Social dominance orientation: Cause or ‘mere effect’? Evidence for SDO as a causal predictor of prejudice and discrimination against ethnic and racial outgroups

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ABSTRACT

The question of whether SDO is a cause or mere effect of intergroup attitudes and behaviors has been the subject of heated debate. Much of the research brought to bear on the question, however, has used cross-sectional data that is not best-suited for making causal inferences. Using data from a panel study that tracked UCLA undergraduates over several years, we find support for the notion that SDO is a cause, rather than ‘mere reflection’ of prejudice and discrimination against outgroups. Specifically, using cross-lagged analyses among White students, we show that SDO measured in 1996 has significant marginal utility for predicting prejudice against a series of ethnic outgroups, as well as self-reported ingroup friendship preference, four years later, controlling for their 1996 levels. Conversely, outgroup affect and ingroup friendship preference measured in 1996 fail to predict SDO levels in 2000 once 1996 SDO levels are taken into account. Implications of these analyses for the debate on the interpretation of SDO as a relatively stable orientation towards group-based hierarchy in society are discussed.

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The status of social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) as a causal variable indexing individuals’ general preference for hierarchical relationships in society has increasingly become the subject of heated debate (e.g., Kreindler, 2005; Leh miller & Schmitt, 2007; Pratto et al., 1994; Schmitt, Branscombe, & Kappen, 2003; Sibley & Liu, 2010; Sidanius & Pratto, 2003; Turner & Reynolds, 2003; Wilson & Liu, 2003). Broadly speaking, SDO has been defined as ‘a very general individual differences orientation expressing the value that people place on non-equalitarian and hierarchically structured relationships among social groups’ (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, p. 61). In their discussion of SDO’s place in social dominance theory’s general framework, Pratto et al. (1994) argue that SDO is a cause of support for ideologies (e.g., racism and sexism), called hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths, that help to perpetuate group-based dominance hierarchies. Some researchers, however, have questioned the interpretation of SDO as a causal variable (e.g., Turner & Reynolds, 2003).

The present study aims to directly address the question of whether SDO can be considered a cause of specific attitudes and self-reported behavior towards particular groups in society, or alternatively, their ‘mere reflection’. Importantly, a view of SDO as a causal variable does not imply that SDO itself cannot also be influenced by prior attitudes, experiences, and membership in particular groups. Instead, it argues that above and beyond any ‘bottom-up’ influence of socialization, specific group-based attitudes, and/or social context on SDO, the latter remains an important ‘top-down’ cause of specific intergroup attitudes and behaviors. In short, SDO is not only an effect of group-relevant socialization experiences, attitudes, and social contexts. Rather, SDO is also a cause of specific intergroup attitudes and behaviors.

SDO: A ‘mere reflection’?

Since its original conception almost two decades ago, SDO has consistently been found to uniquely predict a multitude of intergroup attitudes and phenomena that contribute to the exacerbation or attenuation of hierarchy between groups across a wide range of different samples, countries, and contexts. The kinds of variables predicted include, for example, racism, sexism, xenophobia, generalized prejudice, political ideology, a range of group-relevant redistributive social policies, career choice, physiological arousal to outgroup faces, differential sentencing of dominant and subordinate criminal offenders, discriminatory behavior in minimal group experiments, support for wars of aggression but opposition to wars for humanitarian purposes, perceived ethnic discrimination, and anti-miscegenation...
attitudes (Altemeyer, 1998; Green, Thomsen, Sidanius, Staerklé, & Potanina, 2009; McFarland & Adelson, 1996; Navarrete et al., 2009; Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006; Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Despite its well-established ability to predict a wide array of group-relevant phenomena, SDO's status as a general orientation towards societal hierarchy and inequality affecting an individual's support for legitimizing ideologies and/or policies has been called into question by some scholars (e.g., Lehmiller & Schmitt, 2007; Schmitt et al., 2003; Turner & Reynolds, 2003). Arguing from a self-categorization and social identity perspective, these authors have questioned SDO's generalizability, stability, and causative status. Rather than being an antecedent of prejudice against a variety of outgroups, it is claimed that SDO is in fact simply a reflection of attitudes toward specific groups within specific social contexts (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2003). In their view, rather than measuring any general orientation towards intergroup inequality and group-based hierarchy, measures of SDO merely index attitudes toward whatever specific group relationships the individual had in mind while filling out the items of the SDO scale, and as such, are liable to large fluctuations depending on the different social contexts considered (e.g., Huang & Liu, 2005; Lehmiller & Schmitt, 2007).

