Social Dominance Theory: Its Agenda and Method

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The theory has been misconstrued in four primary ways, which are often expressed as the claims of psychological reductionism, conceptual redundancy, biological reductionism, and hierarchy justification. This paper addresses these claims and suggests how social dominance theory builds on and moves beyond social identity theory and system justification theory.

KEY WORDS: social dominance theory, racism, system justification theory, social identity theory

The civil and human rights reforms that swept the United States and much of Western Europe in the 1960s and early 1970s led many to conclude that prejudice, discrimination, and oppression were well on their way to democratic resolution. However, the subsequent scores of ferocious and near-genocidal interethnic outbreaks around the globe should convince all but the most near-sighted that this celebration of the triumph of tolerance was premature in the extreme. As a result of renewed worldwide mayhem, the 1990s witnessed a major resurgence of scientific interest in the problems of prejudice, stereotyping, racism, and intergroup conflict.

Both classical and contemporary work have yielded genuine insights into these complex and interrelated problems. Nonetheless, these insights have not
been able to fully explain why oppression is so widespread and tenacious. We suggest that part of the reason for this hole in our theoretical understanding is that almost all approaches have focused on some specific psychological or sociological cause of prejudice and discrimination. Rarely have social scientists attempted to understand these problems by exploring the interactions among several levels of analysis—that is, the manner in which psychological, sociostructural, ideological, and institutional forces jointly contribute to the production and reproduction of social oppression.¹ For example, modern authoritarian personality theory, aversive racism theory, and terror management theory all conceptualize prejudice and discrimination in terms of the individual’s psychological needs or values (e.g., Altemeyer, 1998; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998; Greenberg, Simon, Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Chatel, 1992). Social identity theory, self-categorization theory, and much contemporary stereotyping research view these problems as ultimately resulting from the social construals of the self (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Such theories fail to address the main consequences of prejudice and discrimination (i.e., systematic group oppression and structural inequality), nor do they address the institutional and ideological underpinnings of this oppression. That is, by focusing on strictly psychological motivations and social construals, most social-psychological theories fail to address both the context and consequences of prejudice and discrimination, namely group differences in power.

Like the psychological approaches, most structural theories also focus on a single root cause of prejudice and discrimination. For the most part, the structural theories concentrate their attention on competition over material and symbolic resources (e.g., Bobo, 2000; Jackman, 1994; Levine & Campbell, 1972). Despite the valuable insights this general approach offers with respect to some forms of group oppression such as racism and nationalism, it is often not able to easily account for other forms of group oppression such as sexism and generalized patriarchy (see Glick & Fiske, 1996; Jackman, 1994; Pratto & Walker, 2001; van den Berghe, 1967). In addition, these structural models fail to account for individual differences in the degree of discrimination and prejudice against “the other” among people who have the same structural relationships to “the other” (see also Huddy, 2004).

Social dominance theory, by contrast, focuses on both individual and structural factors that contribute to various forms of group-based oppression. The theory views all of the familiar forms of group-based oppression (e.g., group-based discrimination, racism, ethnocentrism, classism, sexism) as special cases of a more general tendency for humans to form and maintain group-based hierarchy. Rather than merely asking why people stereotype, why people are prejudiced, why they discriminate, or why they believe the world is just and fair, social dominance

¹ For a relatively rare partial exception, see Tilly (1998).
Social Dominance Theory asks why human societies tend to be organized as group-based hierarchies. By framing the question in this way, social dominance theory is not simply focused on the extreme yet all-too-common forms of intergroup truculence (e.g., mass murder and genocide), as claimed by some critics (see, e.g., Huddy, 2004; Reicher, 2004), but rather on the universal and exquisitely subtle forms of discrimination and oppression that large numbers of people face in their everyday lives all over this planet. The research agenda of social dominance theory has included consideration of the cultural, ideological, political, and structural aspects of societies, leading to a focus on similarities and differences across societies, interactions between psychological and social-contextual processes, and the subtle yet important similarities and differences between various types of group-based oppression (e.g., arbitrary-set hierarchies vs. patriarchy). In specifying the cultural and gendered aspects of oppression, social dominance theory tries to avoid ethnocentric and androcentric overgeneralization. In an effort to describe group-dominance societies as interactive systems rather than as the result of some simple and singular root cause (e.g., “personality”), social dominance theory explores the manner in which processes at different levels of analysis interact with one another. Finally, rather than concentrating its attention on the open-ended nature of human possibilities, so dear to the interests of Reicher (2004) and other advocates of the “blank slate” view of human nature (see Pinker, 2002), social dominance theory is devoted to trying to deepen our understanding of the recurrent realities of actual human existence, including the universal realities of patriarchy, ethnocentrism, and dominance/submission (see Brown, 1991; Pinker, 2002).

