



## *Commentary*

# **Why social dominance theory has been falsified**

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Schmitt, Branscombe and Kappen (2003) and Wilson and Lui (2003) present a persuasive series of studies which raise major problems for the conceptualization of social dominance orientation in social dominance theory. Building on these and other data in the literature, this commentary summarizes six fundamental criticisms which can be made of the theory. We conclude that social dominance theory is flawed by conceptual inconsistencies and has been disconfirmed empirically in relation to its key hypothesis of behavioural asymmetry. The reaction of subordinate groups to the social hierarchy is better explained by social identity theory.

Social dominance theory (SDT) paints a bleak picture of human nature and human social organization. It argues that there is in human nature, derived from our evolutionary past, a ubiquitous drive or predisposition to form 'group-based social hierarchies', authoritarian, essentially fascist social systems (Altemeyer, 1998) in which groups with power dominate and oppress subordinate groups. This drive, being 'biological', operates irrespective of the in-group's social position so that low-status groups also work to maintain the hierarchies which oppress them ('behavioural asymmetry', BA). This theory not only makes futile any effort to liberate humanity from oppression, domination and divisive hatreds, it also asserts that social systems built on perpetual coercion, domination and conflict are 'adaptive'; they are good for us.

Fortunately, any serious look at the theory reveals significant conceptual inconsistencies and that research data already disconfirm its one distinctive empirical hypothesis of BA (that irrespective of their own interests low-status groups show out-group favouritism, whereas high-status groups show in-group favouritism, to maintain the social hierarchy). In order to deal with these problems SDT has begun borrowing heavily from social identity theory (SIT), whilst misrepresenting the latter to maintain the claim that SDT is different.

There are numerous criticisms to be made of SDT but we think the six most important are: (1) that the supposed evolutionary basis of the social dominance drive is largely fantasy; (2) that the social and psychological substance of the theory does not follow from and indeed is at odds with the so-called 'ubiquitous drive'; (3) the meaning and role of 'social dominance orientation' (SDO), the trait variable that dominates the research, are rendered problematic by a growing amount of evidence (see Schmitt,

Branscombe, & Kappen, 2003, hereafter SBK; Wilson & Liu, 2003, hereafter WL); (4) the BA hypothesis (in which subordinate groups support the hierarchy which oppresses them to the same extent as dominant groups) has already been demonstrably falsified (leading to the unacknowledged adoption of SIT to explain the conditions under which low-status groups will accept or reject the *status quo* and favour or derogate the dominant group); (5) the hypothesis of 'ideological asymmetry' (IA), supposedly an aspect of BA, is in fact patently inconsistent with it and illustrates that attitudes to dominance hierarchies and group inequalities are a function of one's group identity, interests and position in the social structure rather than any invariant biological drive, just as realistic conflict and social identity theories would expect; and (6) that SDT is both reductionist and philosophically idealist in that it seeks to derive all political ideologies, intergroup relations and indeed the whole social structure from one psychological drive or, in the theory's weaker but no less implausible form, one attitude (SDO), abstracted, reified and distorted to stand for some hard-wired original sin of biology ('the beast within'). Whereas, in fact, intergroup attitudes are not prior to but follow from social structure; they follow from the beliefs, theories and ideologies which groups develop to make sense of their place in the social structure and the nature of their relationships with other groups. SDO is a product of social life rather than an underlying cause.

## 1. The evolutionary basis of the social dominance drive

The evolutionary argument of SDT is in our view largely fantasy. It is one-sided speculation untainted by real evidence. Supposedly, somewhere in our past, humans belonged to 'primitive hordes' at constant war with each other, which found that group dominance hierarchies based on age and gender conferred an adaptive advantage in this struggle (Sidanius, 1993). All socially-constructed 'arbitrary-set' group hierarchies (based on race, class, religion, etc.) are nothing but the expression of the drive which evolved at this earlier time. Since arbitrary-set (i.e., 'social' rather than 'biological') groupings apparently only emerged with economic surplus some 10,000 or more years ago, they are plainly not the basis of the evolutionary drive. But what actual evidence is there that social differentiations were based on age- and gender-marked lines of group domination and oppression, as opposed to a cooperative division of labour, roles, responsibilities and expertise; that hierarchy involved domination as opposed to influence and legitimate authority (reflecting collective identification with and cohesion within the group); that influence hierarchies of subgroups and individuals were fixed rather than specific and distributed, varying in many ways as a function of the task, experience, personal abilities, the social context and cultural traditions? Where is the evidence that human groups did not make peace as well as war, cooperate as well as compete, combine into higher-order societies for the purposes of ritual and ceremony, for trade, for the exchange of people, the selection of mates, for the pure pleasure of sociable interaction and sharing experiences? And where is the evidence that societies controlled by force and coercion, power and compliance, by the oppression of half the members, are more efficient and successful than those marked by influence, acceptance, unity and mutual respect and care? Kershaw's recent (1998/2000) definitive biography of Hitler ought to dispel for all time the myth that authoritarian organization is either efficient or likely to confer adaptive advantage.

