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2 **Competitive growth in a cooperative mammal**

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21 In many animal societies where hierarchies govern access to reproduction, the social rank of
22 individuals is related to their age and weight¹⁻⁵ and slow-growing animals may lose their place
23 in breeding queues to younger ‘challengers’ who grow faster than they do^{5,6}. The threat of
24 being displaced may be expected to favour the evolution of competitive growth strategies,
25 where individuals increase their own rate of growth in response to increases in the growth of
26 potential rivals. While growth rates have been shown to vary in relation to changes in the
27 social environment in several vertebrates including social fish^{2,3,7} and mammals⁸, it is not yet
28 known whether individuals increase their growth rates in response to increases in the growth
29 of particular reproductive rivals. Here we show that, in wild Kalahari meerkats (*Suricata*
30 *suricata*), subordinates of both sexes respond to experimentally induced increases in the
31 growth of same-sex rivals by raising their own growth rate and food intake. In addition, when
32 individuals acquire dominant status, they show a secondary period of accelerated growth
33 whose magnitude increases if the difference between their own weight and that of the heaviest
34 subordinate of the same sex in their group is small. Our results show that individuals adjust
35 their growth to the size of their closest competitor and raise the possibility that similar plastic
36 responses to the risk of competition may occur in other social mammals, including domestic
37 animals and primates.

38

39 Recent studies have revealed the extent to which aspects of the social environment can affect
40 growth in several vertebrates. In some social fish, the risk of conflict with dominant
41 individuals reduces the growth rates of subordinates^{2,3,7} while, in some mammals, prenatal
42 growth increases in response to physiological stress levels in pregnant mothers in high-density
43 environments⁸. However, studies have not yet investigated whether adolescents or adults can
44 adjust their growth rates in relation to changes in the size of specific rivals who may displace
45 them in reproductive queues. In many cooperatively breeding mammals, subordinates of both

46 sexes queue for reproductive opportunities in breeding groups, sometimes for several years^{5,9}.
47 Rank in these queues is usually determined by relative age and weight, and previous research
48 has produced some evidence of strategic adjustments in growth. In mole-rats and meerkats,
49 adult females that acquire the dominant breeding position commonly show a period of
50 secondary growth¹⁰⁻¹² which may allow them to increase their fertility or consolidate their
51 status^{5,13}. Here, we describe experiments that investigate whether subordinate meerkats
52 queuing for breeding opportunities also engage in competitive growth.

53

54 Meerkats live in groups of 3–50 individuals where 90% of reproduction is monopolised by a
55 single dominant pair⁵. Subordinates of both sexes contribute to costly cooperative activities,
56 including pup-feeding, babysitting and raised-guarding¹⁴. Within groups, subordinates of the
57 same sex are ranked in a hierarchy based on age and weight¹⁵. If the breeding female dies, the
58 oldest and heaviest subordinate typically replaces her, and subordinate females occasionally
59 displace breeders⁵. Unlike females, most males leave their natal groups voluntarily when they
60 are 2–4 years old and attempt to displace males in other groups. If they are successful, the
61 oldest and heaviest male usually assumes the breeding position^{5,16}. Data presented here are
62 derived from a twenty-year study of wild meerkats that has encompassed more than sixty
63 groups in which all individuals were recognisable. Most individuals were trained to climb
64 onto electronic balances and were weighed three times a day (dawn; after three hours of
65 foraging; and dusk) on approximately ten days a month throughout their lives⁵. Changes in the
66 weight of individuals between the beginning and end of morning foraging sessions provide a
67 measure of their food intake.

68

69 Using 14 groups of habituated meerkats, we manipulated the growth of subordinates of both
70 sexes by provisioning particular individuals and measuring effects on the growth and food
71 intake of individuals of the same sex immediately above them in the age-related hierarchy.
72 We identified pairs of same-sex littermates belonging to two distinct age classes: juveniles
73 (aged 4–7 months), who had recently reached nutritional independence (n=12 female and 19
74 male litters from 12 groups), and young adults (aged 12–24 months), who had reached sexual
75 maturity and were able to compete for any breeding vacancies that occurred⁵ (n=8 female and
76 9 male litters from 14 groups). In each pair, we fed the lighter individual, later referred to as
77 the ‘challenger’, with half a hard-boiled egg twice per day for three months. We subsequently
78 compared the growth of unfed littermates, referred to as ‘challenged’ individuals, with those
79 of unfed control individuals of the same age from other litters over the same period (Extended
80 Data Figure 1).

