**Duck, Duck, Dominance: Group Status Identity as a Predictor of Social Dominance Orientation in Children**

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**Abstract**

Given social dominance orientation’s (SDO) implication in a wide variety of forms of prejudice, an understanding of its development is imperative for intervening in the perpetuation of social inequality. Previous research has revealed that children form attitudes toward social groups and intergroup relations not only through the absorption of family members’, friends’, and other socializing factors’ attitudes, but also through their independent capacity for perceiving and reacting to social categories and hierarchies. To test whether children’s status identities might motivate their support for (or rejection of) social, children ages 5 to 10 were visibly randomly situated within a novel group hierarchy as members of a high or low-status group. Assignment to the high-status condition (relative to the low-status condition) negatively predicted empathy for outgroup members but had no significant effect on support for social hierarchy (SDO). Both status conditions expressed clear bias in favor of the ingroup. Additionally, demographic characteristics like family SES and age each emerged as negative predictors of SDO scores which, in turn, positively predicted ingroup bias.

**Introduction**

Social hierarchy is nearly universal throughout human societies and groups. Whenever communities stratify into groups of differing statuses, human lives are powerfully influenced by the status of the groups to which they are assigned. From the most banal of microaggressions to the profound horrors of slavery and genocide, our group identities have profound implications for the burdens and privileges we can expect to receive. As a brief example from the United States context, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that White Americans (as members of a dominant racial group) can expect to live, on average, four to seven years longer than Black or Native Americans, respectively (Hassanein, 2021). Around the world, women are nearly twice as likely to die at the hands of their partners or family members than men (Lemahieu & Me, 2019). Given the enormous consequences of group stratification along status tiers, a rigorous understanding of the factors which amplify and attenuate social hierarchy is imperative.

Social dominance theory (SDT) draws on historical realities and empirical research to offer a framework for understanding how group-based inequality is challenged or perpetuated. Central to SDT is the observation that individuals differ in their level of support for social hierarchy, an attitude referred to as social dominance orientation (SDO). Support for social hierarchy is thought to arise from a view of the world as inevitably competitive and, consequently, requiring the ruthless advancement of one’s own interests (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Pratto et al. 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 2012). This pathway between a ‘competitive jungle’ worldview and SDO serves as an intermediary conduit between personality traits (i.e. agreeableness and empathy) and a wide variety of prejudiced attitudes (i.e. sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, fatphobia) (Altemeyer, 1998; Carvacho et al, 2013; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Lee et al., 2011; Ruffman et al., 2020; Sidanius & Pratto, 2012). Thus, SDO is frequently conceptualized as an aspect of the ‘prejudiced personality’ (Altemeyer, 1998; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Schmitt et al., 2003; Sidanius et al., 2013). In support of this conceptualization of SDO, longitudinal research has shown that, like personality characteristics, individuals’ SDO levels exhibit relative stability over months and years in adulthood (Asbrock et al., 2010; Duriez et al., 2007; Sidanius et al., 2013).

At first glance, Social Identity Theory (SIT) and its supporting literature seem to offer a robust competing explanation of group-based prejudice. Rather than individual disposition, SIT implicates self-identification with groups as the root of prejudice (Bettencourt et al., 2001; Dunham et al., 2011; Hornsey, 2008). Previous research indicates that the strength with which one identifies with a group reliably predicts prejudice in favor of that group’s other members (Bettencourt et al., 2001; Dunham et al., 2011; Hornsey, 2008). This effect of self-identification does not depend on whether the group is ‘real’ (rich with historical and cultural meaning like gender, ethnic, and racial groups) or ‘novel’ (created through random assignment and without prior associations) (Bettencourt et al., 2001; Dunham et al., 2011; Hornsey, 2008). When imbued with high social status, novel groups have been shown to exhibit even greater prejudice in favor of their ingroup and to more reliably exhibit prejudice against outgroups (Bettencourt et al., 2001, Hornsey, 2008).

