Social dominance theory

Social dominance theory (**SDT**) is a theory of intergroup relations that focuses on the maintenance and stability of group-based social hierarchies.[1] According to the theory, group-based inequalities are maintained through three primary intergroup behaviors: institutional discrimination, aggregated individual discrimination, and behavioral asymmetry. The theory proposes that widely shared cultural ideologies (i.e., legitimizing myths) provide the moral and intellectual justification for these intergroup behaviors.

Social dominance theory was first formulated in 1999 by psychology professors and researchers, Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto.[1][2] The theory begins with the observation that human social groups tend to be organized according to group-based social hierarchies in societies that produce economic surplus. These hierarchies have a trimorphic (3-form) structure. This means that these hierarchies are based on (1) age (i.e., adults have more power and higher status than children), (2) sex (i.e., men have more power and higher status than women), and (3) arbitrary-set, which are group-based hierarchies that are culturally defined and do not necessarily exist in all societies. Arbitrary-set hierarchies can be based on ethnicity (e.g., Whites over Blacks in the U.S.), religion, nationality, and so on.

Human social hierarchies consist of a hegemonic group at the top and negative reference groups at the bottom. More powerful social roles are increasingly likely to be occupied by a hegemonic group member (for example, an older white male). Males are more dominant than females, and they possess more political power (the iron law of andrarchy). Most high-status positions are held by males.[1]

Contents

Hegemonic group

Social dominance theory is a consideration of group conflict which describes human society as consisting of oppressive group-based hierarchy structures. The key principles of social dominance theory are:

- Individuals are stratified by age, sex and group. Group identification is based on ethnicity, religion, nationality, and so on.

- Human social hierarchy consists of a hegemonic group at the top and negative reference groups at the bottom.
- As a role gets more powerful, the probability it is occupied by a hegemonic group member increases (Law of increasing proportion).
- Males are more dominant than females; they possess more political power (the iron law of andrarchy). Most high-power positions will be held by males.
- Racism, sexism, nationalism and classism are all manifestations of this same principle of social hierarchy.

Group hierarchy

The reason that social hierarchies exist in human societies is that they were necessary for survival of inter-group competition during conflict over resources.[3] Essentially, groups organised in hierarchies were more efficient at combat than groups who were organised in other ways, giving a competitive advantage to groups disposed towards social hierarchies.

Social dominance theory explains the mechanisms of group hierarchy oppression using three basic mechanisms:

- Aggregated individual discrimination (ordinary discrimination)
- Aggregated institutional discrimination (discrimination by governmental and business institutions)

  - Systematic Terror (police violence, death squads, etc.)

- Behavioural asymmetry

  - systematic outgroup favouritism or deference (minorities favour hegemony individuals)

- asymmetric ingroup bias (as status increases, in-group favoritism decreases)
- self-handicapping (low expectations of minorities are self-fulfilling prophecies)
- ideological asymmetry (as status increases, so beliefs legitimizing and or enhancing the current social hierarchy)

These processes are driven by legitimizing myths, which are beliefs that justify social dominance:

- paternalistic myths (hegemony serves society, looks after incapable minorities)
- reciprocal myths (suggestions that hegemonic and outgroups are actually equal)
- sacred myths (Divine right of kings – religion-approved mandate for hegemony to govern)

Social dominance

SDT states that an individual's level of discrimination and domination can be conceptualised, or measured, with the social dominance orientation (SDO). This is an individual set of beliefs, sometimes viewed as something akin to a personality-trait, which describes the actors views on social domination and the extent to which they will aspire to gain more power and climb the social ladder. For instance, the SDO6 scale measures social dominance orientation by agreement with statements such as "Sometimes other groups must be kept in their place" and "It's probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups at the bottom."[4]

Duckitt and right-wing authoritarianism

Researcher at University of Auckland, John Duckitt, accepts the concept of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) and attempts to pair it to a related set of beliefs, Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA).[5] A scale was produced to measure RWA, and it was focused on conventionalism, authoritarian aggression and authoritarian submission.[5] These three core authoritarian characteristics were identified in the sociology book, *The Authoritarian Personality*.[5]

Duckitt proposes a model in which RWA and SDO are produced by socialization in childhood, by personality, and by worldview beliefs. Punitive socialisation is hypothesised as a cause of social conformity. This conformity is predicted to lead to a view of the world as a dangerous, dog-eat-dog place. These correspond to high–RWA beliefs, and in turn influence ingroup and outgroup attitudes. Unaffectionate socialisation is hypothesised to cause tough-minded attitudes. This promotes a view of the world as competitive, similar to the jungle of the evolutionary past. The need to compete is aligned with high SDO, and, again, influences ingroup and outgroup attitudes.

These two streams of causation may co-occur. Parenting styles may be both punitive and unaffectionate, and a competitive-jungle worldview is compatible with world–as–a-dangerous-place. Once established, high–RWA beliefs are hypothesised to promote high–SDO beliefs and vice versa. This predicts high correlations between the two, with environmental origins. On top of this, outgroup and ingroup attitudes may reinforce each other.