81

82 Challenged individuals of both age classes responded to increases in the growth of fed
83 challengers by increasing their average weight (both in absolute terms and relative to controls)
84 over the course of the experiment. Growth from the start to the mid-point of the experiment
85 was greater in challenged than in control individuals (Figure 1a-b; juveniles: two sample
86 Welch t-test, n=32 challenged and 72 control individuals, $t=4.17$, $P<10^{-4}$; adults: n=18
87 challenged and 18 age- and sex-matched control individuals, paired t-test, $t=2.10$, $df=17$,
88 $P=0.050$), generating a difference in the average weight of challenged and control individuals
89 halfway through the experiment (juveniles: n=32 challenged and 83 control individuals,
90 $504.3\pm 68.2\text{g}$ vs. $438.5\pm 73.2\text{g}$, two-sample Welch t-test, $t=4.54$, $P<10^{-4}$, adults: pairwise
91 weight difference= $40.7\pm 51.06\text{g}$, paired t-test, $t=3.38$, $df=17$, $P=0.003$). Differences in growth
92 were, however, no longer detectable in the second half of the experiment (Juveniles: n=27
93 challenged and 74 control individuals, two-sample Welch t-test, $t=0.22$, $P=0.825$; adults:

94 paired t-test, $t=-24.23$, $df=17$, $P=0.059$), suggesting that challenged individuals may not be
95 capable of sustaining accelerated growth over extended periods. In both age classes, the
96 growth of challenged individuals over the first half of the experiment was positively
97 correlated with the growth of their fed challenger (Extended Data Figure 2, Extended Data
98 Table 1), suggesting that challenged individuals adjusted their growth response to the growth
99 of their rival. Increases in the growth of challenged individuals were associated with increases
100 in food intake: food intake was greater for challenged than for control individuals in the first
101 half of the experiment (Figure 1c-d, juveniles: $n=32$ challenged and 86 control individuals,
102 two-sample Welch t-test, $t=2.17$, $P=0.033$, adults: paired t-test: $t=2.80$, $df=17$, $P=0.013$), but
103 not in the second half (Juveniles: $n=29$ challenged and 83 control individuals, two-sample
104 Welch t-test, $t=1.19$, $P=0.240$; adults: paired t-test: $t=-0.16$, $df=17$, $P=0.876$).

105

106 Social mechanisms other than cooperative growth could conceivably contribute to increases in
107 the growth of challenged animals, but we were unable to find any evidence that this was the
108 case. It is unlikely that potential increases in the contributions of fed challengers to
109 cooperative activities in the first half of experiment reduced the contributions of challenged
110 animals and so increased their weight gain. First, juveniles contribute little to cooperative
111 activities, so accelerated growth in challenged juveniles cannot be mediated by changes in
112 cooperative behaviour. Second, challenged adults maintained their investment in raised-
113 guarding and pup-feeding in the same period relative to control animals (Wilcoxon signed-
114 rank paired-test, raised-guarding: $V=52$, $df=17$, $P=0.156$, pup-feeding: $V=30$, $df=17$,
115 $P=0.095$). Finally, adult fed challengers increased their contributions to raised guarding but
116 not to pup-feeding (Wilcoxon signed-rank paired-test: raised-guarding: $V=143$, $df=17$,
117 $P=0.013$, pup-feeding: $V=67$, $df=17$, $P=0.719$).

118

119 Additional analyses suggest that adults that acquire dominant positions may also adjust their
120 growth rates in a strategic fashion. In both sexes, the lifetime breeding success of dominant
121 meerkats depends on the length of time they hold the dominant position⁵ which, in females,
122 increases with the difference between their own weight and the weight of the heaviest
123 subordinate of the same sex⁵. Since subordinates engage in competitive growth, we examined
124 whether individuals that have recently acquired the dominant position adjust the magnitude of
125 their subsequent increase in weight to the relative weight of their closest rival. We first
126 analysed whether newly dominant males and females increase their growth rate following
127 dominance acquisition by comparing their weight in the month prior to dominance acquisition
128 and in the four months following dominance acquisition. New dominants of both sexes
129 increased in weight after acquiring dominance (analysis of variance with repeated measures,
130 effect of month post-dominance acquisition on weight: $F_{4,184}=16.81$, $P<10^{-4}$, Figure 2a,
131 Extended Data Figure 3a). The extent of growth following dominance acquisition did not
132 differ between the sexes (analysis of variance with repeated measures, interaction between sex
133 and month post-dominance acquisition: $F_{4,184}=1.22$, $P=0.31$) and primarily occurred in the
134 two months following dominance acquisition (see Extended Data Table 2 for the results of the
135 post-hoc tests). This growth response may not solely reflect improved access to resources, as
136 food intake remained constant in both sexes during the same period (analysis of variance with
137 repeated measures, effect of month post-dominance acquisition on food intake: $F_{4,112}=0.34$,
138 $P=0.850$, and interaction between sex and month post-dominance acquisition: $F_{4,112}=0.09$,
139 $P=0.986$, Extended Data Figure 3b).

