The Relationship Between Social Dominance Orientation and Helping Behavior

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Abstract

Previous research suggests that people high in social dominance orientation (SDO) have low commitment to human rights, are less inclined to aid members of an out-group, and are less disposed to cooperate with members of an out-group. In the current research, we examined the relation between SDO and prosocial behavior. Participants were given questionnaires to measure SDO as well as the extent to which they would be willing to volunteer for two fictitious organizations, one promoting social equality and one promoting social inequality. Participants high in SDO were more likely to dislike the organization promoting social equality. Surprisingly, however, there was no association between SDO and attitudes toward the organization promoting social inequality. The research therefore provides evidence that, as prior research has shown SDO to predictive of harmful behaviors, SDO may also predict helpful behaviors as well.
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A common idiom states that children learn basic life lessons in kindergarten. One of the first

In an increasingly diverse world, it is clear that whereas some people tolerate and accept those of different cultures, others do not. Some people strive to live in ethnically diverse areas, cherishing friends and coworkers with different backgrounds. Conversely, others resent and despise members of other groups, fighting to maintain and increase segregation in their communities. Although a great many variables are associated with attitudes toward members of outgroups, one variable – social dominance orientation (Levin, 2004) – has repeatedly been shown to be a strong predictor of such attitudes.

People high in SDO generally think that their own group is superior to others, and feel that social differences are normal, acceptable, and even necessary; those low in SDO tend to be more egalitarian and usually feel the opposite, that inequalities between people or classes should be minimized (Halabi et al., 2008). SDO can contribute to many negative behaviors (Sidanius et al., 2001), but can it predict positive behaviors like helping?

Prior research has focused on the negative effects of SDO. Some studies have shown that people of different ethnicities, religions, and genders all experience aspects of social dominance towards other groups. Levin (2004) examined whether there were differences in SDO between various ethnic and religious groups if the status gap between the groups was viewed as greater. He also studied the perceived status gap between different genders and its effect on SDO. Samples consisted of Caucasians and African-Americans in the United States. The participants filled out a questionnaire on the topic of “social attitudes.” They also completed an SDO scale and were asked to rate the status of various groups in their society. In the American comparison between whites and blacks, whites had higher levels of SDO than blacks among those who perceived the status gap as large. However, when people saw the status gap as small, whites and blacks did not differ in SDO. The gender comparison revealed that American men consistently had higher levels of SDO than...
women, even among the group that saw the status gap between men and women as small. Those who thought the status gap was larger and in favor of men had lower SDO scores, contrary to the hypothesis. In general, the results showed that when individuals of various religious and ethnic backgrounds believe the status gap between groups to be larger, greater differences in SDO emerge between the groups. These differences often influence negative aspects of SDO which can lead to prejudice against out-groups.

Prejudice, racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism conflict with global issues such as human rights. In fact, SDO may have an oppositional effect on people’s support of human rights and their willingness to help others. McFarland and Mathews (2005) conducted a study that focused on individual differences that influence the support of human rights. They found that factors like dispositional empathy, education, and global knowledge were correlated with support for human rights. However, factors like authoritarianism, ethnocentrism and SDO weakened support for human rights. Participants were given a questionnaire containing items measuring attitudes toward scenarios of human rights abuse with policy choices; items measuring preferences between human rights and national self-interest goals; items regarding national foreign policy goals; and scales from the Human Rights Questionnaire. This study showed a variety of results. Social dominance was negatively correlated with both commitment to and endorsement of human rights, and was positively correlated with a desire for restriction of human rights. McFarland and Mathews (2005) argued that social dominance is related to “valuing power, dominance, and a lack of universal concerns,” which are correlated with low commitment to human rights (2005, 381). As a result, people with qualities like social dominance, authoritarianism, and ethnocentrism are potentially more likely to restrict the rights of, and less likely to help, an out-group that is unpopular.