There is a constant confusion in SDT between the ideas of hierarchy and domination, as if they were the same, which they are not, just as between influence and

power (Turner, 1991). Contrary to SDT, it is societies which rely solely on domination, coercion and power, which cannot influence because they lack moral legitimacy, which are likely to disappear (Jost & Majors, 2001). The only real 'evidence' advanced for the evolutionary argument is SDT's own assertion that dominance hierarchies have always and will always exist. We think the claim is false and a classic case of the *post hoc* fallacy which brings crude biologism into disrepute: we say it exists and if it exists it must be adaptive and if it is adaptive that is why it exists. In human societies there are groups at war and peace, groups competing and cooperating, as a function of their interests, identities and values, social hierarchies based on domination and hierarchies based on the acceptance of legitimate influence, groups who want to dominate and groups which oppose all domination, there is social stability and historical change. All this flexibility and complexity of human social relations is an expression of our dynamic, transforming, social and psychological nature, a nature which has made social change, the construction of new social futures from present imaginings, its own peculiar social trait. We do not question the evolutionary basis of human psychology but we do reject SDT's one-sided, bleak fatalism.

## 2. Hard-wired biology versus the social structure of social conflict

Having postulated a 'ubiquitous drive' for group-based hierarchy as its founding idea, SDT immediately abandons it once the facts of social life are confronted. The term 'ubiquitous' means universal, general, everywhere, but the concept of and findings on SDO acknowledge and indicate that this is not so. If SDO is a measure of the drive (and what else is it?), then not only does drive vary but for every high social dominator there is a person with a 'predisposition' to reject and oppose group inequalities! The theory accepts that there are people, groups, social institutions, beliefs and political ideologies which are for social domination and those which are against it, there are hierarchy-enhancing (HE) legitimizing myths and hierarchy-attenuating (HA) legitimizing myths. Far from there being a universal drive for hierarchy, there is in fact a social conflict between HE and HA forces.

The only biological explanation provided for this conflict is to replace the original contention that dominance hierarchies are adaptive with the new, equally unfounded, contention that the conflict is adaptive, but this must be to argue that evolution has provided us with opposing predispositions! This is neither parsimonious nor plausible. The actual explanation is social-structural and is obvious to any intergroup theorist who takes seriously the idea of conflicting group interests. Groups hold different positions within the social-structure such that they have conflicting identities and interests which drive their support for, or rejection of, relevant social dominance hierarchies. The dominant groups which benefit from their position tend to develop beliefs, attitudes, ideologies and institutions consistent with their self-interest, whereas subordinate groups which are disadvantaged by their position tend to develop beliefs, attitudes, etc., consistent with theirs, the elimination of their subordination. And this is not to deny the vagaries and vicissitudes that can arise in the perception of self-interest by subordinate groups given the active efforts of dominant groups to disguise the conflict of interests and legitimate their dominance. As we shall see, the IA hypothesis of SDT is open admission that subordinate groups are more likely to reject the *status quo* than are dominant groups, consistent with the self-interest of both.

### 3. The meaning and role of the SDO construct

What the SDO concept represents is highly problematic. Jost and Thompson (2000) question whether SDO is a unitary construct and argue that SDO comprises two scales, opposition to equality (OEQ) and support for group-based dominance (GBD). They find that the meanings of OEQ and GBD vary depending on the status position of the group doing the rating. Low-status African-Americans, for example, were less in favour of dominance and inequality than European-Americans. SBK and WL demonstrate that the SDO scores of the same group of people will vary with the social categorization and intergroup relationship that is salient for them in the rating task (increasing with dominant and decreasing with subordinate in-group identities). SBK show that women's beliefs about inequality follow social identity concerns (contradicting SDT's 'invariance' hypothesis) such that if they perceive they are in the dominant position compared to men they show greater comfort with inequality. WL's work reveals that identification with gender groups mediates the relationship between gender and SDO. SBK highlight inconsistencies in the definition of SDO and question the extent to which it measures a general attitude towards inequality. Their findings indicate that SDO is a measure of specific forms of inequality that are relevant to identity concerns and the social context in which SDO is being assessed.

Further, it makes little psychological or ideological sense to force all aspects of social and political ideology onto the one dimension of being pro- or anti-group inequality. It does not relate well to more traditional ways of thinking about how political ideologies and personalities vary. For example, the right-wing versus left-wing continuum of political thought does not correlate well with being simply for or against group inequalities. Endorsement of Marxist socialism implies rejection of conservatism, racism, sexism and so on, but acceptance of a political hierarchy in which workers dominate capitalists. Rejecting the *status quo* is not the same as rejecting group inequalities, just as endorsement of individual freedom can be consistent with conservatism.