140

141 The growth of new dominants in the five months following dominance acquisition was more
142 pronounced when the heaviest same-sex subordinate was closer to their own weight at the
143 time of dominance acquisition (Linear Model, estimate±SD=-0.76±0.27, $F_{1,36}=7.69$, $P<0.01$,
144 Figure 2b and Extended Data Table 3). There was no significant sex difference in this
145 accelerated growth (Extended Data Table 3). Rapid post-dominance growth exacerbated
146 existing weight differences between dominants and same-sex subordinates, with the result that
147 most established dominants were the heaviest individual of their sex in their group (females:
148 58% of groups, males: 68%). While similar periods of growth after dominance acquisition in
149 female naked mole-rats have been interpreted as a way of enhancing fecundity^{11,12,17}, the
150 presence of strategic growth adjustments to the relative size of rivals in dominant meerkats of
151 both sexes suggests that these increases may serve to consolidate their status and prolong their
152 breeding tenure^{5,13}.

153

154 Our findings suggest that subordinates can track changes in the growth and size of potential
155 competitors, perhaps using physical contact as well as visual, vocal or olfactory cues, and
156 react by adjusting their own growth. While the physiological correlates of increased growth
157 rates in challenged individuals are not yet known, hormonal changes associated with
158 increased threat of competition may raise growth and food intake. Acceleration in growth
159 following dominance acquisition is probably associated with the sudden lifting of
160 reproductive suppression and a re-orientation of life-history strategy. The hormonal profile of
161 dominant meerkats is distinct from that of subordinates, with higher plasmatic levels of
162 oestradiol and progesterone in breeding females and of cortisol in breeders of both
163 sexes^{10,18,19}. Sex steroids are known to regulate the production of critical actors in the
164 insulin/growth factor pathway in the mammalian reproductive tract and associated tissues²⁰,
165 which may result in the up-regulation of anabolic genes involved in growth. Strategic

166 increases in growth rates could be constrained by energy and fitness costs²¹. Allocation of
167 additional resources to growth by challenged individuals may depress immune function and
168 reduce longevity as a result of increases in oxidative stress and telomere shortening²² while
169 increases in time spent foraging may raise predation risk, which is high in meerkats²³.

170

171 Our results suggest that competitive growth may represent an important component of the
172 developmental strategy of individuals. Recognition of this process may alter classic
173 perspectives on mechanisms of social competition, which frequently suggest that the
174 phenotype of interacting individuals determines the outcome of competitive interactions
175 rather than vice versa. As reproductive queues are widespread in social mammals and the size
176 and weight of individuals often affect their status and breeding success²⁴, competitive growth
177 may occur in many other social species, possibly including domestic mammals, nonhuman
178 primates and humans.

179

180 **References and Notes**

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250 information is available at www.nature.com/reprints. Correspondence and requests for
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252

253 **Figure legends**

254

255 **Figure 1. Competitive growth in subordinates.** Boxplots showing the growth (individual
256 weight difference between the start and mid-point of the experiment) (panels a, b) and food
257 intake (average morning weight gain in the first half of experiment) (panels c, d) of unfed,
258 ‘challenged’ individuals (light grey boxes) and of their fed ‘challengers’ (dark grey boxes)
259 relative to control individuals (white boxes) in juveniles (panels a, c) and adults (panels b, d).
260 Whiskers comprise all data points. Numbers below the boxes indicate the number of
261 individuals.

262 **Figure 2. Competitive growth in dominants.** Panel a: example growth trajectories of a male
263 and female during their transition to dominance. Panel b: adjustment of growth following
264 dominance acquisition in response to social competition in 20 males and 25 females. Dots
265 show the raw values (grey for females, black for males) of dominant weight gain within the
266 150 days following dominance acquisition as a function of weight difference to the heaviest
267 same-sex subordinate (measured at dominance acquisition). The dotted line shows the
268 predicted values of the linear model (results presented in Extended Table 3) and standard
269 deviations of the predicted values are delineated by shaded areas.

270 **Methods**

271 ***Study site and population***

272 Data were collected between 1996 and 2013 as part of a long-term study of wild meerkats at
273 the Kuruman River Reserve, South Africa. The site experiences a hot-wet season (October–
274 April) and a cold-dry season (May–September), with extensive interannual variation in rain²³.
275 Rainfall was measured daily (mm) using a standard gauge²⁷. Details regarding the site and
276 population are published elsewhere^{5,14,23}.

