



Group Dominance: Perceptions of Overt and Subtle Body Language

Danielle Cartier, Julia Butler & Nikki Boudrieau
Stonehill College



ABSTRACT

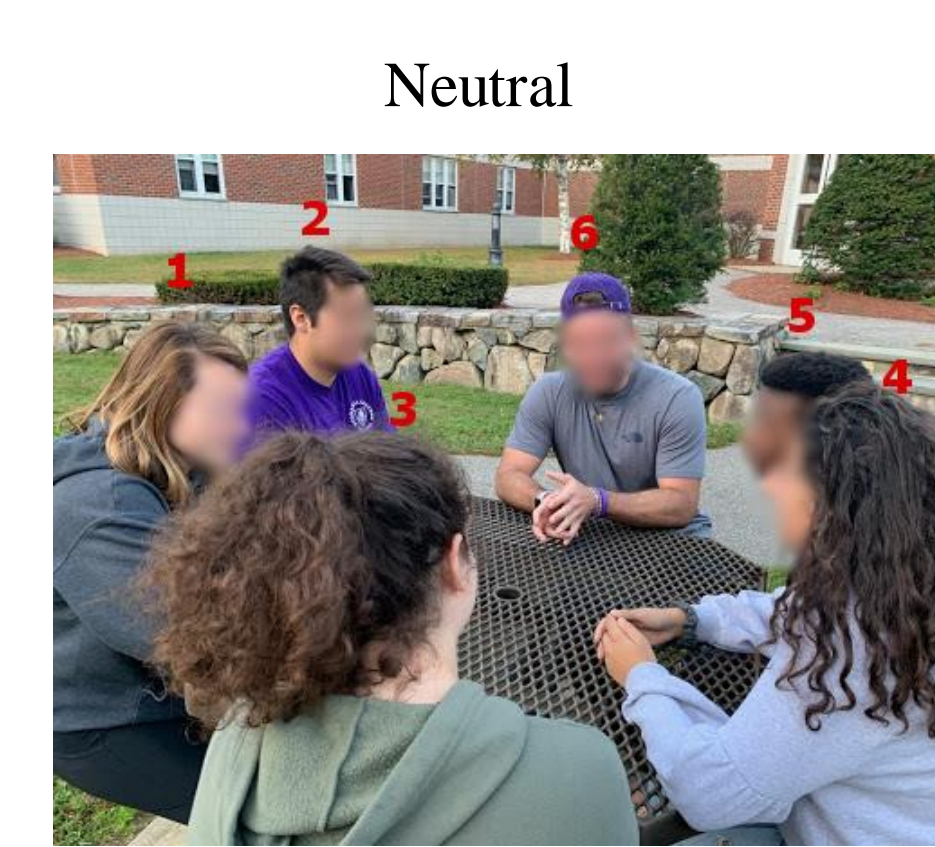
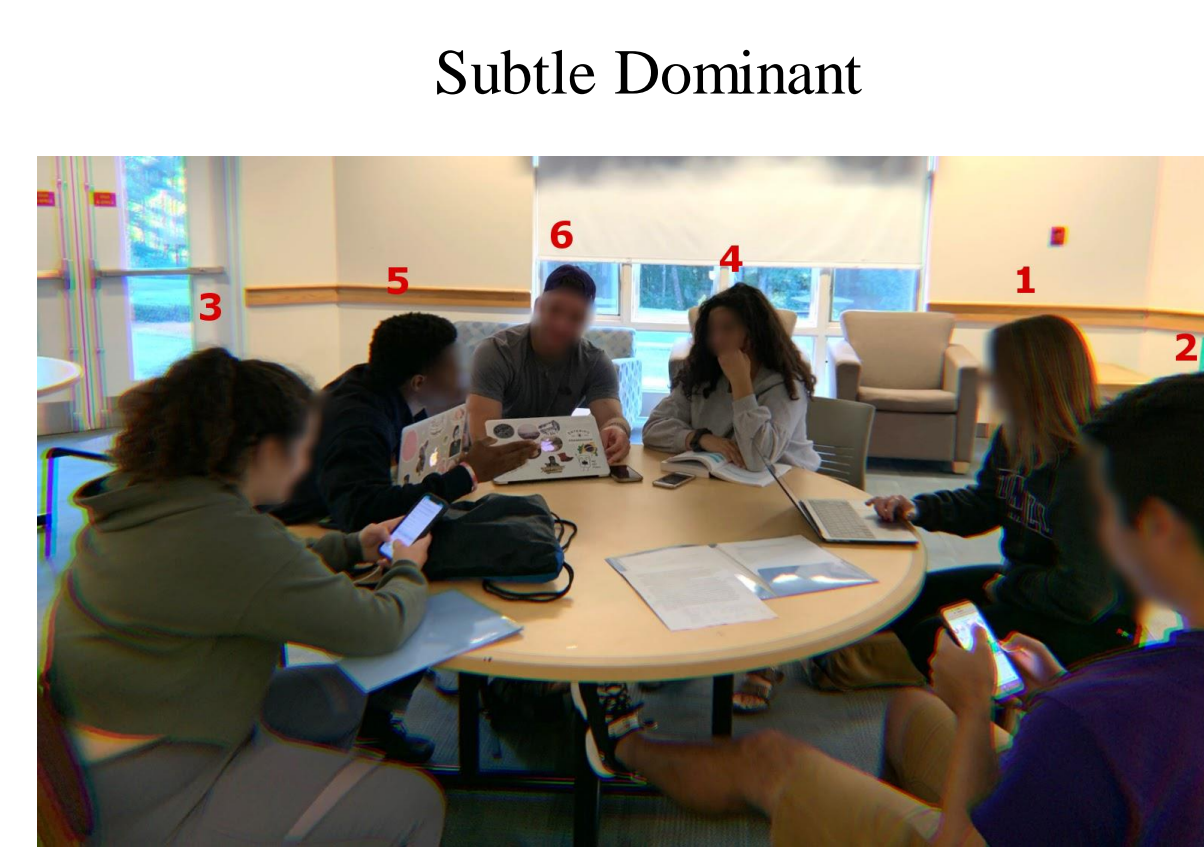
This study looked at whether participants were able to identify dominance in both overt and subtle dominant body language. Participants ($N = 23$) were given a packet containing pictures of groups of people and asked if there was a dominant individual in each picture. The results showed that the only significant difference in the number of correct answers was between overt dominance compared to subtle and neutral dominance, $F(2,21) = 43.38, p < 0.001$.

