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Social Dominance Theory: The Explanation behind Social Hierarchy and Oppression?

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Despite our best efforts, oppression, discrimination, brutality and chaos have persisted throughout history and continue to play a role in modern society. Instances of human oppression and suffering are all too common and often result in hierarchal social structures. These hierarchal structures place individuals or groups at the top of the social system, with other individuals or groups barely surviving at the bottom. While journalists and the media have penetrated descriptions and broadcasts of this barbaric behaviour, it is primarily social scientists that have tried to construct a theory behind why societies, across the globe, are structured in this hierarchal way (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). As a result of this, multiple forms of research on the related topics of stereotyping, prejudice, relations within groups, and race and gender have become extensive. Past literature has placed emphasis on different issues that explain the complex problem of oppression and hierarchies. As there are many separate pieces of the puzzle behind oppression and racism that may be interrelated, it can seem overwhelming and tedious to tie them into a coherent whole.

Sidanius and Pratto (1999), however, did just that with their synthesis of Social Dominance Theory (SDT). The theory was constructed with a foundation from a variety of pre-existing psychological models, social-psychological models, structural-sociological models, and lastly evolutionary models (Sidanius & Pratto 1999). Though Sidanius and Pratto drew from several interdisciplinary models, the most important sources contributing to the synthesis of SDT will be discussed in terms of their impact on the theory. Implications and applications of the model will be discussed, in addition to criticising the limitations of the theory. The social dominance model will then be contrasted with other theories explaining cognitive thought and behavioural action. SDT has been influenced by the different domains of psychology, sociology,

and evolution, but its main goal was an attempt to connect the worlds of individual personality with the domains of societal behaviour and structure (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

With several previous models impacting the construction of SDT, it is impossible to discuss each unique contribution to the theory within the limits of this paper. Three key models, of which Sidanius and Pratto found basis for their theory, however, will be examined. The first of these theories is *authoritarianism,* the key personality syndrome in the *authoritarian personality theory* (APT) introduced by Fromm in 1941 (as cited by Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Authoritarianism takes into account an individual's social, economic, and political convictions. This theory takes precedence in the psychodynamic area of psychology. It outlines child-rearing practices that cause the child to be humiliated throughout his/her lifetime. Parents high in authoritarianism tend to show affection towards their children only when their children show immediate obedience to rules (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

As a result of this, an authoritarian rearing style conditions humans to concepts of dominance and submission (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). As they are influenced towards a particular hierarchical orientation by this upbringing, they divide people into two groups: the weak and the strong. They detract those thought of as weak or humane and inferior within society, and glorify those that appear strong or powerful (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Among the extensive research done on the topic of authoritarianism, findings indicate that individuals who are prejudice against one minority group (i.e., African-Americans) also tend to be prejudice against another minority group (i.e., Jewish people) (as cited by Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Though authoritarian views may be considered one of the most influential and a key component in describing prejudicial behaviour, the theory has been thoroughly criticised.

Criticism stemmed from the use of attitude scales that were prone to measurement errors, more specifically the agreement bias, and ideological bias (as cited by Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In addition, the *F*-scale (used to measure authoritarianism as a trait) was politically biased in measuring only the right, and ignoring leftist political views (as cited by Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Despite original distaste in the theory, when valid methodology evolved and was utilized, current research displayed support for authoritarian views (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Three original claims poised by authoritarianism theorists are relevant to the construction of SDT (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). First is *generalized ethnocentrism,* the defamation of multiple out groups. The second is that in this stigmatization of other "groups," a central theme emerges of dominance and submission (the foundation of hierarchy). Lastly, this generalized ethnocentrism does, in fact, correlate highly to conservatism, across multiple cultures (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). There is, therefore, empirical basis for the authoritarian trait.

Another underlying model that Sidanius and Pratto valued in the construction of SDT is Milton Rokeach's conception of the attitudes and beliefs of people in regards to politics and outgroups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). More importantly, Rokeach focused on understanding societal values, and prioritizing principles relating to beliefs and behaviour. Rokeach proposed that numerous major political views of the 20th century could all be explained by a valence in freedom and equality; hypothesizing a *two-value theory of political behaviour* (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). There is some support for this theory of freedom and equality driving political views. For example, capitalism places a high value on individualism and freedom, and a low value on equality within the social system. Communism places high value on equality within societies, but a low value within society on personal freedom or individualism. Unfortunately in Western culture, research implies the importance an individual attaches to freedom is unrelated

to their political ideologies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). A recent study, however, examined the hierarchal structure of Japanese and Slovenian students, with results indicating a general underlying structure between the two groups (Musil, Rus, & Musek, 2009). This study models support for a general underlying basis across different cultures. Regardless of conflicting research on the theory, the approach emphasizes the relation of the attitudes of individuals within society to corresponding social institutions that determine intergroup relations; a key component of SDT (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