277 Meerkats were habituated to humans and individually recognizable due to dye marks.
278 Groups were visited about three times a week, so life-history events (births, deaths,
279 emigrations, changes in dominance) were known to an accuracy of about three days^{5,14}.
280 Pregnancy status was inferred from parturition date and affects female weight from the
281 midpoint of gestation, lasting approximately 70 days²⁵. Females were considered pregnant
282 from 40 days prior to parturition or from the first day of detectable pregnancy in cases where
283 abortions occurred. Dominant individuals were identified by their behaviour towards group-
284 mates^{4,5}. They scent-marked more frequently than subordinates, and asserted their dominance
285 over others by anal marking, by rubbing them with their chin, and more rarely by attacking
286 and biting them. Changes in dominance were immediately recognizable, as they were often
287 preceded by a short period (hours to days) of intense fighting, and were accompanied by
288 dramatic changes in behaviour in the contesting individuals. Previous genetic work has shown
289 the absence of incestuous matings within groups⁴. If all immigrant males die, a natal male
290 may become socially dominant in his group. Natal dominant males do not mate-guard the
291 dominant female, who is often their mother, and regularly conduct extraterritorial forays for
292 mating opportunities²⁶. These males (77/166 dominant males in our dataset) have been
293 excluded from analyses.

294

295 ***Weight measures***

296 Individuals were trained to climb onto a laboratory balance in return for drops of water or
297 crumbs of hard-boiled egg, allowing us to record body weight to an accuracy of 1g (Figure
298 1a). Although individuals were often weighed three times a day, we only used data collected
299 in the morning right after emergence from the burrow and before foraging, to avoid noise
300 created by variation in foraging success throughout the day²⁷. Food intake, or morning weight
301 gain, was calculated as the difference between weight collected before foraging activity
302 started, and weight collected after about three hours of foraging¹⁰.

303

304 ***Cooperative behaviour***

305 Three cooperative activities are regularly performed by male and female meerkats¹⁴: (1)
306 babysitting newborn pups, where an individual stays at the burrow while the rest of the group
307 forages, (2) feeding pups that are old enough to join foraging trips (approximately 1–3 months
308 old), and (3) raised-guarding, where an individual ceases foraging and climbs to a raised
309 position to watch out for potential dangers. The occurrence of babysitting, pup-feeding and
310 raised-guarding was recorded *ad libitum* as events during observation sessions, allowing
311 quantification of relative rates of helping per individual, i.e. the number of occurrences of one
312 cooperative behaviour performed by one individual relative to the total number of occurrences
313 of that behaviour in the group over a given time period.

314

315 ***Competitive growth experiment***

316 From 2010 to 2013, we conducted a set of 3-month feeding experiments on adults aged 310–
317 870 days and on juveniles aged 111–215 days to investigate whether unfed littermates

318 (challenged individuals) would increase their growth rate in response to experimentally
319 elevated growth rates of their fed siblings (challengers). We identified pairs containing at least
320 two same-sex littermates and fed the individual that was lightest (or as heavy as its sibling)
321 when the experiment started (mean weight difference (\pm SD) in juveniles: 9.8 ± 30.6 g, in adults:
322 29.9 ± 28.2 g). The fed individuals received half an egg twice daily four times a week during
323 three months. Competitive growth has never been described previously, so no prior
324 information was available for power analyses to establish adequate sample sizes. For 17 fed
325 adults including 8 females, the shortest feeding bout lasted 55 days and the mean \pm SD feeding
326 duration was 84 ± 11 days. For 31 fed juveniles including 12 females, the shortest feeding bout
327 lasted 21 days and the mean \pm SD feeding duration was 76 ± 21 days. For one adult female litter
328 and one juvenile male litter, there were three same-sex siblings and the two lightest
329 individuals were very close in weight (i.e., their average weight difference was lower than 10g
330 in the 15 days preceding the experiment); one of them was fed, and the two unfed siblings
331 were included in the cohort of challenged individuals. Experiments were interrupted when a
332 pregnancy was detected in an experimental female (fed or unfed), and corresponding data
333 were excluded from analysis. In other cases where the experiment was aborted (e.g., if an
334 individual disappeared), data collected during the shortened period were included in analyses;
335 note that for three juvenile dyads, food supplementation lasted respectively 21, 23 and 26
336 days, so these individuals were excluded from all calculations related to measures describing
337 the second half of the experiment. Observations and weighing sessions were not subjected to
338 blinding, because weight gained by fed individuals during the experiment was often
339 detectable by observers.