In a synthesis of SIT and SDT perspectives, however, Guimond et al. (2003) found that male French college students visibly randomly assigned to imagine becoming a “Director” as part of a management team exhibited higher levels of SDO than students assigned to imagine becoming a “Receptionist.” Furthermore, the high-status group’s increase in SDO fully mediated an increase in prejudice against North African people (a salient marginalized group in France) brought on by the experimental manipulation. While the conclusions of this investigation must be interpreted with some caution due to the study’s small sample size (N = 30) and resulting lack of statistical power (the increase in SDO was large but marginally significant, *p* = .089, Cohen’s *d* = 0.669), further support for the link between group status identities and SDO can be found in similar investigations. Among University of Kansas undergraduate students, Schmitt et al. (2003) found that manipulating students’ perceptions of the relative status of their university influenced their SDO levels. In particular, the researchers found that students led to believe that their university received more state resources than nearby universities more strongly endorsed SDO than students led to believe that their university received fewer state resources.

Closely related to group status identity, self-perceptions of power have also been shown to elevate SDO levels. Guimond et al. (2003) additionally demonstrated that participants led to believe that their talent for leadership is above-average expressed higher SDO levels relative to participants led to believe their talent for leadership is merely average (this conclusion was not limited by its statistical power, N = 74). Moreover, Heering & Leone (2019) found that Italian college students given the power to decide the future of another person’s employment (relative to students merely asked to give recommendations for how to manage an unruly employee) also exhibited higher SDO levels. In addition to these demonstrations of SDO’s malleability to experimental manipulations of group status identity and power, a large body of literature substantiates that adults with high-status social identities (i.e. White people, straight people, and, especially, men) broadly tend to exhibit higher levels of SDO (Altemeyer, 1998; Lee et al., 2011, Pratto et al., 1994; Schmitt et al, 2003; Sidanius & Pratto, 2012). In sum, empirical evidence supports that adults’ support for social hierarchy is motivated by position within social hierarchy, a core tenet of SDT (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 2012).

The development of SDO prior to adolescence remains largely unexamined in favor of the development of SDO through adolescence (Cadamuro et al., 2021). In particular, investigations of SDO’s development to date have focused on illuminating the pathways through which adolescents passively absorb intergroup attitudes from their family and peers. Parents, especially, have been shown to play an important role in the development of SDO. Parents’ SDO scores have been repeatedly found to positively correlate with their adolescent children’s SDO scores (Altemeyer, 1998; Chatard & Selimbegovic, 2008; Duriez & Soenens, 2009; Ruffman et al., 2020). Furthermore, adolescents whose parents emphasize the importance of external (rather than internal) achievements tend to exhibit increases in their support for social hierarchy over time (Duriez, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2007). Other family members can have similar effects. Grandparents’ SDO scores have been found to incrementally predict grandchildren’s SDO scores when controlling for the effects of parents’ SDO scores (Chatard & Selimbegovic, 2008). Beyond the influence of family ties, friendships may play a role in SDO’s socialization: among nine and ten-year-olds, friendships with marginalized peers have been found to be associated with lower SDO scores (Vezzali et al., 2018).

A growing body of evidence substantiates that, beyond passively absorbing attitudes about intergroup relations, young children actively perceive and reason about social hierarchy. Empirical evidence from infants indicates that children are capable of conceptualizing social status by as young as six months of age: infants of this age are able to infer group status from group size and expect individuals of differing statuses to receive differing treatment (Pun et al., 2016; see also Pun et al., 2017). By the time children first attend school, they are not only capable of locating themselves and others within the socioeconomic class hierarchy, but also exhibit a preference for wealthier peers’ company and an expectation that wealthier peers are more competent than poorer peers (Hazelbaker et al., 2018; Shutts et al., 2016). As further evidence that young children perceive and form attitudes about social hierarchy, children between the ages of three and eight have been shown to reject and rectify unequal distributions of resource inequalities attributed to gender but not resource inequalities attributed to merit (Rizzo et al., 2020).