Though the relationship between social dominance and human rights is an important issue, other studies have focused on more specific effects of social dominance and willingness to help members of an unpopular out-group. Halabi, Dovidio, and Nadler (2008) explored the relationship...
between social dominance orientation, group status, and the amount of help offered to members of
the in-group and the out-group. The researchers gave 99 Jewish-Israeli participants questionnaires,
which included the Hebrew version of an SDO scale. Participants in the threat condition were then
told that the number of Arab students in important departments would soon overtake the number of
Jewish students; those in the no-threat condition received no information about status discrepancies
between Jews and Arabs. Next, all participants were given scenarios involving helping Jewish or
Arab students and were asked to select which action they would most likely take. The three options
were to give no help, to give dependency-oriented help (e.g. do a task for the person), or autonomy-
oriented help (e.g. teach the person). Halabi et al. (2008) found that, when threatened, those high in
SDO offered less help to out-group members, and when they did offer help to out-group members,
more often gave dependency-oriented help. This study illustrated the effects of threats to an in-group
and the likelihood of helping an out-group member. It is particularly relevant and applicable to world
events because it showed that members of one nationality/ethnicity (the in-group) were less likely to
help members of a different nationality/ethnicity (the out-group). Thus, the research suggests that
SDO has an influence on prosocial behaviors towards other groups.

Clearly, there is a variety of research suggesting an association between SDO and negative
behavior. But might SDO also predict positive, helpful behavior? Sidanius, Pratto and Mitchell
(2001) provided some evidence suggesting so. They conducted a study investigating the effects of
social dominance orientation and in-groups on social value and social allocations. Participants were
first given a questionnaire, which included an SDO scale. Next, they were given a perceptual test
during which they had to estimate the number of dots briefly flashed on a screen. Upon completion,
they were, by random assignment, told that they were either “overestimators” or “underestimators.”
The group to which the person was assigned became the “in-group,” while the other group became
the “out-group.” Afterwards, the individuals made social allocations to members of their own group
and members of the other group. Participant then reported of intergroup evaluation, social distance,
and group cooperation. Results indicated that those who were low in SDO and who did not identify with the in-group were least likely to regard their group as more competent than the other; those who had greater in-group identification and SDO were more likely to want social distance from the out-group. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the greater a person’s self-esteem and social dominance orientation, the less disposed they were to cooperate with the other group. This study is important because it shows that, although sex, self-esteem, and group identification predict out-group discrimination, so too does social dominance orientation. Thus, SDO can be applied to a multitude of areas including social attitudes, political ideology, prejudice and racism, among others.

Building upon previous research regarding SDO and helping (Halabi et al. 2008; Sidanius et al., 2001), we examined whether SDO would predict helping behaviors in a more positive sense. We created two fictitious organizations. Whereas one espoused views promoting social inequality, the other identified more egalitarian goals. As McFarland and Mathews (2005) showed that SDO is negatively correlated with supporting human rights, we hypothesized that high-SDO participants would be less likely to show support for the organization advocating egalitarianism. In a similar vein, we hypothesized that high-SDO participants would be more likely to support the organization supporting inequality. Prior research has shown that people high in SDO are less likely to help members of an out-group (Halabi et al., 2008) and are less likely to cooperate with members of an out-group (Sidanius et al., 2001).

**Method**

**Participants**

Sixty-seven students enrolled in psychology classes at Union College took part in the study to fulfill course requirement or for monetary compensation. Ages ranged from 17 to 22 years. Thirty-seven females and 30 males participated in the study.

**Procedure**
Participants entered the research laboratory and were first given an informed consent form to complete. Next, participants were told that they would be reading about various organizations. The first organization, “The Union College Program for Excellence,” (UCPE), aimed “to put Union in its rightful place: As one of the very finest institutions, ranked higher than its peers, both regionally and nationally. Union deserves to be on top.” The second fictitious organization, called the “Union College Community Initiative,” (UCCI), aimed to “help members of the local community in their day-to-day lives… through job training, childcare, and other programs for the local community.” After reading each group’s description, participants indicated how willing they would be to volunteer for the organization on a 5-point scale anchored with not at all interested and extremely interested; participants then indicated how “important” they felt each organization was on a 5-point scale anchored with not at all important and extremely important. Participants then completed a SDO scale (Sidanius et al., 2001). Each statement was answered using a 7-item Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Finally, participants were debriefed and dismissed.

**Results**

We first assessed the extent to which SDO predicted responses to the “Community Initiative.” As predicted, there was a negative association between SDO and ratings of this group’s importance ($r = -.25, p = .02$), such that high-SDO people thought that the organization was less important. There was also a negative association between SDO and volunteerism likelihood ($r = -.33, p = .04$), such that high-SDO people indicated a lesser willingness to volunteer for the organization.