340

341 **Statistical analysis**

342 **Competitive growth in subordinates**

343 In order to investigate the effect of feeding individuals on the growth of their unfed same-sex
344 littermate, we first calculated the growth and food intake, averaged over the first or the second
345 half of the experiment for challenged individuals, challengers and control individuals. Growth
346 was calculated as the individual difference between weight recorded immediately prior to the
347 start of the experiment and at the mid-point of the experiment (45 days), or as the individual
348 change in weight from the mid-point to the end of the experiment (90 days). Food intake,
349 calculated in terms of morning weight gain, was averaged for each individual, over days 5–45
350 of the experiment (the first four days were excluded to allow for potential adjustments in
351 challenged individuals) and then over experimental days 45–90. We compared these measures
352 across challenged and control individuals using two-sample Welch t-tests (for juveniles) and
353 paired t-tests (for adults) after checking that variance was homogeneous across groups using
354 Levene tests ($P>0.05$ in all cases). We focus on the contrast between challenged and control
355 individuals: significantly higher growth in challenged individuals over controls would provide
356 experimental evidence for competitive growth, defined as an elevated increase in growth in
357 response to the challenge of a fed rival. Control individuals were selected as any individual
358 from the population during the experimental period (2010–2013) that had a lighter same-sex
359 littermate in his/her group at the age at which supplemental feeding commenced in
360 experimental groups (120 days in juveniles, one year in adults), in order to match criteria used
361 to identify unfed individuals in experimental dyads (Extended Data Figure 1). In adults, where
362 heterogeneity in the age at the start of the experiment was considerable (361–772 days,
363 mean \pm SD=496.7 \pm 112.9 days), each challenged individual was matched to the same-sex
364 individual of the control cohort that was closest in age (differences in birth dates between

365 challenged individuals and their matched control were small: 2–32 days, mean+SD=11.2±8.4)
366 and present in the population at the time of the experiment. Matching each experimental
367 individual with a same-age and same-sex control in this way allows us to control for
368 environmental variation that may otherwise introduce noise when comparing the weight and
369 growth of individuals that underwent a supplementation at different time periods (e.g. during
370 the dry versus the wet season). Individual weight prior to the experiment was averaged across
371 the 15 days preceding the experiment, weight at mid-point was averaged across days 45–60 of
372 the experiment, and weight at the end of the experiment was averaged across experimental
373 days 90–105.

374 It was not possible to select such matched control individuals in juveniles, however, as
375 there was no control litter born shortly before or after experimental litters in several cases.
376 Small age differences can introduce important noise when comparing weights among
377 juveniles, because growth rates are relatively high between four and seven months of age,
378 compared to later ages²⁷. In the juvenile cohort, age at the start of the experiment was very
379 homogeneous (range: 111–128 days of age, mean±SD=122.3±4.7), so matching experimental
380 dyads with control individuals by age was deemed less necessary. Individual weight records
381 were averaged across 95–110 days of age (before experiment); 170–185 days of age (after ca.
382 45 days of experiment); and 215–230 days of age (after ca. 90 days of experiment), and
383 growth was calculated between these time points.

384 We further ran a linear model investigating the relationship between the growth of
385 challenged individuals and the growth of their fed challenger to test whether the growth
386 responses of challenged individuals were adjusted to the weight gain of their fed challenger.
387 Growth was the response variable, and was calculated as the weight difference between the
388 start and the mid-point of the experiment (since the above analyses suggested that competitive
389 growth was highest at this time). Explanatory variables included sex, age at start of

390 experiment, and cumulated rainfall in the past nine months, which was previously found to
391 influence the growth of individual meerkats²⁷. Results and sample sizes are presented in
392 Extended Data Table 1 and Extended Data Figure 2.

393

394 Changes in cooperative activities during experimental periods

395 We investigated the influence of the experiment on pup-feeding and raised-guarding rates in
396 the adult cohort only, because helping is rare before six months of age¹⁴. We did not consider
397 babysitting because less than half of the experimental groups exhibited babysitting during the
398 experiment. For each observation session, we measured the observed proportion of raised-
399 guarding events performed by the focal individual relative to the total number of events
400 recorded for the group. We then calculated individual deviation from the proportion expected
401 under the null hypothesis, where each individual contributes equally, calculated as the inverse
402 of the number of helpers in the group. We averaged this deviation across all observation
403 sessions for each individual during the first half of the experiment (10–120 sessions per
404 individual, median=19). Thus, mean deviation gives an indication of the extent of cooperative
405 behaviour relative to average contributions in the group: individuals with a larger, more
406 positive deviation have higher cooperative behaviour. We compared the mean deviations
407 between challenged individuals and their matched controls using paired Wilcoxon signed-
408 rank tests, as the response variable was not normally distributed. We used the same approach
409 to test for differences in individual contributions to pup-feeding between challenged and
410 control individuals.