The last pre-existing theory stems from focus on sociological aspects and structural relationships amongst groups. Perhaps the most straight-forward model behind discrimination is the *group position model,* introduced by Herbert Blumer in 1960 (as cited by Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The model states that when certain groups are in a state of power inequality or imbalance, the dominant group will pursue measures to maintain their hierarchal position over less powerful groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). This alludes to the idea that powerful groups are always striving for more power and dominance to maintain the status quo, which in turn directly benefits them. To achieve this subordination of certain groups of individuals, powerful groups will advocate the preservation of this hierarchal structure by implementing ideologies and policies that further themselves, rather than furthering society as a whole (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Though the previous models contributed to the synthesis of SDT, Sidanius and Pratto also placed emphasis on Marxism and neoclassical theories, public opinion and attitudes research, social identity theory, and modern thinking on evolutionary psychology for the foundations of their theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Through understanding both classical approaches, and more contemporary pre-existing models of prejudice, oppression, and discrimination, it is evident that a common theme occurs within each; hierarchy.

SDT begins with the principle that all societies tend to be organized in systems of *group-based social hierarchies* (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). At the bare minimum, social structures are established with one (or a small number) of powerful groups at the top of the structure, and a larger number of weaker or subordinate groups at the bottom of the social structure (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Sidanius and Pratto (1999) state that the powerful or hegemonic group at the top of the structure contain and strive to maintain a disproportionate share of what they refer to as *positive social value,* defined as "the material and symbolic things for which people strive" (p. 31). Positive social value varies by culture, but can include political authority, power, superior health care, or high social status (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). While the dominant group is enjoying the luxury of positive social value, the subordinate group is left with what the theorists' termed *negative social value* (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Negative social value can include low social status, high-risk jobs or disrespected occupations, and severe negative sanctions (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). After establishing the common theme of hierarchy throughout cultures, SDT outlines the mechanisms working behind the maintenance of this division of values.

Sidanius and Pratto distinguish between two types of hierarchies; one focused on the individual (and their unique characteristics) and one focused on group membership (1999). Within an individual-based social hierarchy, one's own characteristics are used to achieve prestige or wealth within society (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). This could include academic achievement or athletic ability (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). In contrast, group-based social hierarchy allows an individual to achieve prestige or wealth by "…virtue of his or her ascribed membership in a particular socially constructed group" (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 32). The suggested group memberships can include race, religion, linguistic group, or social class. Sidanius and Pratto do not assume that the two work independently within society. In complex

social systems the two can work side by side and be interrelated. Sidanius and Pratto (1999) provide the simplistic example of two children who have the same talent and drive for ambition (thus, more or less equal status within an individual-based hierarchy). One of these children comes from a family with a high social status (attends all the most prestigious schools) and therefore does quite well in life. The other child grows up in a dangerous and low status neighbourhood, with limited external resources, and does not do as well.

Specifically focusing on group-based social hierarchies, Sidanius and Pratto (1999) collapsed Pierre van den Berghe's distinction of four different social hierarchal stratification systems into three; an age system, a gender system, and an *arbitrary-set* system. The age and gender systems speak for themselves, and are evident in various societies. Adults and middle-aged individuals generally have more social power than children and younger adults. Throughout history, men have generally had various political and social controls over women. What is unique to SDT is the notion of the arbitrary-set system: a system filled with "socially constructed and highly salient groups based on characteristics such as clan, ethnicity, race, social class…and any other socially relevant group distinction that the human imagination is capable of constructing" (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 33). What sets apart the stratification of the arbitrary-set system to that of gender and age is its ability to be easily shaped and moulded. In essence, membership to join the criteria for the "in-group" is both socially and contextually constructed, formed and maintained by certain societies. With its uniqueness, however, comes the backlash of such plasticity. Sidanius and Pratto (1999) describe the arbitrary-set system as being associated with a higher degree of violence throughout history. Other than the Holocaust, the authors outlined seven distinct issues of arbitrary-set violence within the 20th century alone (Sidanius &

Pratto, 1999). To summarize, the three basic assumptions of SDT, in considering hierarchal societies and age, gender, and arbitrary-set system are:

(1) while age- and gender-based hierarchies will tend to exist within all social systems, arbitrary-set systems of social hierarchy will invariably emerge within social systems producing sustainable economic surplus. (2) Most forms of group conflict and oppression (e.g., racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, nationalism, classism, regionalism) can be regarded as different manifestations of the same basic human predisposition to form group-based social hierarchies. And (3) Human social systems are subject to the counterbalancing influences of hierarchy-enhancing (HE) forces, producing and maintaining even higher levels of group-based social inequality, and hierarchy-attenuating (HA) forces, producing greater levels of group-based social equality (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 38).