There are other objections to an individual difference approach to prejudice and intergroup relations which cannot be reiterated here (McGarty, 2001; Reynolds, Turner, Haslam, & Ryan, 2001; Turner, 1999a). Work by SBK, WL and SDT researchers themselves show that SDO is not a relatively stable, fixed individual difference variable but reflects specific forms of group-based inequality. It is best understood as a group attitude, which varies with self-categorization in contemporary contexts, the meaning of group membership, group position and intergroup relationships. SDO is presented as the 'primary psychological mechanism' underlying group-based social hierarchy but in fact it varies with and reflects group identity and behaviour in society. SDO's meaning cannot be understood independently of the political beliefs and social position of the raters.

### 4. The falsification of 'behavioural asymmetry' (BA)

The one important, distinctive and testable idea of SDT is that low-status group members should act against their self-interest and support the social hierarchy irrespective of their own social position. In fact, however, for reasons never properly explained, this hypothesis has been converted in the literature into the weaker prediction that this will only be the case for those high in SDO. But even the weaker prediction has been disconfirmed. Research on SIT going back to the 1970s has long shown that low-status groups will only tend to favour the high-status group to the degree that they

identify with it and/or perceive the intergroup relationship as legitimate and stable. They show in-group bias where they perceive group boundaries as impermeable, or are otherwise high in-group identifiers, and the relationship as illegitimate and unstable. SD work confirms that low-status SDO does not undermine these findings. Federico (1998) and Rabinowitz (1999), for example, show that low-status group members with high SDO (a) acted in similar ways to their low-SDO counterparts when group relations were unstable or (b) rejected the *status quo* more than those with low SDO when there was a high level of perceived injustice. Levin, Federico, Sidanius, and Rabinowitz (2002) and Sidanius, Levin, Federico, and Pratto (2001) accept that acceptance or rejection of the *status quo* by subordinate groups follows from its perceived legitimacy or illegitimacy, just as Tajfel and Turner (1979) hypothesized. They find support for the prediction that amongst members of low-status groups, SDO and out-group favouritism will be positively related only when the system is perceived as legitimate.

Tajfel and Turner's (1979) basic statement of SIT proposed that both high- and low-status groups would display varying strategies to deal with their position as a function of a number of factors. The theory set out three scenarios for low-status groups:

- (1) where group boundaries are permeable and the *status quo* is secure (stable and/or legitimate) people will tend to identify with, favour and seek to move into the high-status group (individual mobility);
- (2) where group boundaries are impermeable and secure, low-status group members should accept their inferiority on the status dimension and seek positive distinctiveness on alternative dimensions (social creativity); and
- (3) where group boundaries are impermeable and insecure (unstable and/or illegitimate) the low-status group should seek to change the *status quo* and display in-group bias (social competition).

SDT researchers now seem to be advancing the first and third of these hypotheses as their own while claiming there are problems with SIT because it cannot explain out-group favouritism. This is despite the fact that the existence of a 'universal tendency to favor ingroups over outgroups' (Sidanius, Levin, Rabinowitz, & Federico, 2000, p. 95) has always been rejected by SIT (Reicher, 2000; Turner, 1999b) and that Tajfel and Turner (1979) specifically based their analysis on its rejection. SIT never endorsed 'generic ethnocentrism' and, as anyone can read, offers a much more complex understanding of in-group and out-group favouritism. For low-status group members the theory states there will be 'out-group' favouritism on the status dimension under the conditions described by points 1 and 2 above (in relation to point 2, in-group and out-group favouritism can occur at the same time but on different dimensions). A key point is that irrespective of the respondent's sociological group membership SIT focuses on *psychological* group membership. If there is identification with the high-status group then 'out-group' favouritism actually means group members are favouring their psychological in-group (see SBK and WL). Based on SIT, then, BA should occur where low-status group members identify with the high-status group and/or the relations between the groups are secure. SD theorists may want to claim such predictions as their own, but in doing so they accept the falsification of their own theory and cease to propose a distinctive theoretical position. High SDO scorers should be working to maintain and legitimize the social system, irrespective of own group's position, and if this is not so, then what exactly does the theory predict that is new?