411

412 **Growth after the acquisition of dominant status**

413 When investigating changes in weight following dominance acquisition, we considered
414 individuals that maintained dominance for at least six months, to avoid biasing the sample
415 towards short and unstable tenures. We averaged weight records for each individual (n=42
416 females and 30 males) across the 30 days preceding dominance acquisition (labelled “month
417 0”) and then across days 0–30; 30–60; 60–90 and 90–120 following dominance acquisition
418 (respectively labelled “months 1, 2, 3 and 4”). Weights recorded during pregnancies were
419 excluded. We then retained only individuals with no missing data in any of these five one-
420 month blocks (n=21 females and 27 males) to ensure a balanced design. Thus, we could
421 evaluate the significance of weight differences between one-month blocks using a repeated
422 measures analysis of variance with multiple factors. Factors included sex, proximity to
423 dominance acquisition (with 5 levels: month 0, 1, 2, 3 and 4), and the interaction between sex
424 and proximity to dominance acquisition, to test if the temporal dynamics of post-dominance
425 growth differed between males and females. Post-hoc tests were conducted using paired t-
426 tests with adjusted p-values to compare within-individual changes in weight before
427 dominance acquisition to each of the four months after acquisition; as well as between each
428 month of the four month period following acquisition of dominance. A Bonferroni correction
429 was applied to correct for multiple testing. These results are presented in Extended Data
430 Figure 3a and Extended Data Table 2.

431

432 We compared changes in food intake (measured as morning weight gain) following
433 dominance acquisition using the same approach. As described above, we retained only
434 individuals with no missing data in any of the five one-month blocks (n=9 females and 21
435 males) to evaluate the significance of differences in food intake between one-month blocks
436 using a repeated measures analysis of variance with multiple factors. As above, factors

437 included were sex, proximity to dominance acquisition and their interaction. These results are
438 illustrated by Extended Data Figure 3b.

439

440 Dominant growth adjustments to the weight of the heaviest subordinate

441 To investigate the effect of competition on growth following dominance acquisition, we ran a
442 Linear Model, with weight gain within 150 days following dominance acquisition (calculated
443 as weight 150 days after dominance acquisition minus weight at dominance acquisition, each
444 averaged across all weights for 10 days prior to and after the time-point of interest) as our
445 response variable. We focused on a five-month period after dominance acquisition, because
446 previous models had revealed that growth rates were elevated in the four months following
447 dominance acquisition. We included all new dominant females that retained dominance for
448 longer than six months and had at least one subordinate female in their group that was older
449 than six months when they became dominant. Six months is the age of the youngest female
450 who ever reached dominance. Weights recorded during pregnancies were excluded. We
451 included all new dominant males that had at least one non-natal subordinate male in their
452 group that was older than six months when they became dominant. Natal subordinate males
453 were not considered as rivals because they hardly ever reproduce or fight for dominance⁴.
454 Explanatory variables included sex, rainfall (averaged over the 150 days following dominance
455 acquisition), a sinusoidal term describing season of dominance acquisition²⁷, age at
456 dominance acquisition, time since dominance acquisition (ranging from 0 to 150 days),
457 absolute weight difference with the same-sex rival (i.e., heaviest subordinate at the time of
458 dominance acquisition). In addition, the interaction between sex and absolute weight
459 difference with the same-sex rival tested whether the effect of the weight difference to the
460 main rival differed between sexes. We used the absolute value of weight difference because
461 graphical exploration of the data suggested that dominant growth rates increase when their
462 rival is either slightly heavier or slightly lighter, but not when their rival is much lighter or

463 much heavier. In cases where a rival is much heavier but failed to win fights over dominance,
464 he or she may have poor competitive abilities for other reasons and may not represent a threat
465 to the dominant. The results and sample sizes are presented in Extended Data Table 3.

466

467 All statistical analyses were run with R 3.1.3²⁸, and all tests were two-sided.

468

469 **Additional references of the section describing methods**

470 ²⁵ Sharp, S. P., English, S., and Clutton-Brock, T. H., Maternal investment during
471 pregnancy in wild meerkats. *Evol. Ecol.* **27**, 1033 (2013).

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473 prospect for extra-group paternity: alternative reproductive tactics in a cooperative
474 mammal. *Proc R Soc B* **274**, 1603 (2007).

475 ²⁷ English, S., Bateman, A. W., and Clutton-Brock, T. H., Lifetime growth in wild
476 meerkats: incorporating life history and environmental factors into a standard growth
477 model. *Oecologia* **169**, 143 (2012).

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479 computing. R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria. URL
480 <http://www.R-project.org/>.