Given children’s ability to perceive and react to social hierarchy from both a first- and a third-person perspective, parental socialization may not be necessary for children to develop favorable views towards social hierarchy. Rather, just as assignment to a high-status group motivates adults to more strongly endorse social hierarchy, membership in a high-status group may motivate children to independently endorse social hierarchy. Assignment to a high-status novel group (relative to assignment to a low-status novel group) has been previously shown to disincline three to eight-year-old children to rectify resource inequalities or believe that resource inequalities are unfair (Rizzo and Killen, 2020). Additionally, the same authors found that three to eight-year-old children assigned to a high-status novel group are less likely to demonstrate an understanding of others’ mental states (i.e., demonstrating theory of mind) than children assigned to a low-status novel group (Rizzo & Killen, 2018). This finding is conceptually consistent with evidence from adults that high socioeconomic status individuals pay less visual attention to the people around them (Dietze & Knowles, 2016). These observed effects of young children’s assignment to a high-status novel group reflect an acceptance of inequality and a lack of empathy, both of which are known to be associated with high levels of SDO (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Sidanius et al., 2013; Sidanius & Pratto, 2012).

Thus, integrating a status-motivated perspective of SDO in accordance with SIT and extending previous research on the development of SDO in children of younger ages, the present study seeks to examine whether children’s position within a novel social hierarchy predicts their support for hierarchy generally. This question has important implications for the development of a socially-dominant worldview and, consequently, prejudice. If a fleeting experience of privileged social status is sufficient to increase SDO levels, chronic reinforcement of high social status through the subtle cues that enable race, class, and gender hierarchies (among other systems of social difference and subjugation) may play a crucial role in the adoption of socially-dominant and prejudiced beliefs. Subsequently, we test the hypothesis that participants assigned to a high-status novel group will exhibit higher levels of SDO than participants assigned to a low-status novel group (A). Additionally, commensurate with prior literature, we expect that higher SDO scores will predict greater ingroup bias (B) and reduced expression of outgroup empathy (C). Thus, we hypothesize that SDO will at least partially mediate the relationship between group status assignment and both ingroup bias and outgroup empathy.

Furthermore, if children’s attitudes towards social hierarchy are sensitive to their status identities, children’s gender identities, as a highly salient self-defining social status identity, should also influence their attitudes towards social hierarchy. Specifically, given most societies’ patriarchal organization, girls should be less accustomed to thinking of themselves as high-status than boys. Consequently, girls’ attitudes towards social hierarchy should be more sensitive to the effects of random assignment to a high-status novel group than boys’ attitudes. Therefore, we hypothesize that girls will exhibit a greater increase in SDO scores from the low to high-status condition relative to boys (D).

**Methods**

**Sample** Participants between the ages of five and ten (*M* = 7.79; *SD* = 1.76) were recruited in-person at community partner sites in and around Philadelphia, PA between November 2021 and March 2022. As reported by their parents, 42 participants identified as female, 30 participants identified as male, 8 participants identified as Black or African-American, 7 participants identified as Asian-American, 1 participant identified as Hispanic or Latino, 13 participants listed two or more racial identities, 30 participants identified as White, and the remaining participants’ parents did not indicate their racial identity. Parents of our participants indicated that their families, relative to the national median, had attained a somewhat higher level of education (the median level of education was having completed college), and perceived themselves as towards the higher end of the socioeconomic hierarchy as indicated on a 10-point scale (*M* = 7.27, *SD* = 1.51).

**Procedure** Following attainment of parental consent, participants were given the opportunity to spin an orange and green spinner to discover which of two fictional groups, “Zarpies” or “Gorps,” they would be a member of for the duration of the study. While the color the spinner landed on ostensibly determined which group the participants would join, the status condition and group label (Zarpie or Gorp) the participants were, in reality, randomly assigned by participant identification number and counterbalanced across male and female-identifying participants.

