

# "What a jerk!" Uncontested provocative statements can signal dominance

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Credit: Sebastian Herrmann on Unsplash

When people publicly agree with a statement that they privately disagree with, we infer that the speaker is dominant and likely to be in a superior hierarchical position, concludes a new study published in the scientific

journal *Social Psychological Bulletin*.

Audience reaction is not all that matters. The mere fact of uttering a blunt statement that challenges the audience signals something about the speaker's personality. Speakers uttering blunt statements were perceived to be more dominant than speakers whose statements agreed with the audience, even if the audience mildly reacted to the blunt statement.

To reach these [conclusions](#), a French-Danish research team, led by Emma de Araujo (Paris Sciences et Lettres University, CNRS, France) and Sacha Altay (Institut Jean Nicod, CNRS, France), conducted two experiments involving a total of 635 people in the UK. The authors decided to study this topic to make sense of a common observation: "Some people make provocative statements, knowing that this will anger or hurt others. Why would they do such things?"

In both experiments, the participants were asked to read about different situations where a [fictional character](#) called Allan was talking with his colleagues. Then, Allan made a statement that either contradicted or conformed with his audience's opinions. In the different scenarios, the conversation concludes with his colleagues either nodding in agreement or rejecting Allan's assertion. For each case, the participants were asked to assess Allan's characteristics, including [dominance](#), leadership, kindness, warmth, cleverness and competence.

The first experiment used mundane statements, for example, whether Ronaldo or Messi was the better footballer. For the second, the researchers chose opinions that were clearly offensive toward a specific ethnicity. In both experiments, the results were similar: we infer that someone is dominant when the [audience](#) accepts a challenging statement.

However, signaling dominance through blunt statements is not without costs. Even if Allan came across as dominant and likely to be in a

superior hierarchical position, whenever he opposed the others' views he was also seen as a colder person, a trait that is often considered to be the most harmful when it comes to managing one's reputation.

"If bystanders infer dominance from hearing challenging statements, this offers a way for people to assert their dominance. Our findings open up the possibility that people who are keen to display their dominance might choose to utter challenging or even offensive statements," commented the researchers.

"Indeed, people who seek status specifically via dominance (but not those pursuing prestige) are particularly likely to engage in offensive forms of political expression."

**More information:** Emma De Araujo et al, Dominant jerks: People infer dominance from the utterance of challenging and offensive statements, *Social Psychological Bulletin* (2022). [DOI: 10.32872/spb.6999](https://doi.org/10.32872/spb.6999)

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