## 5. Ideological asymmetry and collective self-interest as an alternative to understanding attitudes to power

Ideological asymmetry (IA) is presented as part of BA but in fact is inconsistent with it. BA is meant to indicate support for social hierarchy irrespective of, and at the sacrifice of, own position and group interest. IA, however, actually argues that whether or not SDO predicts support for social hierarchy is a 'function of the social power of one's primary reference group' (Sidanius *et al.*, 2000; see Federico, 1998; Rabinowitz, 1999; SBK), that is, the relationship between SDO and support for hierarchy depends on whether it is in one's self-interest! IA helps make sense of growing findings that under certain conditions (e.g. insecure group relations) low-status group members high in SDO *reject* the *status quo* and act in the direction of their self-interest (by favouring the low-status group).

What are the implications of IA? First, it supports the position (consistent with realistic conflict theory and SIT; see SBK) that group attitudes to power and dominance hierarchies tend to reflect a group's collective self-interest, which is shaped by their identity, their position in the dominance hierarchy and their understanding of the nature of the social system. This implies, contrary to SDT, that groups are ethnocentric, not in any 'generic' sense, but in that they behave in ways that are in line with their identity-relevant interests, needs and values, based on their historically developed and ideologically influenced understanding of their social position and society. Differences in attitudes to power, in the adoption of HE and HA ideologies, and related conflicts between groups need not be derived from some supposed biological drive or fixed trait but are perfectly explicable in terms of the nature of the social structure itself where there are different group positions, identities and interests.

Secondly, IA illustrates the split nature of SDT and the fundamental fault line of inconsistency that runs through it: the inconsistency between supporting social dominance hierarchies irrespective of self-interest and supporting them because of self-interest (which both falsifies and makes superfluous the notion of a universal predisposition); the inconsistency expressed in the move from a ubiquitous drive to varying levels of SDO (from pro- to anti-) and the abandonment of universality for the conflict between HE and HA forces; the conceptual and empirical inconsistency in the meaning of SDO as embodying both a drive for in-group superiority and a desire for group inequalities in general (SBK; WL; Jost & Thompson, 2000); and the inconsistency expressed in the position that SDO drives intergroup behaviour while actually showing that SDO reflects group identities and intergroup relations (as in high-status groups scoring higher on SDO than low-status groups).

Thirdly, the inconsistency of SDT makes it indeterminate. It is not possible to advance both BA and IA and maintain a coherent theory. On the one hand we are presented with a theory that sounds dramatic, distinctive and novel because it claims we all support dominance hierarchies even when they go against our self-interest. On the other hand, faced with the empirical data showing the opposite, SDT embraces the self-interest explanation but claims that this too is part of behavioural asymmetry. The empirical findings are better explained by collective self-interest and identity shaped by position in, and understanding of, the social structure (Levin *et al.*, 2002). Despite the unrelenting misrepresentation and criticism of SIT in SD literature, we think it clear that SDT only 'works' because it has adopted SIT predictions.

## 6. The reductionism and philosophical idealism of SDT

Group attitudes, like group identities, are fundamentally shaped by social structure (Turner & Oakes, 1997). Groups develop attitudes to guide their behaviour and shape their actions. They do so in light of their social circumstances, their social position, their identity in the context of their shared understanding of the social system. SD and all intergroup research confirms this view, and yet SDT seeks to abstract and reify just one feature of some of these judgments and turn it into a *deus ex machina*. The theory argues that there is a 'ghostly' cause that originates outside of the workings of society, located in and vaguely justified in terms of our 'biology', which determines social life. This position is both reductionist, reducing social and political life to a psychological drive, and philosophically idealist, positing social consciousness as the cause of social being rather than deriving the former from the latter. The causes of social life are within society. Group attitudes are socially structured and their nature in terms of meaning, form and degree is a function of the complexity and contradictions of social life. This position is not a rejection of biology or evolutionary theory, and certainly not of psychology. The fact that there is a social psychological dynamic within human nature and society (making for political and social change, for the emergence of new social systems) is an expression of our biology and evolutionary past.

## Conclusion

In our view, SDT needs to sort out its internal inconsistencies before it can be considered a genuine theory. Its most powerful and distinctive claim, that there is a universal, ubiquitous drive for social hierarchy irrespective of group position, has been disconfirmed. We can see no evidence for the idea that there is a biological or psychological drive which preordains the endless recycling of society as a form of social domination, but much that fits an intergroup, social-structural perspective on social conflict and political ideology. Groups, group differences and hierarchies are inherent in social life, but this need not mean that social domination is. Theories like SIT and self-categorization theory reject the inevitability of prejudice and universal ethnocentrism; they point to the reality and positive possibilities of social and political change. Researchers in this tradition are currently working both to understand the conditions under which it takes place, including the conditions under which subordinate and dominant groups will accept or reject the *status quo*, and to explore actively the optimistic implications of these theories for the elimination of prejudice and the formation of complex human societies and organizations compatible with mutual respect, justice and cooperation between groups. This is not an argument to replace political analysis and action with social psychology, but it is an argument to develop a social psychology consistent with and supportive of positive political action.

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