Most proximally, social dominance theory notes that chronic group-based oppression is driven by systematic institutional and individual discrimination. That is, many social institutions (e.g., schools, organized religions, marriage practices, financial houses) and many powerful individuals disproportionately allocate desired goods—such as prestige, wealth, power, food, and health care—to members of dominant and privileged groups, while directing undesirable things—such as dangerous work, disdain, imprisonment, and premature death—toward members of less powerful groups. Because institutions allocate resources on much larger scales, more systematically, and more stably than individuals generally can, social dominance theory regards institutional discrimination as one of the major forces creating, maintaining, and recreating systems of group-based hierarchy.

According to social dominance theory, group discrimination tends to be systematic because social ideologies help to coordinate the actions of institutions and individuals. That is, people share knowledge and beliefs that legitimize discrimination, and most often they behave as if they endorsed these ideologies. As such, people support institutions that allocate resources in accordance with those ideologies (Mitchell & Sidanius, 1995; Pratto, Stallworth, & Conway-Lanz, 1998;

2 By the term “patriarchy” we refer to the pattern of male dominance in politics and the public sphere.
Pratto, Stallworth, & Sidanius, 1997), and, as individuals, allocate resources in accordance with those ideologies, particularly when they are in social contexts that cue these ideologies (Pratto, Tatar, & Conway-Lanz, 1999). Another consequence of societal consensus on legitimizing ideologies is that members of more powerful groups tend to behave in their own interest more than do members of less powerful groups, a phenomenon we call behavioral asymmetry (e.g., Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, chapter 9).

Finally, the acceptance of ideologies that legitimize inequality and behaviors that produce inequality is partly determined by people’s general desire for group-based dominance. This desire for group-based dominance is captured by a construct we call social dominance orientation. This psychological orientation is important not only for understanding individual differences in sociopolitical attitudes and behavior, but also for understanding group differences in behaviors such as ingroup favoritism and the attainment of social roles that influence the degree of hierarchy. As such, social dominance theory views the determinants of group-based hierarchy at multiple levels of analysis, including psychological orientations, the discriminatory behaviors of individuals, the legitimizing ideologies that permeate entire social systems, and the social allocations of groups and social institutions.

As a relatively new set of ideas, social dominance theory has in some respects been poorly understood, which in turn has contributed to some confusion when comparing social dominance theory to other theories of intergroup relations. In the remainder of this essay, we address the ways in which social dominance theory has been misapprehended. We then compare social dominance theory to the related models of social identity theory and system justification theory, and conclude by suggesting how our theoretical agenda can guide further research on stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, ideology, and intergroup relations. We will describe social dominance theory in richer detail as we compare the theory to other models and respond to the major criticisms that have been raised against it.

**Misconstruals of Social Dominance Theory**

There are four major ways in which social dominance theory has been misconstrued. These misunderstandings can be expressed as four distinct claims: the claim of psychological reductionism, the claim of conceptual redundancy, the claim of biological determinism, and the claim of hierarchy justification.