From this perspective, the relationship between SDO and sexism, for example, is best accounted for not by assuming the existence of any generalized support for inequality (i.e., SDO) that causes support for a particular instantiation of hierarchy-enhancing ideology (i.e., sexism), but by positing that individuals were specifically thinking about the relationship between men and women when filling out the SDO measure (Schmitt et al., 2003, study 2). In a similar vein, differences in SDO levels between groups are seen to reflect the specific group interests of individuals for whom those categories were salient. Thus, the robust gender differences in SDO regularly observed across a multitude of countries (Lee, Pratto, & Johnson, 2010; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1994) are assumed to be completely context-dependent (e.g., Dambrun, Duarte, & Guimond, 2004; Huang & Liu, 2005; Schmitt et al., 2003). That is, these differences are argued to be driven solely by the fact that men thinking about the relationship between the sexes while completing the SDO scale will show greater support for hierarchy relative to women because, as the dominant group, they stand to benefit more from a continuation of the status quo (Schmitt et al., 2003). In support of this overall framework, Schmitt et al. (2003, study 4) found, using correlational data, that while sexism mediated the relationship between gender and SDO levels, SDO failed to mediate the relationship between gender and sexism. Based on these findings, the authors concluded that SDO was more accurately conceived of as a product of attitudes towards specific group relationships rather than as their cause. Huang and Liu (2005) reached similar conclusions based on their finding that, among Taiwanese, the expected gender difference in SDO was obtained when gender was salient prior to completion of the SDO scale, but not when regional group membership was primed.

The overall view of SDO as ‘mere reflection’ is well characterized by Turner and Reynolds (2003), when they state:

Intergroup attitudes are not prior to but follow from the 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 (p. 200, emphasis added).

SDO as cause and effect

In contrast to a ‘mere reflection’ account, we argue that SDO is best conceived as both an effect and a cause of intergroup attitudes and behaviors.

We do not dispute the view that SDO is affected by the structure and nature of intergroup relations. In fact, the influence of the social structure on the expression of SDO has been emphasized by social dominance theorists (e.g., Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, pp. 77–79; Sinclair, Sidanius, & Levin, 1998), and the importance of considering the context salient at the time of SDO’s measurement has become increasingly clear (e.g., Guimond, Dambrun, Michinov, & Duarte, 2003; Schmitt et al., 2003). In an important study examining malleability in SDO, Guimond et al. (2003, study 3) found that participants randomly assigned to receive feedback implying their suitability to socially dominant positions displayed higher levels of SDO relative to those who did not receive such feedback. Based on these and other similar findings, it is clear that SDO levels are not purely fixed, but are sensitive to social context. However, were individual SDO levels to fluctuate wildly and unpredictably from one context to another, one would not be able to conceive of it as a general, stable, and causal orientation. Notwithstanding the moderate variation in absolute levels of SDO expected across contexts, social dominance theorists also expect a relative stability in an individuals’ SDO level across time and social contexts, implying a personality or trait (stable) component to SDO.

In one important study exhibiting both context sensitivity and stability, Levin (1996) found that when primed with the internal Israeli context, the relatively high-status Ashkenazi Jews exhibited a higher level of SDO (measured with a random half of the scale) than their counterparts in the Jewish–Sephardic context. However, when primed with the national context of the Israeli context, the relatively high-status Ashkenazi Jews exhibited a higher level of SDO (measured with the second half of the scale) increased, and differences between the three Jewish groups disappeared. Critically, however, individual levels of SDO in one context significantly predicted SDO levels in the other, with the two subscales correlating r = 0.56 across contexts. This suggests that individuals who were relatively high in SDO in one social context continued to be relatively high in the next (see also Pratto et al., 2006).

