

From leadership to influencers: Why people choose to follow others

New ASU research suggests status inequality may be built deep into human nature

By Nicole Pomerantz, ASU News
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For a long time, most scientists believed that early human hunter-gatherer societies were mostly equal, with little hierarchy or leadership, and that strong inequalities only emerged later with farming and complex societies.

However, [new research](#) out of Arizona State University is challenging this.

Archaeological finds, ethnographic studies and now psychological research suggest that inequality in influence — who people listen to, copy and follow — may have been part of human societies deep into our evolutionary past.

“At some point in our past, humans became reliant on culture,” said [Thomas Morgan](#), an evolutionary anthropologist at ASU. “We don’t solve problems on our own; we have to work as a team and learn from each other. In this context, people who are really skilled, intelligent or charismatic are valuable. It’s like a talent marketplace, and if you have a skill, you can leverage that into status.”

Morgan is a research scientist at the Institute of Human Origins and associate professor at the School of Human Evolution and Social Change at ASU.

These prestige hierarchies are very different from the dominance hierarchies seen in many animal groups, like nonhuman primates. Instead of becoming a leader by aggression, strength or fighting ability, with prestige, leaders rise to the top because others feel they are skilled, knowledgeable and successful — they want them to lead.

“The collective nature of human social life changed how our societies are organized,” Morgan said. “Our ancestors were no longer just individuals in competition with their group mates for resources or mates; instead, they also began organizing themselves in competition with other groups. But the challenge is to find effective leaders, and because this is hard, people keep an eye on who others defer to and have a tendency to just follow suit. So when people see others copying or listening to someone, they are more likely to do the same.”

“Over time, this creates a snowball effect,” added [Robin Watson](#), a lecturer at the University of Lincoln and a visiting researcher at ASU. “The more people follow one individual, the more influential that person becomes. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing. If those with influence have useful information, then prestige provides us with an accessible shortcut to help us decide who to learn from.”

How does inequality form?

To test their theories, researchers from ASU and the United Kingdom created computer models, conducted laboratory-style experiments and ran evolutionary simulations.

For one part, the scientists placed 800 volunteers in small groups and asked them to analyze groups of colored dots. The volunteers were then asked which color appeared most often.

After making their own guess, participants were required to copy someone else’s answer. Participants could see two things about the others in their group: how often each person had been right in the past and how often other people had already copied each individual.

The results were clear. People did not copy randomly. They gravitated toward those who were already popular, sometimes even more than toward those who were objectively accurate.

“As you might expect, people cared about how accurate their group mates were, and they were more likely to learn from skillful people,” Morgan said. “But they also cared about how many times their group members were copied by others. This created the snowball effect, and very quickly, a small number of people ended up leading their groups.”

In many groups, just one or two people ended up shaping most decisions. This kind of inequality appeared fast, within minutes. The level of imbalance was similar to income inequality seen in many modern societies.

The evolution of prestige

From an evolutionary point of view, this tendency makes sense.

Paying attention to skilled or successful people usually helps us learn faster and make better decisions. Over thousands of generations, humans who followed good role models likely survived and thrived. But figuring out who will be a good leader is a tough problem, and humans don’t solve problems on our own — we do it as a group. So we monitor not just how good people are, but who others are following, too.

The study’s evolutionary simulations show that this instinct to follow prestige would have been favored by natural selection, backing up the behavior of the experimental participants and suggesting such choices are a common feature of human psychology today.

These findings help explain patterns we still see everywhere: in workplaces, politics, schoolyards and social media.

Understanding this tendency doesn't mean hierarchy is inevitable or always good. But it does suggest that inequality in influence isn't just a feature of modern societies — it may be part of how human groups have always worked.

Other authors for this work included [Hillary Lenfesty](#), an assistant research professor at the Institute for Human Origins and School of Human Evolution and Social Change, and [Charlotte Brand](#), a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Exeter.

The article, "[Human Prestige Psychology Can Promote Adaptive Inequality in Social Influence](#)," was published in Nature Communications.

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Main image



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