To foster identification with their new group, participants were given a paper wristband matching the color the spinner had landed on and told that other ingroup members shared the participant’s favorite hobby while outgroup members did not enjoy the participant’s favorite hobby. Participants were then presented with pictures and a narrated story describing a norm-setting inequality (“Zarpies always get to decide the rules for the games they play together”) and a resource inequality (“Zarpies always get three stickers” while “Gorps only get one sticker”). The story and pictures depicted this relationship in two settings, at the playground and at school, to emphasize the generalizability of the group status dynamic. To check for comprehension, participants were asked which group set the rules of the games played together and, later, which group members received only one sticker after each depiction of the status relationship within a context. The story ended with ‘sticker time’ when the participant received one or three stickers depending on their status condition.

Immediately following the status manipulation, participants verbally completed the group feeling thermometers, the outgroup empathic response scale, two open-ended items about their explanations for the two groups’ status, and a child-friendly SDO scale (Cadamuro et al., 2021; Swart et al., 2011). Before completing the final measure, participants were asked to “...think of all of the groups in the whole world (maybe you’ve been part of a group at school).” and then provide an example of a group they had in mind. Upon completing the SDO measure, the researcher debriefed the participant by emphasizing that participants were no longer Gorps or Zarpies and rectifying the sticker inequality between low and high-status condition participants. All participants were awarded an additional sticker (very different in kind and size from the stickers used for the status manipulation) and thanked for their contribution.

**Measures** All measures were verbally assessed and, excepting the open-ended response items, completed using a four-point scale accompanied by images of thumbs ranging from being clearly pointed down and red in color to being clearly pointed up and green in color (see supplementary materials). To measure attitudes toward the ingroup and outgroup, four-point feeling thermometers ranging from “really not like” to “really like” were employed (e.g. “How much do you like the Zarpies?”). Participants’ ratings of the outgroup were subtracted from their ratings of their ingroup to give an ingroup bias score. Swart et al.’s (2011) Affective Empathy measure was adapted to fit the present study’s story to measure outgroup empathic response with a scale anchored by “definitely not” and “definitely yes” (e.g. “If you knew that a Zarpie was feeling sad, would you also feel sad?”).

SDO was measured using Cadamuro et al.’s (2021) two-factor child SDO6 scale which is comprised of two factors: SDO-Dominance (SDO-D) and SDO-Anti-egalitarianism (SDO-E ;= 0.54, = 0.51, = 0.63). Given that this scale had not previously been used with children as young as five years of age, the reliability of the scale was compared across two age cohorts each containing half of the sample. Despite the experimenters’ expectations that some items would be problematic due to anecdotal experiences of participants struggling to understand words like “inferior” in item 9, the difference in the reliability of the scale between age cohorts was minimal (= 0.47,= 0.52).

In open-response format, to assess whether the participants made meaning of their random status assignment (via spinner), children were asked, “Why do you think **you** are a Zarpie/Gorp?” Similarly, to assess if the participants generated their own explanation of the status hierarchy depicted by the story (which gave no explanation), participants were asked, “Why do you think Zarpies/Gorps never get to decide the rules and always get as many stickers?” if they were in the low-status condition or “Why do you think Zarpies/Gorps always get to decide the rules and always get more stickers?” if they were in the high-status condition.

**Results**

**Preliminary Analyses** Two-tailed Student-t tests indicated that, as expected, the color or name of the group to which participants were assigned had no significant effect on ingroup bias, outgroup empathy, or SDO (color: *t*(60) = 1.64, *p* > .1; names: *t*(67) = -1.66, *p* > .1). Overall, children tended to exhibit bias in favor of their ingroup (M = 0.46, SD = 1.59), empathize with compromised outgroup members (M = 3.09, SD = 0.74), and be skeptical of social hierarchy (M = 1.83, SD = 0.52) though they were more likely to reject subtle anti-egalitarianism (M = 1.62, SD = 0.64) than callous dominance (M = 1.99, SD = 0.64). Given the strong right-skew of each SDO variable (particularly SDO-E), each SDO variable was log-transformed in all subsequent analyses (SDO: M = 0.56, SD = 0.29, SDO-E: M = 0.41, SD = 0.37, SDO-D: M = 0.64, SD = 0.32).