SDO as cause

Several empirical findings support social dominance theorists’ contention that SDO plays a causative role in shaping attitudes and behaviors. If it were true that SDO merely reflected attitudes towards specific groups in particular contexts rather than serving as a general orientation, SDO would not be expected to correlate with behaviors in a minimal group context, with groups entirely unfamiliar to the participants. However, several studies have now shown that SDO measured before a minimal groups experiment can predict subsequent discriminatory behavior in that context (e.g., Amiot & Bourhis, 2005; Sidanius, Pratto, & Mitchell, 1994). For example, Amiot and Bourhis (2005) measured SDO levels of students in Quebec one month before conducting a minimal groups experiment that was ostensibly unrelated. Even though it would have been impossible for the participants to have been thinking about the fictional groups they had not yet been exposed to while completing the scale, SDO still predicted discrimination against minimal outgroups, one month later, on measures of both positive (γ11 = 0.25, p < 0.05) and negative outcome distributions (γ21 = 0.19, p < 0.05).1

Other studies, capitalizing on cross-lagged longitudinal designs, have argued for the causal status of SDO more convincingly still (e.g., Sibley & Duckitt, 2009; Sibley & Liu, 2010; Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007; Thomsen et al., 2010). While remaining subject to potential ‘third variable’ alternative explanations, cross-lagged longitudinal

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1 Given the correlational nature of this study, it remains possible, as in all correlational studies, that the effect was driven by a third variable rather than by SDO.
data allow for substantially greater confidence in drawing causal conclusions relative to cross-sectional correlational data. In their study 3, for example, Sibley et al. (2007) tested a model of SDO as an antecedent of support for hostile sexism, and showed that while hostile sexism measured at Time 1 (5 months prior) accounted for 40% of the variance in hostile sexism measured at Time 2, addition of Time 1 SDO level as a predictor of Time 2 hostile sexism resulted in a significant increase in explained variance, lending support to SDO’s status as a causal predictor of the sexist ideology.

Similarly, Thomsen et al. (2010) found support among White Americans for a model in which SDO is a cause rather than an effect of perceived ethnic victimization, another type of legitimizing ideology. Specifically, these authors found that while perceived ethnic victimization measured among Whites in 1997, and controlling for 1997 SDO, did not significantly predict levels of SDO in 2000, SDO levels measured in 1997, controlling for 1997 perceived ethnic victimization, significantly predicted increased levels of perceived ethnic victimization in 2000 (see also Sibley & Duckitt, 2009).

Furthermore, in important recent work, Sibley and Liu (2010) adapted a subset of the items of the SDO, scale to create three scales specifically measuring attitudes toward intergroup hierarchy based on ethnic, gender, and age-specific stratification. Subsequently, they showed that the attitudes towards the different types of inequality each contributed unique variance to the prediction of SDO scores measured with the original (unmodified) SDO, scale, leading them to conclude that SDO cannot in fact be reduced to attitudes in any one specific context.

Moreover, using a longitudinal cross-lagged design, the authors found that Time 1 SDO was a significant predictor of more specific inequality attitudes measured five months later at Time 2, even after the effects of Time 1 specific inequality attitudes and levels of right-wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1998) were controlled for. The authors also found significant reciprocal effects of specific inequality attitudes on SDO, leading them to suggest that SDO is both influenced by bottom-up processes, and itself exerts causal, top-down influences on specific attitudes.

Hypotheses

The specific aim of the current study is to more comprehensively explore the causal status of SDO as an antecedent to intergroup prejudice and discrimination. The ideological asymmetry hypothesis within social dominance theory argues that the relationship between SDO and intergroup attitudes and behaviors will typically be stronger among dominant rather than subordinate groups (e.g., Fang, Sidanius, & Pratto, 1998; Peña & Sidanius, 2002). Thus, we used only White participants for the purposes of our analyses.

