

Letter

Why Social Status Is Essential (But Sometimes Insufficient) for Leadership

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One recurrent feature of social species is the differential degree of deference and advantage conferred on some individuals and denied to others. In recent decades, scholars have made substantial inroads into understanding the psychological foundations of these social asymmetries. Much of this work converges on the notion that social stratification in humans is the result of two distinct forms of status: prestige, or freely conferred deference resulting from the capacity to benefit others and inspire respect; and dominance, or coercive compliance resulting from the capacity to inflict costs and impose fear [1].

In an account consistent with existing work on social hierarchies [1,2], van Vugt and Smith [3] offer an in-depth examination of how prestige and dominance explain leader–follower asymmetries. One conclusion they draw is that ‘not all high-status individuals are therefore leaders, but equally, not all leaders are necessarily high-status individuals’ (p. 954). Although we agree that status and leadership are unlikely to be perfectly correlated, we believe that caution is warranted in consequently inferring a disconnect between status and leadership. In fact, we argue that wielding either dominance or prestige is a necessary, albeit sometimes insufficient, condition for effective leadership, because these two forms of status provide the foundation of a leader’s ability to influence others.

Two insights illustrate why status is crucial for leadership in our species. First, status – both the prestige and the dominance variety – is a principal means by which leaders

emerge. In small, ‘minimal’ laboratory task groups, leaders emerge informally through either respect for their expertise in task-specific knowledge (prestige-based status) or fear and compulsion from a willingness to intimidate and aggress (dominance-based status) [2]. These patterns are also observed in naturalistic groups and communities in the field [4,5], cross-culturally across small-scale societies [1,6], and when leadership becomes formalized, institutional, and collectively acknowledged [7].

Thus, status shapes who emerges as leaders and does not merely correspond with how leadership is exercised, as van Vugt and Smith suggest. Becoming a leader may reciprocally increase status, such as by amplifying one’s coercive threat potential via a newly acquired network of allies. More broadly, persuasion and force are best considered two core mechanisms that generate social asymmetries, including leader–follower asymmetries [1]. Accordingly, the source of climate change activist Greta Thunberg’s leadership is her prestige, resulting from her demonstrated efficacy in contributing to collective action; the deference and attention she receives demonstrate that she is not, as van Vugt and Smith suggest, low status.

Status appears to be important for leadership in many other animal societies as well. Among some primates, leadership is exclusively achieved by those at the very top of the dominance hierarchy, who possess superior fighting ability, size, and strength. However, there is also suggestive evidence for prestige-like processes that promote leadership in several other complex species that demonstrate primitive forms of culture [8]. In orca whales, for example, older females (grandmothers) act as repositories for ecological knowledge and, like prestigious individuals in human societies, transmit valuable know-how to their children and grandchildren, and provide critical leadership over the pod when foraging for

salmon [9]. Thus, although human societies may be unique in the regularity, importance, and scope at which prestige-based status contributes to leadership, the two forms of status may be crucial to leader emergence across many species. In their discussion of leadership in matriarchal animal societies (e.g., orcas, elephants), van Vugt and Smith appear to under-recognize the prestige status of these females and how their prestige is a key source of leadership.

Second, leadership style often changes facultatively within an individual depending on current status and context. For example, business managers are often disinclined towards dominance but, after suffering a loss of prestige, spontaneously resort to force, and seek to regain influence by initiating conflict and waging threats and insults [10]. This finding highlights the necessity of deploying some degree of one form of status or the other to effectively lead and retain the differential influence on which a leader’s privileged position rests.

Although we view high status as essential for seeking and exercising leadership, at times high-status individuals may nonetheless fail to acquire leadership, or effectively lead. van Vugt and Smith’s analysis of this puzzle rightly focuses on the under-representation of prestigious women in leadership positions, but overlooks other relevant interindividual differences and cultural factors. For example, leadership acquisition depends in part on motivation and political will and ambition [11], expressed in a willingness to out-compete other high-status individuals with leadership aspirations. In some traditional societies, ‘Big Men’ with substantial prestige compete with other prestigious Big Men for leadership through generosity (e.g., throwing feasts, giving away wealth), contributing to collective action, and building alliances, which further augment their influence to attract more followers [12].

Another factor that can moderate the impact of status on leadership is culture,

particularly cultural norms that exalt social and political equality, which can suppress the emergence of dominant leaders. Among the most egalitarian hunter-gatherers, coercive dominance is uncommon, owing to an exceptionally strong cultural emphasis on individual autonomy, a sharing ethos, and leveling efforts to limit the power of would-be aggrandizers [13]. Similarly, modern workplaces with effective antibullying sanctions may curtail the ascension of dominant employees. Finally, institutions and organizations may express variable, idiosyncratic criteria for advancement to leadership (e.g., in mobs and street gangs, a fearsome reputation may be a particularly effective means to rise through the ranks). Across these contexts, both dominance and prestige may each become more weakly associated with leadership.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that individuals lacking prestige to attract followers or coercive dominance to compel compliance are unlikely to ascend to leadership, and leaders without either

source of influence will tend to fail. Possessing one or the other form of status is therefore likely to be a necessary but insufficient condition for leadership. Further work is needed to examine the constellation of factors and mechanisms that multiply determine success in competition for leadership, including why high-status individuals at times fail to be promoted to top leadership.

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