Next, we assessed the extent to which SDO predicted responses to the “Program for Excellence.” Contrary to our predictions, there was no association between SDO and ratings of this group’s importance ($r = .05, p = .86$), nor was there an association between SDO and volunteerism likelihood ($r = -.08, p = .19$). Thus, SDO did not predict either variable associated with this organization.
Discussion

Social dominance orientation may contribute to many areas of life including prejudice, racism, and ethnocentrism (Sidanius et al., 2001), but might also be able to predict more positive aspects, including prosocial behavior such as helping. The current research investigated whether social dominance orientation could predict whether people would indicate positive or negative attitudes towards different organizations.

In the current research, examined whether SDO could predict helping behaviors. We hypothesized that people higher in social dominance orientation would think that a program promoting inequality was more important and more worthy of their time. In addition, we hypothesized that those higher in SDO would rate the low egalitarian program as less important, and would demonstrate less interest in participating in the organization. The hypothesis was only partially supported. Results indicated that those high in SDO had more negative responses to the egalitarian program, but, surprisingly, responses to the program espousing inequality were not correlated with SDO.

Implications

Our research suggests that fundraising and volunteer-recruitment efforts for organizations that espouse egalitarian goals be targeted to people with appropriate (low) levels of SDO. Obviously, assessing individual levels of SDO would be unwieldy if not impossible. However, as SDO correlates with a variety of variables that are relatively easy to assess (e.g., Levin, 2004), assessing those variables, and then targeting efforts appropriately, might allow organizations to focus their resources more efficiently.

Limitations

Perhaps the most notable limitation of our research is that, whereas the predicted negative association between SDO and responses to the egalitarian organization was observed, the predicted positive association between SDO and responses to the status-enhancing organization was not. Our
failure to find support for this latter hypothesis may have been due to the fact that the “Union College Program for Excellence” may have appealed to all participants regardless of their levels of SDO. Indeed, it is possible that the extreme importance students place on the prestige of their college likely overwhelmed any potential effects of SDO. Perhaps using a status-striving organization that is not so central to participants’ sense of worth might provide support for this hypothesis.

The fact that we invented fictional organizations also is a potential limitation. We used such organizations because doing so allows for us to avoid any pre-existing attitudes or behaviors that might come into play had we used organizations that did exist. However, this choice reduces the external validity of our study, as it would be highly unlikely for a person to consider volunteering for an organization about which he or she only has several sentences’ worth of information. The highly artificial nature of our study, therefore, calls into question the generalizability of the observed negative association between SDO and responses to the egalitarian organization. That is, although we have argued that high-SDO people would be less likely to volunteer for such an organization, given that absolutely nobody would ever volunteer for an organization based on such scant information, it is hard to understand exactly what basis participants are using to make such decisions. This problem could be alleviated by either providing participants with more lengthy and detailed information about the fictitious organizations or by using well-known organizations instead of fictitious ones.

**Directions for Future Research**

One interesting avenue for future research would be to assess actual behaviors. Although it is likely the case that people’s reported intentions to volunteer would likely be predictive of actual behavior, direct measurement of such behavior would not require such an assumption. If such a study were conducted, we would expect that the same basic pattern of means would emerge, although the overall level of actual volunteerism would be lower than would be reported intentions to behave. This is due to the fact that for many people, particularly those for whom feelings about the programs
are moderate, it is far easier to simply indicate that they would volunteer than to actually engage in such behavior.

Another avenue for future research would be to assess attitudes or behavior toward an entity other than an organization. For example, it might be possible that SDO correlates with attitudes toward politicians with various stances toward issues related to class differences. Such a finding would be interesting, as it would further speak to the generalizability of the effects demonstrated in the current paper. Running such a study, using either a fictionalized or real politician, would likely show similar, if weaker results, due to the fact that, compared to faceless organizations, attitudes toward people might be impacted by a variety of factors independent of classist leanings: Factors such as gender, race, and attractiveness might all compete with SDO. Such factors would likely serve to weaken the relationship.

**Conclusion**

There is a wealth of research demonstrating that people high in SDO engage in behavioral and cognitive processes in a different manner than do people low in SDO. Our research added to this line of work by demonstrating that high-SDO people thought that an organization promoting egalitarian values was of less importance and less worthy of their time than were high-SDO people. Our findings thus suggest another way in which SDO predicts important processes; it also provides potential insight for people soliciting volunteers for egalitarian organizations.
References


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