As seen in Table 1, several significant correlations emerged between our variables of interest: SDO and

SDO-E were each positively associated with ingroup bias (*r* = .23, *p* < .05; *r* = .51, *p* < .01, respectively). SDO and SDO-E also shared negative relationships with participant age and family socioeconomic status (*r*(SDO, age)= -.38, *p* < .01; *r*(SDO-E, age)= -.29; *p* < .05, *r*(SDO, SES)= -.32, *p* < .05; *r*(SDO-E, SES)= -.38, *p* < .01 ). SDO-D, notably, was not significantly associated with any other variable (excepting SDO). In addition to its relationships with SDO and SDO-E, outgroup empathy also significantly positively correlated with participant age (*r* = .25, *p* < .05) and was negatively associated with high status in the group status condition (*r* = -.24, *p* < .05). Regrettably, Table 1 also reveals that our sample’s age distribution by gender was skewed such that the boys in our sample were significantly older than the girls (*r* = -.39, *p* < .01). This limitation of the present investigation is further examined in the discussion.

**Main Analyses** In contrast to Bettencourt et al.’s (2001) findings that adults assigned to high-status novel groups consistently exhibit greater ingroup bias than adults assigned to low-status or status-less novel groups, the mean ingroup bias scores of each status condition did not significantly differ (Mhigh = 0.23, Mlow = 0.70, *t*(72) = -1.31, *p* > .19). While status condition did not moderate ingroup bias, a simple linear regression of outgroup empathy scores on an indicator variable for group status condition demonstrated that children in the high-status condition were significantly less likely to empathize with outgroup members than children in the low-status condition (*b* = -0.36, *p* < .05). This finding conceptually replicates Rizzo and Killen’s (2018) finding that children assigned to a high-status condition are less likely to exhibit empathy and theory of mind. As a further replication of previous research, a simple linear regression of outgroup empathy on participant age showed that children, on average, became markedly more empathetic toward outgroup members as they aged (*b* = 2.37, *p* < .001).

Turning to SDO and its potential role as a mediator of the effect of group status assignment on ingroup bias and outgroup empathy, simple linear regressions of outgroup empathy and ingroup bias on SDO showed a significant positive effect of SDO on ingroup bias but only a marginally significant negative effect of SDO on outgroup empathy (*b* = 1.28, *p* < .05; *b* = -0.58, *p* < .07, respectively). Crucially, however, the effect of group status assignment on SDO was only marginally significant and directionally *negative* indicating that participants in the high-status condition marginally *opposed* social hierarchy more than participants in the low-status condition (*b* = -0.12, *p* < .09). Subsequently, SDO could not have served as a mediator of the negative effect of group status condition on outgroup empathy.

**Exploratory Analyses** Given the contradiction between the theoretical assumptions of hypothesis (D) and the observation of a marginally significant and reversed (relative to the hypothesized effect) effect of group status condition on SDO, a multivariate linear regression of SDO on group status condition, participant gender, and an interaction term yielded (unsurprisingly) no significant effects (interaction term: *p* > .9, F(3,64) = 1.21). More surprisingly, the frequent finding that men and boys have higher average SDO scores than women and girls did not emerge in our sample even when accounting for the lopsided age distribution by including age as a control (*bgender* = -0.03, *p* > .65). In fact, gender’s only significant relationship with another variable was a positive relationship with outgroup empathy when included as a covariate of participant age and group status condition (*bgender* = 0.45, *p* < .01).

Unexpectedly, simple linear regressions revealed that the only significant demographic predictors of SDO were the subjective socioeconomic status of the participant’s family and the participant’s age (*bSES* = -0.06, *p* < .05; *bage* = -0.06, *p* < .001).