*The Claim of Psychological Reductionism*

We are in strong agreement with Reicher (2004) when he complains that the fate of many psychological theories is to see much of the richness and complexity of the original formulations reduced to a single aphorism and to a single
hypothesis. This unfortunate fate has befallen not only authoritarian personality theory and social identity theory, but (despite its relatively young age) social dominance theory as well. Although a broader theoretical overview of social dominance theory was presented as early as 1993 (see Sidanius, 1993), a good deal of the early empirical research exploring this rather broad theory focused on the individual-difference construct of social dominance orientation (SDO; e.g., Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Sidanius, Liu, Pratto, & Shaw, 1994). This apparently led many to assume, mistakenly, that social dominance theory was just another personality theory, and as such, a model that focused solely on the role of this individual-difference variable in driving intergroup conflict (e.g., Schmitt, Branscombe, & Kappen, 2003; Turner & Reynolds, 2003). The role of SDO has become so large in the minds of some that they have come to refer to the theory as “social dominance orientation theory.” Whereas SDO is an important component of the broader model, social dominance theory is neither primarily nor exclusively concerned with this individual-difference construct. Our earliest work using SDO addressed its relation both to institutional discrimination and to social ideologies, which, we have always emphasized, were the two more important engines of group-based social hierarchy.

Indeed, we have followed Allport’s (1954) suggestion in understanding intergroup aggression and discrimination as the results of factors working at several different levels of analysis. As social dominance theory describes the process, discriminatory acts are enacted by persons with particular behavioral predispositions, subgroup loyalties, and social identifications, within specific social contexts, often in connection with the activities of social institutions and social roles, and embedded within cultures with particular social ideologies and structural relations. Rather than being an exercise in psychological reductionism (see Schmitt et al., 2003; Turner & Reynolds, 2003), social dominance theory is explicitly devoted to trying to understand how psychological predispositions, social identities, social context, social institutions, and cultural ideologies all intersect to produce and reproduce group-based social inequality. Rather than facilely stating that discrimination is multiply determined, research on social dominance theory has explored how processes at various levels of analysis intersect and reinforce one another, as we illustrate below. In other words, rather than merely being a “static” personality model, as suggested by some (e.g., Huddy, 2004; Sniderman, Crosby, & Howell, 2000), social dominance theory is very much a model about process, specifically the processes that create and recreate group-based social hierarchy.

The issue of social context. Contrary to the claims of some critics (e.g., Guimond, Dambrun, Michinov, & Duarte, 2003; Reicher, 2004; Schmitt et al., 2003; Turner & Reynolds, 2003) that SDO is conceptualized as some immutable and static “personality” variable, and somehow apart from the “social process” and social structure, social dominance theorists have long argued that the sources of SDO are not restricted to a single set of factors (e.g., personality or the “social process”). Rather, SDO arises from a number of factors such as socialization
experiences, situational contingencies or context, and individual temperament (e.g., aggression, empathy; see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, pp. 77–81).

Social dominance theorists have paid particular attention to social context as a factor in SDO. Although we have shown that SDO tends to be fairly stable over time (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius, van Laar, Levin, & Sinclair, 2003), we have also argued and shown that SDO does indeed interact with particular features of the social context, such as the social identities primed within specific social contexts and perceived social threats. For example, in a minimal-groups experiment, we found that people higher in SDO were most discriminatory against the out-group when the ingroup was one with which they could highly identify (Sidanius, Pratto, & Mitchell, 1994). In implicit group discrimination experiments, people high and low in SDO appeared equally discriminatory until they were put under group threat, at which point high-SDO people became highly discriminatory and low-SDO people failed to discriminate (Pratto & Shih, 2000). Independently, Jackson and Esses (2000) have shown that reducing perceptions of the group threat posed by immigrants reduces prejudice against them by those low in SDO, but that this intervention does not work for those high in SDO.