With broad assumptions (and extensive theoretical background that closely relates with measures of authoritarianism, interpersonal dominance, or conservatism) there is no doubt of the difficulty in operationalizing the theory of SDT into unique concrete terms. Sidanius and Pratto suggest that group dominance is expressed in terms of *social dominance orientation* (SDO) (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). SDO is defined as a "very general individual differences orientation expressing the value that people place on nonegalitarian and hierarchally structured relationships amongst social groups" (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 61). SDO is the value individuals place on domination of certain groups within society. In developing the SDO scale, the theorists constructed value scales from 18 741 respondents living in 11 countries (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Originally mimicking Rokeach's measure for a general tendency towards the value of equality (or away from it), the SDO scale places greater emphasis on group-based dominance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The recent SDO scale includes items such as "It is OK if some groups

have more of a chance in life than others" and "Inferior groups should stay in their place" (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 67). The scale was designed to capture the essence of an individual's dominance towards social groups. Empirical evidence indicated that when removing the construct of SDO in previous associations, the correlation of political conservatism and authoritarianism weakened substantially (1999).

There is wide empirical evidence for the use of SDT and SDO. Consensual racial attitudes and career choice was looked at among 5655 American undergraduate and graduate students (Sidanius, Pratto, Martin, & Stallworth, 1991). Results indicated that individuals desiring career choices in the "power" professions (i.e., business or law) were found to have higher levels of consensual racism than students who desired other job opportunities (Sidanius, et al., 1991). This finding supports the assumption that power relates to consensual racism or the synthesising of outgroups, due to individuals striving for domination and success. To further support the theory of social dominance applied in the workplace, Haley and Sidanius (2005) looked at individuals' socio-political attitudes, and their institutional environments. Their results indicated that hierarchy-enhancing organizations tend have employees that possess anti-egalitarian beliefs, while hierarchy-attenuating organizations employees possessed more democratic views (Haley & Sidanius, 2005). This research indicates that individuals with certain political views are more likely to be employed in workplaces that enhance these views (though there was no indication of whether the organization could influence the individual's view). In applying the model to prejudicial views, American and Israel university students completed questionnaires (including the SDO scale) assessing in-group identification and out-group affect, and variables relating to high status and low status groups. Results indicated that higher SDO was associated with more negative affect toward low-status groups (Levin & Sidanius, 1999).

To reiterate this, Quist and Resendez (2002) related SDO with stronger beliefs of stereotypes and legitimizing myths, producing results supporting the prediction that high SDO individuals would strongly relate more intergroup threat with more legitimizing myths.

To outline more recent examples in support of SDT, Garcia, Posthuma, and Roehling (2009) incorporated *relational models theory* and SDT in assessing how national culture influences preferences for males in employment-related decisions. Consistent with SDT, females responded in a way that justified the status quo (i.e., their disadvantages in the work place) by preferring to hire males over females when making an employee-related decision (Garcia, Posthuma, & Roehling, 2009). Therefore individuals who find themselves in subordinate positions within society find it difficult to overcome societal barriers, and remain in their lowly position. In an extension of gender subordination, Rosenthal and Levy used the model of SDT to explain why women of colour and women of lower income are more likely to contract HIV than white women or men (2010).

With empirical evidence supportive and real-world applications of the power, prejudice, and gender models unified by SDT, one would assume its acceptance by the psychological realm. With a large portion of its foundation based on previous theories of prejudice and/or discrimination however, theorists challenged the assumptions made by the model. Schmitt, Branscombe and Kappen looked at attitudes toward group-based inequality aligning with SDT or with that of the pre-existing model of *social identity theory* (2003). They investigated five studies that explored the context where people think about social structure and the implications of these structures for one's in-group affect attitudes toward inequality. In the majority of the studies, social identity theory was supported, indicating that attitudes toward inequality are group-specific and dependent on the social-structural orientation of salient in-groups (Schmitt,

Branscombe, & Kappen, 2003). Thus, the proposed umbrella of SDT may be more context-specific than previously suggested by Sidanius and Pratto.