Based on the research reviewed, and consistent with the view of social identity and self-categorization theorists, one would expect Whites’ SDO levels to be affected by prior attitudes and behavior towards specific ethnic outgroups. However, in contrast to these theorists, we hypothesize that Whites’ SDO levels will also function as a cause of prejudice and discrimination. In contrast to previous research in this area, we tested our hypotheses over a time period (four years) substantially longer than has typically been used. While earlier studies (e.g., Sibley & Liu, 2010) have established reciprocal effects of SDO and specific racial prejudice on one another, the reliability of these effects has only been examined over the course of five months. It is conceivable that these effects may be relatively transient, and as such, we test their reliability over a substantially longer time period. If, for example, the effects of specific attitudes on later levels of SDO hold only over relatively short periods of time, then the importance of this causal pathway may be questioned.

Moreover, while our study measured attitudes towards ethnic outgroups, examining Sibley and Liu’s (2010) conclusions in the American intergroup context, we also extend prior work by including a measure of (self-reported) behavior, the consequential preference for befriending members of one’s ethnic ingroup rather than members of outgroups. As such, we theoretically extend the debate on the causal nature of SDO by (1) expanding the analysis from an investigation of attitudes alone to the realm of relevant intergroup behaviors, and (2) by examining the reliability of these effects over a much wider timeframe.

Method

Participants

The data were taken from a five-wave panel study of undergraduates from the University of California, Los Angeles, started during the orientation for the freshmen entering in fall 1996 (for a full description of this dataset, see Sidanius, Levin, Van Laar, & Sears, 2008). In 1996, data were collected through the mass administration of a survey before the start of the freshman orientation program. Subsequent waves of data were collected by telephone interview during the spring terms of the following four academic years (1997–2000). We used two waves of data for the current study, one sampled in 1996 (the summer before college entry) and the other sampled four years later in 2000 (the spring of senior year). In total, 748 White students participated in the pre-college wave in 1996 (54% female), and of these, 275 (approximately 53% female) also participated in the senior wave, with 268 participants providing complete data for all the analyses computed.

Attrition analyses

To determine the degree to which those students participating in all waves of data collection differed from those who did not, extensive attrition analyses were performed on study ‘persisters’ (those present for all waves of the panel study) and study ‘dropouts’ (those who dropped out of the study at some point; see Sidanius et al., 2008, Appendix C). These two groups were compared in terms of their demographic and background characteristics, pre-college socio-political attitudes, orientations, and behavioral intentions, and the consistency and stability of their pre-college attitudes. The results of the attrition analyses indicated that attrition was unrelated to any of the variables of interest.

Measures

All of the variables were measured in both the pre-college wave in 1996 and the senior wave in 2000.

Social dominance orientation

This construct was indexed by the use of the following shortened, balanced four-item SDO scale: (SDO 1) ‘It’s probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom’, (SDO 2) ‘Inferior groups should stay in their place’, (SDO 3) ‘We should do what we can to equalize conditions for different groups’ (reverse-coded), and (SDO 4) ‘We should increase social equality’ (reverse-coded). The response scale ranged from 1 — Strongly Disagree to 7 — Strongly Agree, and all items were coded in the pro-dominate direction. The reliability of this shortened four-item scale was 0.77 in the 1996 wave and 0.69 in the 2000 wave. In the current analysis, the four items are used as indicators of a latent SDO factor.

Prejudice and discrimination

Intergroup prejudice and discrimination were measured with respect to two clusters of variables: (1) outgroup affect, indexing prejudice; and (2) ingroup friendship preference, indexing intergroup discrimination.

Outgroup affect was assessed by asking the White respondents three questions about how positively they felt towards (1) Latinos/Hispanics, (2) Asians/Asian Americans, and (3) African Americans/Blacks. All of the questions had a response scale from 1 — Very Negatively to 7 — Very Positive.
Positively. These affective scores were reflected so that high scores indicate high prejudice (i.e., more negative affect). The three items are used as indicators of a latent outgroup affect factor.