Most important, social dominance theorists have argued and shown that SDO levels are sensitive to both transitory and chronic differences in perceived social power between salient social groups. For example, we have predicted and found that members of dominant groups (e.g., European Americans), because of their privileged positions within the social hierarchy, tend to have higher levels of SDO than do members of subordinate groups (e.g., African Americans; see Levin, Sidanius, Rabinowitz, & Federico, 1998; Pratto et al., 1994; Pratto et al., 2000; Sidanius, Levin, Liu, & Pratto, 2000; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Furthermore, as the status of one’s group shifts across intergroup contexts, we have demonstrated that one’s level of SDO shows corresponding shifts as well. Levin (1996) demonstrated this in a study conducted in Israel. There are three major ethnic status categories among Israeli Jews: Ashkenazi Jews (Jews of European heritage who have high status), Mizrachi Jews (Jews of Middle Eastern heritage who have low status), and those of mixed Ashkenazi/Mizrachi heritage who have intermediate status. Using respondents from all three categories, Levin primed Israeli Jews to think about two different group conflicts: the ethnic conflict between Ashkenazi and Mizrachi Jews, and the national conflict between Jews and Palestinians. When primed to think about the ethnic conflict among Jews, Ashkenazi Jews showed significantly higher levels of SDO than did Mizrachi Jews, with mixed Jews falling in the middle. However, when primed to think about the conflict between Jews and Palestinians, all three Jewish groups showed a substantial increase in their level of SDO, and differences among the groups disappeared. In other words, rather than being an immutable characteristic, the degree to which one favors group-based social inequality is, in part, situationally contingent on how one frames one’s social context (see also Guimond et al., 2003; Levin, 2004).
However, the relative degree to which individuals support group-based social inequality also shows a reasonably high degree of cross-situational stability. For example, in this same study, the correlation between scores on the Social Dominance Orientation scale (henceforth “SDO scores”) across these two priming contexts was fairly robust, \( r = .56 \) (\( p < .001 \)). In other words, people who are relatively high in SDO in one intergroup context also tend to be relatively high in SDO in another context. In contrast to the implications of Huddy (2004), one of the things implied by this finding is that even after one is able to control for a wide variety of the situational, occupational, and socialization factors thought to contribute to SDO, we should still expect to find reliable individual differences in SDO, largely attributable to temperamental or personality factors. Again, this reasoning underscores the need to understand the individual’s support for group-based social hierarchy as multidetermined and as a function of factors operating on several different levels of analysis.

The issue of social institutions. Another implication of the psychological reductionism charge is the misapprehension that social dominance theory emphasizes the role of psychological predispositions at the expense of addressing the role of social institutions in the production and maintenance of discrimination. In point of fact, almost singularly among social-psychological theories (see also Jones, 1997), social dominance theory emphasizes that social institutions are centrally implicated in the establishment and maintenance of group-based social inequality and intergroup discrimination (see, e.g., Mitchell & Sidanius, 1995; Pratto, Stallworth, Sidanius, & Siers, 1997; Sidanius, Liu, et al., 1994; Sidanius, Pratto, Sinclair, & van Laar, 1996; van Laar, Sidanius, Rabinowitz, & Sinclair, 1999). Indeed, our review of research on institutional discrimination (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, chapters 5–8) found that institutional discrimination is pervasive across a wide range of societies and domains of life, encompassing housing, labor, health care, retail, education, and law. The greater the institutional discrimination within a given society, the steeper the level of social hierarchy we would expect to find.

Although many powerful institutions—including major financial organizations (e.g., banks, investment houses, insurance companies) and major sectors of the criminal justice system (e.g., police, secret police, prosecutors, judges, prison administrators)—allocate resources in ways that create and maintain group dominance, social dominance theory has also identified a class of institutions that attenuate rather than enhance group-based hierarchy. Institutions that disproportionately allocate resources for the benefit of subordinates—such as civil and human rights organizations, public and private welfare agencies, and the public defender’s office—are labeled as hierarchy-attenuating. Social dominance theory postulates that the stability of group-based social hierarchy is, in part, a function of the equilibrium created by the counterbalancing effects of these hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating social institutions.

