think about it, often the best leaders are the ones that listen to input from others but in some cases are also independent enough to make their own decisions. 'In my opinion, the more subtle perspective we offer could have important implications for decision-making in both the boardroom and the classroom. For example if you are trying to help a leader to learn something new it may be important to consider whether they are socially or aggressively dominant, and whether they will best learn via a social or individual route.'

**More information:** Cook J, den Ouden H.E.M, Heyes C & Cools R. "The social dominance paradox." *Current Biology* DOI: [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2014.10.014](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2014.10.014)

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