What other theorists found difficult within the theory of social dominance is the assumption of subordinated individuals reinforcing their subordination. Theorists outline significant inconsistencies in the implication that low-status groups show out-group favouritism. Their conflicted views against the theory stemmed from the theory's assumption that subordinated individuals reinforce their subordination, while maintaining their low status within the social hierarchy (defined as "behavioural asymmetry") (Turner & Reynolds, 2003). Not only was this idea of reinforcing subordination difficult to grasp, SDT made hardly an effort to fight against domination and subordination within the hierarchal model. Critics advocated that rather than fight against domination, the theory implied that a hierarchal system is adaptive and beneficial for society (Turner & Reynolds, 2003). Theorists suggest that when removing "resources" (or as implied by SDT, the positive and negative social values within society) from the equation of social dominance, other evolutionary factors can contribute to individuals accepting their subordination. This can be exhibited by factors such as previous wins or losses when engaging in past similar conflicts (Sander Van Doorn, Hengeveld, & Weissang, 2003).

Considering the amount of evidence contrary to the theory and multiple theoretical substitutes, it is important to note alternate theories of motivation and action. These alternate theories will be discussed to better understand where SDT has/has not enhanced the literature in the field. In an interesting study by Jost and colleagues (2003), SDO was explored in relation to regulatory focus and uncertainty oriented traits to determine political conservatism. The core ideology of conservatism stresses resistance to change and justification of inequality. All three traits (social dominance, regulatory focus, and uncertainty orientation) were significantly

correlated with this ideology (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). This research indicated SDO as an important predictor, along with other psychological traits, of political conservatism. It is critical to explore other psychological theories that may explain prejudice or social hierarchies and to integrate these theories to better understand societal hierarchies.

In looking more specifically at *regulatory focus*, introduced by Higgins (1997), there are some similarities of this theory in line with SDO. Individuals high in SDO tend to place their goals of dominance ahead of others. When finding other individuals who share similar goals, this cohesion can support a social hierarchal structure (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The regulatory theory also considers one's ideals (or goals) versus their *oughts* (or needs) (Higgins, 1997). It is outlined by regulatory focus that the more a person's ideals were accessible in information processing, the more that individual's promotion system predominates (Higgins, 1997). Individuals with a predominately promotion-focused orientation prefer strategies of approaching self-states that are desired to their end match state (Higgins, 1997). They are also strategically concerned with gains versus non-gains (Higgins, 2008).

In terms of regulatory focus theory and SDT, it would then be assumed that an individual high in SDO (whose main goal is to overcome other individuals and gain success with society) would also be primarily promotion-focused (i.e., a strong emphasis on achieving goals). High SDO individuals would place a great emphasis on their ideals. Socially dominated individuals and individuals high in goal pursuit may pursue their desired end-state within their social structure more easily than others within society. It would be of interest to see how accessible one's ideals would be, when considering a high SDO individual. This could determine whether the two theories can interact to predict how much focus a high SDO individual places on their desired goals. Higgins and colleagues (in press) studied countries that were predominantly goal

oriented, versus predominately prevention oriented. Results concluded that within the United States and Italy there was a significantly higher percentage of predominant promotion ideals vs. prevention focus ideals (Higgins, in press). The United States also scored the highest for promotion-focused strategies than any other nation studied (Higgins, in press). It would be of interest to take this study and apply it to a representative group of the American population (a population heavy in societal hierarchies), to determine if individuals scored significantly higher than other countries for SDO.

SDT was synthesized to explain prejudice and racism within society (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Another theoretical model that places emphasis on explaining these conditions, specifically outlining attitudes towards object and evaluative associations, is Olson and Fazio's (2009) *MODE model*. Olson and Fazio (2009) emphasize that most modern models of racism include interplay of automatic and controlled processes, with more aversive attitudes towards racism tending to occur at an automatic level. They theorize that many individuals wish to display themselves as egalitarian, but in a conscious way. On the other hand, their attitudes towards racism can be shown using implicit association tasks in an unconscious way to unveil these prejudicial views (Olson & Fazio, 2009). In an early study using priming measures, Fazio (as cited by Olson & Fazio, 2009) was able to evaluate Caucasian participants' negative implicit attitudes towards African-Americans. Their automatic association study was used frequently with various alterations, indicating an underlying negative association with African-American individuals within the general population (Olson & Fazio, 2009). This explanation behind racism and prejudice differs from SDO is its direct assumption that individuals, though appearing egalitarian, hold implicit racial attitudes. The MODE model assumes that individuals hold an implicit racial view of certain social groups, where SDT stresses the desire to overcome other

social groups, albeit their culture, race, ethnic views, and so forth. It is this desire to overcome other social groups that prejudice and discrimination emerges, rather than an underlying racial attitude as implied by the MODE model.