Ingroup friendship preference was operationalized as the portion of the respondents' closest friends who belonged to major ethnic outgroups, relative to the portion belonging to the respondents' ethnic ingroup. In four separate questions, respondents were asked how many of their closest friends at UCLA were (a) Caucasian, (b) Asian American, (c) African American, and (d) Latino. For each question, the response alternatives were 1 = None, 2 = Few, 3 = Many, 4 = Most, or 5 = All. Ingroup friendship preference was defined as the portion of one's closest friends who were White, minus the average number of one's closest friends who were non-White (i.e., African American, Asian American, and Latino).

Results

The means, standard deviations and intercorrelations for all variables can be found in Table 1.

Analyses

For both the latent measure of prejudice and the measure of discrimination, we estimated a cross-lagged, structural equation model (using LISREL 8.8) in which we estimated the potential effect of SDO in 1996 on the prejudice (discrimination) measure in 2000 (controlling for that same measure in 1996), and the potential effect of the prejudice (discrimination) measure in 1996 on the SDO measure in 2000 (controlling for SDO in 1996). All analyses used maximum likelihood estimates of model parameters.

We began examination of the hypotheses by use of cross-lagged analysis of the relationships between latent SDO and latent outgroup affect in 1996 and 2000, as both possible causes and effects of one another, over the four-year period. The cross-lagged model gave a reasonably good fit to the empirical data, $\chi^2(69, N = 270) = 146.06, p = 0.001, \text{RMSEA} = 0.06, \text{NFI} = 0.94, \text{CFI} = 0.97$ (see Fig. 1). As can be seen in Fig. 1, individuals' SDO level in 2000 was strongly predicted by their level of SDO in 1996 ($\gamma_{11} = 0.58, p = 0.000$). Furthermore, while one's level of SDO in 1996 appeared to significantly affect one's prejudice against generalized outgroups in 2000 ($\gamma_{21} = 0.25, p = 0.000$), the reciprocal pathway from prejudice in 1996 to SDO in 2000, while statistically significant, appeared to be much weaker ($\gamma_{12} = 0.10, p = 0.045$). These conclusions were affirmed when we constrained the relevant paths to 0.00 and subsequently examined the degree of model deterioration relative to the base model found in Fig. 1. When we restricted the path from SDO in 1996 to outgroup affect in 2000 to 0.00, there was a statistically significant model deterioration, $\Delta \chi^2(1, N = 270) = 11.94, p = 0.001$. In contrast, even though examination of the base model suggested a slight effect of outgroup affect in 1996 on SDO in 2000, when this path was constrained to 0.00, the deterioration in model fit was not statistically significant, $\Delta \chi^2(1, N = 270) = 2.58, p = 0.11$.

In a second set of analyses, we examined the four-year cross-lagged relationships between SDO and ingroup friendship preference, our measure of self-reported discriminatory behavior. This model provided a reasonably good fit to the empirical data, $\chi^2(29, N = 275) = 81.35, p = 0.000, \text{RMSEA} = 0.08, \text{NFI} = 0.91, \text{CFI} = 0.94$. As can be seen in Fig. 2, the cross-lagged analyses revealed that SDO in 1996 significantly affected ingroup friendship preference in 2000 ($\gamma_{11} = 0.21, p = 0.01$). However, the reverse path did not appear to be statistically significant ($\gamma_{12} = 0.00, p = 0.49$). These conclusions were further affirmed by the use of constraint analysis. Specifically, compared to the base model, restricting the path between SDO in 1996 and ingroup friendship preference in 2000 to 0.00 resulted in significant deterioration of model

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⁎ p < 0.05.

⁎⁎ p < 0.01.

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2 While all four SDO items have statistically significant loadings on the latent dimensions of SDO in 1996 and 2000, the loadings of items 1 and 2 are significantly lower than those of items 3 and 4. This is consistent with the well-known fact that the SDO Scale consists of two strongly related, yet distinct subdimensions, dominance and anti-egalitarianism (see Jost & Thompson, 2000), with items 1 and 2 largely reflecting the group dominance aspect of SDO and items 3 and 4 largely reflecting the anti-egalitarianism aspect of SDO. Thus, the correlated errors reflect the fact that in our model, the latent SDO factor is more reflective of anti-egalitarianism than of dominance.