481 **Extended data Figure legends**

482 **Extended data Figure 1. Diagram depicting the experimental design.** Juvenile
483 experiments were conducted from 15/12/2010 to 19/08/2012, and adult experiments from
484 28/03/2011 to 20/07/2013. Each horizontal line represents longitudinal weight data collected
485 from an experimental group. Thick orange lines represent unfed, challenged individuals and
486 blue lines represent fed challengers. Thick green lines represent control individuals, which
487 were animals of the same sex and age-range from the same population over the same period
488 (2010–2013). Red boxes indicate the 3-month experimental windows of food
489 supplementation, which spanned different time periods for different dyads (allowing us to
490 disentangle experimental effects from environmental and seasonal effects on weight) and, for
491 the adult experiment, occurred any time between 310 and 870 days of age. F: female, M:
492 male. Note that the x-axis is not drawn to scale, to facilitate comparison of the design between
493 the juvenile and adult cohorts. The meerkat icon was downloaded from PhyloPic:
494 <http://phylopic.org>, with credit to Michael Keeseey.

495 **Extended data Figure 2. Relationship between the growth of the challenged individual**
496 **and the growth of its fed challenger in juveniles (a) and adults (b).** Thirty-two juvenile
497 and 17 adult experimental pairs were included. Growth was calculated as the individual
498 weight difference between the start and mid-point of the experiment. Dots show the raw
499 values (grey for females, black for males). The dotted line shows the predicted values of the
500 linear model (results presented in Extended Table 1) and standard deviations of the predicted
501 values are delineated by shaded areas.

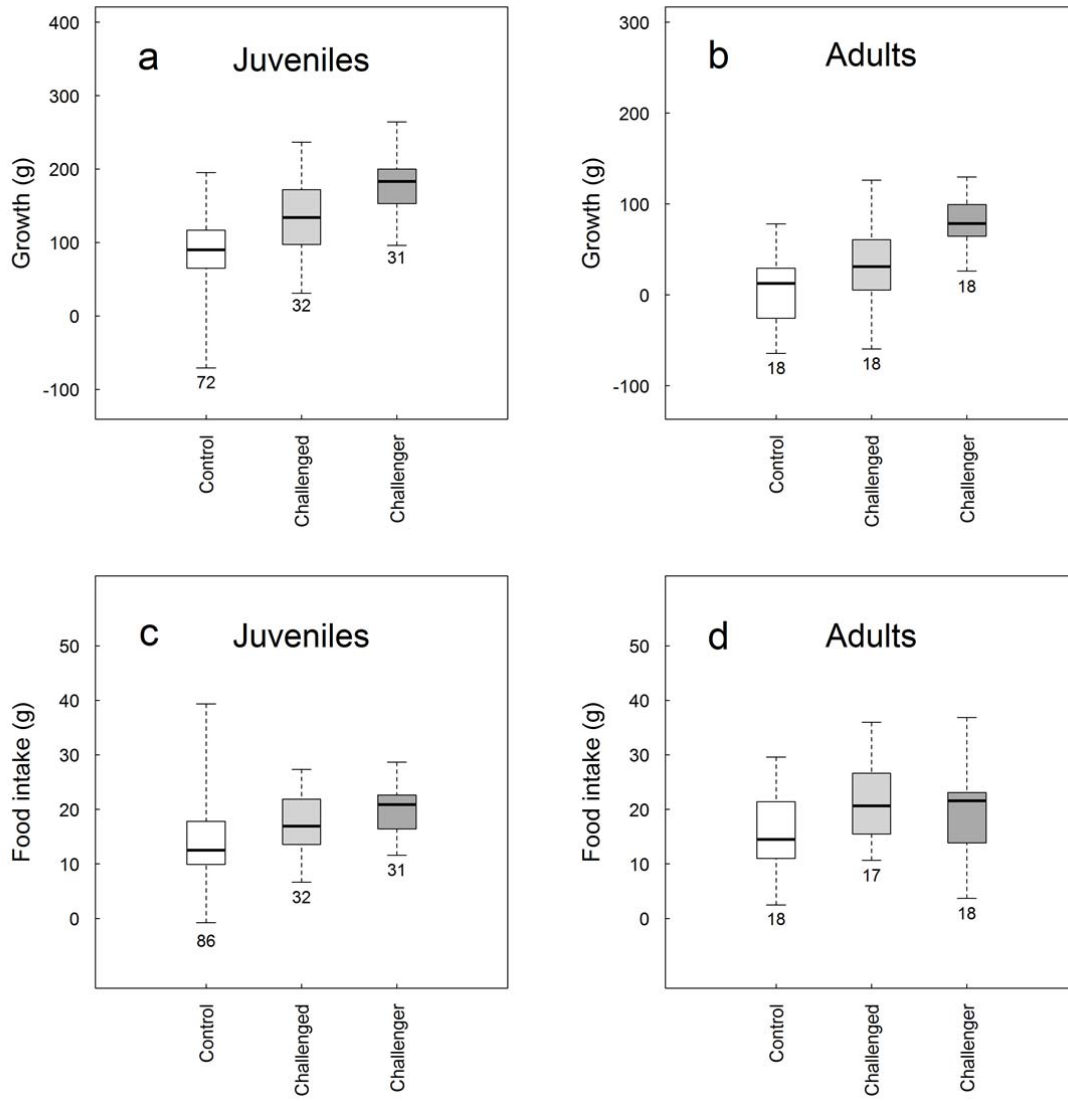
502 **Extended Data Figure 3. Changes in weight (b) and food intake (c) in new dominant**
503 **females (grey boxes, n=42) and males (black boxes, n=30).** Boxplots show the raw values,
504 averaged for each individual during the month preceding dominance acquisition (labelled '0'),
505 as well as during the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th months post-dominance acquisition (respectively