Duckitt further examines the complexities of the interaction between RWA, SDO and a variety of specific ideological/prejudicial beliefs and behaviour. For instance:

- RWA beliefs are activated by social threat or threatening out-groups
- SDO beliefs are activated by competition and intergroup inequalities in status and power
- RWA is a stronger predictor of prejudice when the outgroup is threatening
- When group status is unstable, SDO is associated with higher ingroup bias than when group status is stable
- Outgroup liking is best predicted by similarity to the ingroup, while outgroup respect is predicted by status and technological advancement

Duckitt concludes that RWA and SDO have been well studied, and points out that this way of examining belief-paradigms and motivation-schemas could also be useful for examining anti-authoritarian-libertarian and egalitarian-altruistic ideologies.

Relation to Marxism

SDT is influenced by Marxist and socio-biological ideas. Marx described the oppressive hierarchy of hegemonic group(s) dominating negative reference groups, in his examples the bourgeoisie (owning class) dominate the proletariat (working class) by controlling capital (the means of production), not paying workers enough, and so on. However Marx thought that the working class would eventually grasp the solution to this oppression and destroy the bourgeoisie in a revolution.

Felicia Pratto and legitimizing myths theory

Legitimizing myths theory is about ideologies that explain and justify social systems. The term "myth" is meant to imply that everyone in society perceives these ideologies as explanations for how the world works, not whether or not they are true or false (indeed Sidanius and Pratto make no claims as to the truthfulness, morality or fairness of these ideologies).[6] There are two functional types of legitimizing myths: (1) hierarchy-enhancing and (2) hierarchy-attenuating legitimizing myths. Hierarchy-enhancing ideologies (e.g., racism or meritocracy) contribute to greater levels of group-based inequality. Hierarchy-attenuating ideologies (e.g., anarchism and feminism) contribute to greater levels of group-based equality. People endorse these different forms of ideologies based in part on their psychological orientation toward dominance and their desire for unequal group relations (i.e., their social dominance orientation; SDO).[4] People who are higher on SDO tend to endorse hierarchy-enhancing ideologies, and people who are lower on SDO tend to endorse hierarchy-attenuating ideologies. SDT finally proposes that the relative counterbalancing of hierarchy-enhancing and -attenuating social forces stabilizes group-based inequality.

Various processes of hierarchical discrimination are driven by *legitimizing myths* (Sidanius, 1992), which are beliefs justifying social dominance, such as paternalistic myths (hegemony serves society, looks after incapable minorities), reciprocal myths (suggestions that hegemonic groups and outgroups are actually equal), and sacred myths (the divine right of kings, as a religion-approved mandate for hegemony to govern).[7] Pratto et al. (1994) suggest the Western idea of meritocracy and individual achievement as an example of a legitimizing myth, and argues that meritocracy produces only an illusion of fairness.[4] SDT draws on social identity theory, suggesting that social-comparison processes drive individual discrimination (ingroup favouritism). Discriminatory acts (such as insulting remarks about minorities) are performed because they increase the actors' self-esteem.

Biological sex and dominance

Consistent with the observation that, in patriarchal societies, males tend to be more dominant than females, SDT predicts that males will tend to have a higher social dominance orientation (SDO). As such males will tend to function as hierarchy enforcers, that is, they will carry out acts of discrimination such as the systematic terror by police officers (Sidanius, 1992) and the extreme example of death squads and concentration camps.[7] This is supported by evidence such as police officers possessing measurably higher levels of SDO.[8] SDT also predicts that males that carry out violent acts have been predisposed out of a conditioning called prepared learning.[9] This learned fear readily enables males to commit acts to groups they fear.

Criticisms

John C. Turner and Katherine J. Reynolds (2003) from the Australian National University published in the British Journal of Social Psychology a commentary on SDT titled *Why social dominance theory has been falsified* which outlined six fundamental criticisms based on internal inconsistencies:[10]

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;

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.

Lui and Wilson (2010), conducted research to further examine the role of gender in comparison to levels of social dominance orientation.[11] The study conducted two tests looking at the relationship between gender-social dominate orientation and if it's moderated by strength of gender group identification and found, "strength of gender identification was found to moderate the gender–SDO relationship, such that increasing group identification was associated with increasing SDO scores for males, and decreasing SDO for females."[11] Therefore this study raised questions about gender as group membership and if it's a different status compared to other group memberships, possibly undermining the theoretical basis of SDT.[11]

See also

- Cultural hegemony
- Elite theory
- F-scale (personality test)
- Habitus (sociology)
- Hegemony
- Ideology
- Political psychology
- Power (social and political)
- Social constructionism
- Will to power

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Further reading

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External links

- "Jim Sidanius" (http://scholar.harvard.edu/sidanius/home).
- "Felicia Pratto" (http://socialpsych.uconn.edu/felicia_pratto/).
- "John Duckitt" (http://www.victoria.ac.nz/cacr/about-us/people/associates/john-duckitt).