3 Because we had only a single index of ingroup friendship preference, we used this manifest variable to represent the underlying latent construct. However, to account for the fact that this single indicator measures the latent construct with imperfect reliability, we inverted the square root of the estimated reliable variance into the $\lambda_{\theta_3}$ and $\lambda_{\theta_5}$ parameter matrices with respect to ingroup friendship preference in 1996 and 2000. Similarly, estimates of the error terms were inserted into the $\theta_{\theta_3}$ and $\theta_{\theta_5}$ (for a discussion of this procedure, see Herting, 1985, pp. 302–306). An estimate of the reliability of ingroup friendship preference in 1996 was based upon the test–retest correlation of the index between 1996–1997. An estimate of the reliability of ingroup friendship preference in 2000 was based on the test–retest correlation of the index between 1999–2000. The same substantive conclusions were also reached when assuming perfect measurement of the ingroup friendship preference variable (i.e., $\lambda_{\theta_5}$ and $\lambda_{\theta_5}$ were 1.00 and $\theta_{\theta_3}$ and $\theta_{\theta_5}$ were 0, as in standard manifest variables path analysis). Using this approach showed that ingroup friendship preference in 1996 had no effect on SDO in 2000 (i.e., $\gamma_{11} = 0.00$), while the effect of SDO in 1996 on ingroup friendship preference in 2000 was still statistically significant (i.e., $\gamma_{11} = 0.15, p < 0.05$). These substantive results also held when examining whether or not significant model deterioration occurred when constraining the appropriate $\gamma$-coefficients to 0.00.
fit, $\Delta \chi^2 (1, N = 275) = 5.21, p = 0.02$. In contrast, and consistent with the results found for outgroup affect, restricting the path between ingroup friendship preference in 1996 and SDO in 2000 did not result in deterioration of model fit, $\Delta \chi^2 (1, N = 275) = 0.00, p = 0.99$. Thus, earlier levels of SDO appeared to affect later levels of ingroup friendship preference, but not the reverse.

**Discussion**

The debate about the causal status of SDO has been a particularly contentious one (see Kreindler, 2005; Schmitt et al., 2003; Sibley & Liu, 2010; Sidanius & Pratto, 2003; Turner & Reynolds, 2003; Wilson & Liu, 2003). The importance of understanding whether or not SDO can
be conceived of as a relatively stable orientation with causal influence is heightened by the diverse array of consequential intergroup attitudes and behaviors with which it has been found to correlate (e.g., McFarland & Adelson, 1996; Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

However, much of the work that has attempted to address this question thus far has not used the type of analysis most suited to its investigation. As some commentators have noted (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2003; Sibley & Duckitt, 2009), a close examination of SDO’s causal status is best served by longitudinal designs that allow for a test of its ability to predict attitudes and behaviors in the future. The cross-lagged longitudinal analyses we have employed in this study allow for both an examination of the degree to which SDO is able to predict intergroup attitudes and behaviors in the future, controlling for their original levels, as well as simultaneously testing the degree to which SDO in the future, net of its original level, may be thought of as being caused by intergroup attitudes and behaviors. We are also able to measure the relationship between individuals’ SDO levels across a four-year time period. Importantly, our analyses permit a direct test of the claims of those researchers who have rejected the notion that SDO measures a relatively stable individual-difference orientation with a causal influence on more specific attitudes (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2003; Turner & Reynolds, 2003).