INTRODUCTION

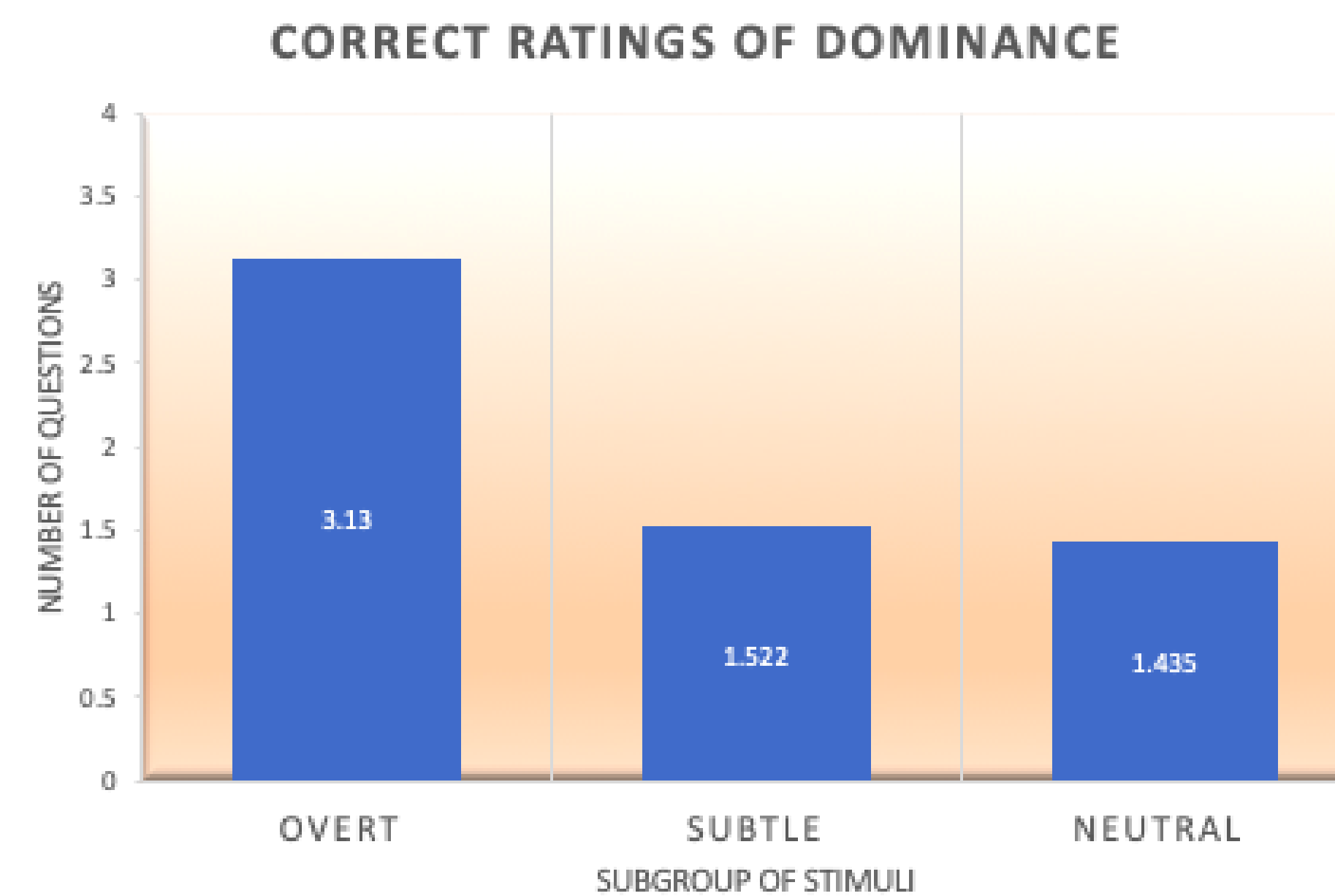
Research on dominance and body posture has shown that expansive postures are often construed more as dominant (Huang et al. 2001). However, the established research has relied on nonverbal displays of dominance that are overt and obvious, which we suggest might make it clear to the participant who the labelled “dominant” person is. While there are times where individuals are claiming dominance by taking up a lot of physical space, such as standing above a group of people, spreading one’s arms and legs widely, or having one’s hands on their hips, there is also often dominance cues displayed much more subtly in real life situations. Previous studies have also examined relationships between individuals or pairs of people, but not group dynamics.

METHODS

- 23 Students were recruited from a small liberal arts college in the Northeastern US.
- Participants ($N = 23$) were given a packet containing pictures of groups of people and asked if there was a dominant individual in each picture, in each of the three categories (overt dominance, subtle dominance, and neutral)
- Additionally, we asked participants to rate the apparent friendliness of the group, and to identify which individual seemed most approachable



RESULTS



- We conducted a repeated measures ANOVA with dominant, subtle or neutral pictures and participants’ number of correct answers out of 4.
- There was a statistically significant difference between number of answers correct for the overt dominant pictures ($M = 3.13, SE = 0.62$), compared to subtle dominant ($M = 1.52, SE = 1.08$) and neutral pictures ($M = 1.43, SE = 0.94$) $F(2,21) = 43.38, p < 0.001$. There was no difference between subtle and neutral postures.
- In exploratory analysis we also examined if perceptions of friendliness rated from 1 to 10 correlated with perceptions of dominance however there was no statistical significance
- between perceptions of dominance and ratings of friendliness in either overt ($M = 6.5, SD = 1.65$), subtle ($M = 6.17, SD = 1.83$) or neutral postures ($M = 6.25, SD = 1.49$), $F(2,21) = 1.03, p = 0.373$.

DISCUSSION



- We hypothesized that participants would be able to identify dominance in a social group from both overtly dominant and subtly dominant body postures.
- Our hypothesis was partially correct, but interestingly, participants were able to identify the dominant figure in the overt category but were largely unable to correctly identify dominant individuals in the subtle category.
- A possible reason why there was no significance between the subtle and neutral postures is that those postures had less body expansiveness.
- The subtle and neutral poses could have been mistaken for being submissive in their more constricted postures (Tiedens & Fragale, 2003).

REFERENCES

Holland, E., Wolf, E. B., Looser, C., & Cuddy, A. (2017). Visual attention to powerful postures: People avert their gaze from nonverbal dominance displays. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 68, 60–67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2016.05.001>