The British
Psychological Society

Group differences in the legitimization of inequality: Questioning the role of social dominance orientation

Samuel Pehrson[1]*, Héctor Carvacho[2] and Chris G. Sibley[3]

[1]University of St Andrews, UK
[2]Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Macul, Chile
[3]University of Auckland, New Zealand

Social dominance orientation (SDO) is conceived as an individual's level of support for group-based hierarchy in general that causes support for more specific group hierarchies. According to social dominance theory, group differences in SDO underpin ideological and behavioural group differences related to specific group hierarchies. Using representative 5-year longitudinal panel data from New Zealand ($N = 3,384$), we test whether SDO mediates effects of sex and ethnicity on legitimizing myths (LMs) relating to gender and ethnic hierarchy over time. The SDO mediation hypothesis is supported in the case of hostile sexism. However, it is unsupported in the case of benevolent sexism and LMs relating to ethnic hierarchy, where there was no cross-lagged effect of SDO. Moreover, being in the dominant ethnic group is associated with more legitimization of ethnic hierarchy but less legitimization of gender hierarchy, which is inconsistent with the notion of a general orientation underpinning group differences in legitimation. There was mixed evidence for a reverse path whereby specific LMs mediate group differences in SDO across time. We argue for the need to find alternative ways to theorize ideological consensus and difference between groups.

Intergroup relations are often characterized by differences of opinion about the legitimacy of status and power hierarchies within which groups are embedded. On the one hand, disadvantaged groups may reject the status quo and engage in various kinds of ideological and practical resistance, while dominant groups may resist perceived threats to their supremacy by legitimizing inequality (e.g., Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Tajfel, 1978). On the other hand, group-based inequalities can also be marked by a level of consensus and cooperation, whereby their stability is a function, at least in part, of being accepted even by those disadvantaged by them (e.g., Dixon, Levine, Reicher, & Durrheim, 2012; Jackman, 1994; Jost & Banaji, 1994). As such, an adequate account of ideological dissension versus consensus between social groups is an important part of any social scientific understanding of intergroup inequality.

Within psychology, social dominance theory (SDT) is perhaps the most influential attempt to understand the nature of ideological consensus and divergence underpinning domination and inequality (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Central to the theory is the construct of social dominance orientation (SDO), defined as 'a very general individual differences

---

*Correspondence should be addressed to Samuel Pehrson, School of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of St Andrews, St Mary's Quad, St Andrews, Fife KY16 9JP, UK (email: sdp21@st-andrews.ac.uk).