Based on prior work that has suggested social influences on SDO levels (e.g., Guimond et al., 2003; Levin, 1996, cited in Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), and most relevant for the purposes of this study, work suggesting the role of specific intergroup attitudes in influencing levels of SDO (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2003; Sibley & Liu, 2010), we expected to find a significant effect of prior levels of prejudice on subsequent levels of SDO, controlling for original SDO levels. However, this hypothesis received only tentative rather than consistent support. While there seemed to be a slightly significant effect of prejudice in 1996 affecting SDO levels in 2000, this relationship did not provide marginal utility in predicting SDO levels in 2000. Furthermore, our measure of discrimination in 1996 did not significantly predict SDO levels in 2000. Given the research that has suggested the influence of specific attitudes on SDO (e.g., Guimond et al., 2003; Schmitt et al., 2003), we are somewhat surprised by these findings. However, while other researchers (e.g., Sibley & Liu, 2010, study 1) have found effects of specific attitudes towards racial outgroups on SDO using similar longitudinal designs, ours is the first study to examine these effects over time periods greater than five months. Our findings suggest that effects of specific attitudes on SDO, while well-established, may be rather short-lived. If, as some researchers have argued, SDO is influenced to some extent by attitudes towards specific groups salient at the time of its measurement, this influence might be expected to diminish as the time interval between measurement of the attitudes towards these same groups and SDO increases. Conversely, to the extent that SDO measures a relatively stable, generalized preference for group-based inequality, we expect individuals’ SDO to chronically influence their specific attitudes and behaviors toward a variety of groups in ways favoring the perpetuation of hierarchical arrangements amongst these groups.

Thus, social dominance theorists argue that, net of any influences on SDO of specific attitudes, socialization experiences and the social structure more generally, SDO should causally influence specific intergroup attitudes and behaviors. We found consistent evidence in support of this view. If SDO were truly nothing more than a ‘mere reflection’ of attitudes and/or behavior towards specific groups in society, it would not be expected to have any marginal utility in predicting those same attitudes and behaviors four years later, over and above their original levels. However, for both analyses considered, SDO measured in 1996 significantly predicted prejudice and discrimination in 2000, net of levels of these same constructs in 1996.

These findings contribute to the growing literature supporting the view that even though SDO has been found to react to the priming of specific intergroup contexts (e.g., Guimond et al., 2003; Lehman & Schmitt, 2007; Levin, 1996), it should also be thought of as a relatively stable cause of prejudice against outgroups (e.g., Sibley et al., 2007) and legitimizing ideologies helping to justify opposition to social policies beneficial to subordinate groups (Sibley & Duckitt, 2009; Thomson et al., 2010). Additionally, our findings are broadly consistent with recent work by Sibley and Liu (2010), who found SDO to provide marginal utility in predicting attitudes towards inequality and dominance based on ethnic, gender, and age-specific stratifications five months later.

Our findings also extend prior work in a number of ways. As mentioned previously, the longer time period examined enables a much stricter test of hypotheses about SDO’s causal status. Furthermore, our study is the first to examine the cross-lagged relationship between SDO and self-reported intergroup behavior, namely the proportion of ingroup relative to outgroup friendships. Particularly given the well-established role of intergroup contact (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), and especially close contact such as cross-group friendships (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, submitted for publication), in reducing prejudicial attitudes towards outgroups, we consider our observation that SDO exerted a cross-lagged effect on ingroup friendship preference important.

An important question concerns why SDO causes prejudice and discrimination, particularly over time. Although a complete answer to this question requires thorough longitudinal analysis, we would expect high SDO individuals’ decreased inclusiveness and empathy for others (e.g., Pratto et al., 1994) to play important roles, as well as their need to justify the perceived disadvantages of subordinate groups. Social dominance theory expects high SDO individuals to justify the disadvantage of subordinate groups by endorsing hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths. For example, SDO increases support for hierarchy-enhancing acculturation ideologies such as assimilation, which in turn increase prejudice against immigrants (Levin et al., submitted for publication).

Conclusion

In sum, the claim that SDO is merely an epiphenomenal construct, fluctuating limitless in response to the salience of different specific group relationships in society, simply does not hold up to empirical scrutiny using appropriate longitudinal techniques over a lengthy time period. We do not agree that the established relationship between SDO and a multitude of group-attitude measures in a variety of contexts can be entirely accounted for by the notion that participants simply access their pre-existing attitudes towards the specific relevant groups while completing the SDO scale. While SDO is no doubt sensitive to specific social contexts, it should also be seen as a relatively stable cause, rather than as a mere reflection, of intergroup attitudes and behavior.

References


For a fuller discussion, see Sidanius and Pratto (1999).