In contrast to the model of regulatory focus, the MODE model states that it is an individual's underlying negative associations against a certain social or cultural group that guides an individual's racism and prejudicial views. Where regulatory places emphasis on desires to accomplish goals in a promotion-focused individual, MODE model places emphasis on implicit racial attitudes and beliefs. Though the two can both be used (separately) with SDT to explain in-group and out-group affiliation and social hierarchies, they could also be researched in coherence to better understand prejudice, racism, and social hierarchies in society. If an individual who possesses more implicit racial attitudes toward an out-group and was predominately promotion-focused (and possessed positive views about inequality), then it could be assumed that this individual would also score extremely high in social dominance. This still leaves, however, those individuals who score low on SDO, and are subordinated within society.

As emphasized, theorists against SDT have difficulty grasping that subordinated individuals within a social system accept and perform actions that maintain this subordination. Though SDT and SDO bring to light why individuals may enhance social hierarchies, the theory has failed to convince other theorists within the psychological arena why subordinated individuals would reinforce these social structures (Turner & Reynolds, 2003). The last theory focused on is Weiner's *Attribution Theory of Motivation* (2008). To perhaps better understand why subordinated individuals work to reinforce their subordination, attribution theory may be considered.

Attribution theory describes achievement motivation as three distinct categories; whether a particular outcome is stable or unstable, whether this outcome is internal or external (locus and control), and whether this outcome is controllable or uncontrollable (Weiner, 2008). Though Weiner outlines other casual factors for motivation, these three key properties may explain why a subordinated individual reinforces their subordinated social status. These three properties, for the most part, map onto what Weiner considers the two main determinants of motivated behaviour; expectancy (subjective likelihood of future success) and value (emotion consequences of goal attainment versus non-attainment) (Weiner, in press) To the best of my knowledge, the research behind social subordination and attribution theory is virtually non-existent; however Weiner's theory could have implications for this topic.

On a global level, subordinated individuals may see their subordination as an outcome of an uncontrollable situation which is perceived, generally speaking, as stable within society and with little internal control. If a cause (subordination, in this circumstance) is regarded as stable, then any past outcome of success or failure to this cause will be expected again (i.e., failure to overcome social structure) (Weiner, in press). In terms of locus and control, a subordinated individual may see these two constructs independently. The cause (such as race) is internal to the individual; however the outcome is uncontrollable (subordination by others within societal hierarchies). Weiner (in press) outlines locus as being an influence of pride and self-esteem, thus subordinated individuals may experience lower self-esteem and less pride associated with their cultural background (if the outcome of subordination was due to race). Weiner provides a better understanding than SDT to why subordinated individuals reinforce their subordination within society. Though SDT was synthesized to be a broad model applicable to many societies across

the globe, it may be necessary to consider and incorporate more characteristics at an individual level within the model than just one's orientation to socially dominate other individuals.

This remains mostly speculative; however it is critical to understand alternate theories of motivation and behaviour to fill in the gaps that were left behind by SDT. SDT places a great emphasis on individuals and their focus on goal-attainment of dominating other social groups, which is applicable in explaining social hierarchies across a majority of cultures. What the theory greatly lacks is its attempt to explain subordinated individuals at the other end of the spectrum. Attribution theory can be used to describe some factors as to why subordinated individuals generally work to reinforce their position within the social hierarchy.

Though SDT is without its limitations, the theory uses a sociological and psychological background to provide a broad encompassing view of the explanation behind social hierarchies across cultures (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Much of the evidence in support of most cultures reinforce group-based hierarchal structures, and the division of positive and negative social value has been extensive, concluding that SDT has applications within the real-world (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Though other theories can describe motivation and behavioural action, they can also be worked into the SDT framework to provide a more accurate depiction of prejudice, racism, and structures within society. SDT has influence many social psychologists to research power, how it operates in an organizational setting, and the different forms of social dominance (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2010). Most importantly, the theory shows how social psychology can be applied not only individual motivation and action, but also across different levels of analysis (i.e., from individual to cultural) (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2010. The theory remains young, however, and requires extensive work to convince social psychologists who doubt its usefulness. Future focus will be placed on how one system (i.e., gender hierarchy or arbitrary-set

hierarchy) can affect another, how legitimizing myths are created or changed, and focus is placed on understanding the degrees/determinates of social hierarchy (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2010). The introduction and extensive research done on SDT has posed numerous questions to the field of social psychology, and now further research in Social Dominance Theory will be used to answer them.

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