506 labelled '1', '2', '3' and '4'). Whiskers show all data points that are no further away from the
507 box than half the interquartile range.

508

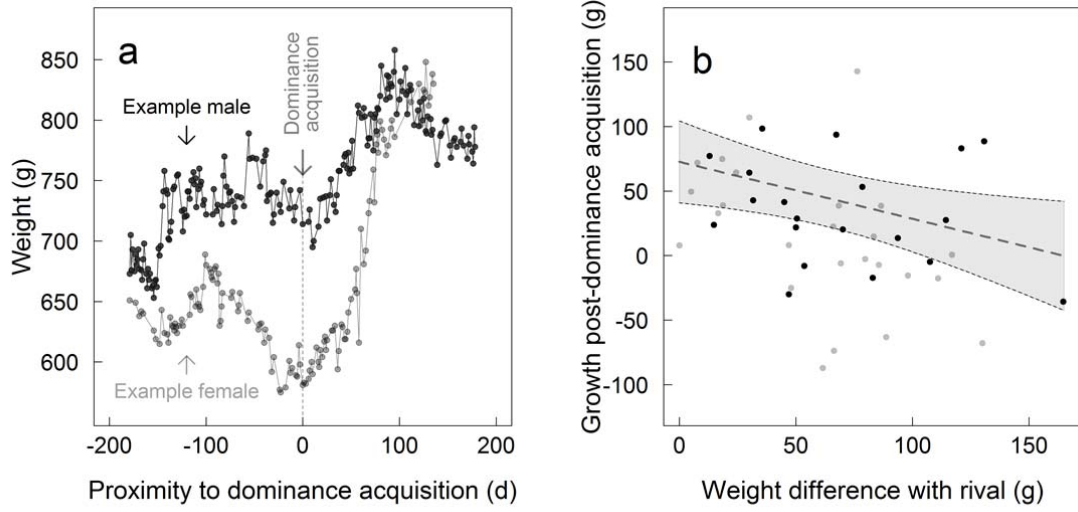
509

510 **Figure 1**



511

512 **Figure 2**



513

514

515 **Extended Data Table legends**

516 **Extended Data Table 1. Results of linear models investigating the relationship between**
517 **the growth of challenged individuals and their fed challengers in juveniles and adults.**

518 The response variable is the growth of the challenged individual, calculated as the individual
519 weight difference between the start and mid-point of the experiment. The juvenile model
520 includes 12 females and 20 males and the value of the model adjusted R^2 is 0.65. The adult
521 model includes 8 females and 9 males and the value of the model adjusted R^2 is 0.61. Est.:
522 Estimate, SD: standard deviation.

523 **Extended Data Table 2. Results of the posthoc paired t-tests investigating temporal**
524 **changes in weight following dominance acquisition.** Pairwise comparison tests were

525 conducted after the repeated measures ANOVA to compare within-individual changes in
526 weight between the month preceding dominance acquisition (labelled '0') and the four
527 months (labelled '1' to '4') following dominance acquisition, as well as between each of the
528 four months post-dominance acquisition. A Bonferroni correction was applied to correct for
529 multiple testing.

530 **Extended Data Table 3. Results of the linear model investigating changes in body weight**
531 **within 150 days following dominance acquisition in relation to absolute weight**

532 **difference with the heaviest same-sex subordinate.** This analysis includes 25 females and
533 20 males. The value of the model adjusted R^2 is 0.21. Est.: Estimate, SD: standard deviation,
534 and F-value: F-statistic of an F-test.