**Discussion**

Despite the present work’s replication of several previous findings, only one of its hypotheses (the positive hypothesized effect of SDO on ingroup bias) was fully supported. While the negative hypothesized effect of SDO on outgroup empathy was marginally supported, neither the main hypothesis regarding group status assignment nor the exploratory hypothesis regarding the moderating role of gender was supported by the data. Several explanations may underlie these observed effects.

Firstly, the experimental paradigm may have failed to situate the participants within a social hierarchy they were motivated to protect or reject. The use of a visibly random means of status condition assignment was intended to remove any doubt that the participants’ behavior was motivated by dispositional evaluations rather than the ingroup bias caused by ‘mere categorization.’ While the participants’ clear demonstration of ingroup bias regardless of their status condition suggests that the manipulation did, in fact, lead the participants to identify with their assigned group, letting the participants spin the status assignment spinner, giving them a wristband denoting their group membership, and repeatedly referring to them using their group label may not have been sufficient to sow a group identity strong enough to choose over egalitarian ideals. Similarly, the stakes of the social hierarchy (its material outcomes as depicted and realized throughout the experimental vignette) may not have been high enough or real enough to motivate investment in the maintenance or dismantling of the hierarchy. Participants did face material consequences resulting from their group membership (the receipt of three stickers versus one sticker) but the experimenter’s visibly endless rolls of stickers revealed that the stickers were not a scarce commodity. In the visual aspect of the experiment’s story, silhouettes of kids were chosen to depict the fictional ingroup and outgroup members in an effort to minimize the influence that participants’ perceptions of the fictional kids’ beauty or race might play. Perhaps, however, the use of real-life confederates or more compelling visuals would make the status hierarchy more concrete and, consequently, more motivating.

Relatedly, the prominence of families’ subjective SES as a predictor of SDO could suggest that novel group identities may never be sufficient to motivate children’s support for social hierarchy or that children’s support for social hierarchy may not be motivated at all. While it is possible that the unfortunate skew of our sample’s age distribution across gender may have obscured a significant relationship between SDO and gender like that found in other research, this study’s indication that some real-world social identities (SES) but not others (gender) are capable of motivating SDO merits inquiry. Potentially, the emergence of SES as a predictor of SDO in the absence of significant effects of novel group status assignment or gender suggests that SDO primarily develops through socialization. Specifically, our present results indicating that high SES children are less likely to hold a socially-dominant worldview may conceptually parallel Carvacho et al.’s (2013) finding that income and education negatively predict prejudiced attitudes in adults and the range of previous literature highlighting the importance of family members’ attitudes towards social hierarchy.

Future research might reevaluate the question of whether the development of social dominance orientation is an independent, motivated process in young children by adjusting the manipulation of children’s status identities. For example, Rizzo and Killen’s (2020) status assignment paradigm highlighting cognitive performance as the defining criteria of the novel groups could be repurposed to examine changes in SDO. Future work should also elaborate on how children’s real-world social identities contributes to their support for social hierarchy. Can manipulating the salience of children’s social identities influence their expression of SDO?

In sum, previous research has revealed children’s capacity for independently perceiving and reacting to social categories and social hierarchies as well as the important role that parents, friends, and other socializing factors play in shaping children’s attitudes toward social hierarchy. When situated within a novel group hierarchy from a low or high-status group’s perspective, children ages 5 to 10 showed no significant difference in their support for social hierarchy by their relative group status or gender identity. Nonetheless, demographic characteristics like family SES and age each negatively predicted SDO scores which, in turn, positively predicted ingroup bias. Our ability to combat prejudice and its roots in the development of general orientations towards social inequality would be greatly advanced by the continued clarification of whether support for social hierarchy arises spontaneously through an independent, motivated process or through passive socialization. Consequently, future research should address the limitations of the current investigation by elucidating the importance of specific characteristics of novel group hierarchies and children’s real-world social identities in their formation of attitudes towards social hierarchy.

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