The intersection between individual behavioral predispositions and social roles. By considering the assignment of individuals into hierarchy-enhancing and
hierarchy-attenuating social roles and institutions, social dominance theory has addressed some of the ways that social ideologies, social context, and individuals’ psychological proclivities contribute to institutional discrimination. The theory hypothesizes that the functioning of hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating institutions will be aided when they are staffed by personnel with the values, attitudes, and behavioral predispositions that are consistent with the institution’s character. Specifically, personnel in hierarchy-enhancing institutions should tend to be relatively anti-egalitarian, whereas personnel in hierarchy-attenuating institutions should be relatively egalitarian in their views of the desired relationship among social groups. In other words, individuals’ desires for group-based inequality and dominance should be compatible with their institutional roles.

In one test of this hypothesis, Sidanius, Liu et al. (1994) compared the SDO scores of people in four different institutional roles—police officers in the Los Angeles Police Department (a hierarchy-enhancing role), public defenders from the Los Angeles County public defender’s office (a hierarchy-attenuating role), UCLA students (people with mixed intentions regarding their future roles), and adults called to jury duty in Los Angeles County (people with mixed current hierarchy roles)—both before and after controlling for a number of demographic factors (e.g., “race,” age, gender, social class, education). Because of their different hierarchy roles, police officers were expected to have higher SDO scores and public defenders lower SDO scores than students and jurors. These expectations were confirmed, even after controlling for demographic differences between the groups. Police officers were found to be significantly more social dominance—oriented than both students and jurors (who represented a random sample of Los Angeles citizens), whereas public defenders were found to be significantly less social dominance—oriented than both students and jurors. Pratto, Stallworth, Sidanius, and Siers (1997) later found that voters classified into hierarchy roles on the basis of their current or most recent occupations (for retirees) showed similar differences in SDO scores (see also Dambrun, Guimond, & Duarte, 2002; Guimond, 2000; Guimond & Palmer, 1996).

**Sorting individuals into compatible social roles.** Because people’s values regarding group-based equality will be important for the smooth functioning of the social institutions in which they are situated and the social roles they are to perform, social dominance theory expects several processes to assort individuals into compatible social roles. To date, some evidence has been provided for five assortment processes: self-selection, institutional selection, institutional socialization, differential reward, and differential attrition.

**Self-selection.** Social dominance theory suggests that when individuals are given a choice, they will tend to choose social roles compatible with their SDO levels. This effect was first demonstrated by Sidanius et al. (1996) using two samples of UCLA students. The students rated the attractiveness of four hierarchy-enhancing careers (i.e., government prosecutor, law enforcement officer, FBI
agent, big business person) and four hierarchy-attenuating careers (i.e., civil rights lawyer, lawyer for the poor, human rights advocate, and working for the benefit of disadvantaged groups). Even controlling for socioeconomic status and political conservatism, SDO was positively associated with the perceived attractiveness of hierarchy-enhancing careers and negatively associated with the perceived attractiveness of hierarchy-attenuating careers. Similarly, when Stanford University students were asked to choose between hierarchy-attenuating and hierarchy-enhancing jobs, their choices reflected their SDO levels (Pratto, Stallworth, Sidanius, & Siers, 1997, experiments 1 and 2). Together, these results provide support for the idea that people will self-select into “appropriate” hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating social roles, depending on their orientation toward group-based inequality (see also Sidanius et al., 2003).

**Institutional selection.** Institutions are also expected to select personnel with values compatible with the institution’s hierarchy function. Pratto, Stallworth, Sidanius, and Siers (1997, experiments 3 and 4) found evidence for institutional selection in simulated employment experiments. University students assumed the role of employers in a position to influence hiring decisions. In both experiments, participants were given a set of job descriptions, half of which were hierarchy-enhancing and half of which were hierarchy-attenuating. Although the descriptions varied according to whether the job was hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating, the duties, salary, and title for each job within an occupation were equivalent. Next, the respondents were given résumés of job candidates, which controlled for their qualifications but varied with respect to the hierarchy role experience of the candidate. For example, one candidate was described as having been a camp counselor at a selective private camp for elite young men and women in Lake Tahoe and as co-founder and president of “Capital Operations,” a student club promoting free enterprise in Eastern Europe and Russia. In another rendition, this applicant was described as having been a camp counselor for a Head Start program in San Francisco and as co-founder and president of “Life Savers,” a student club promoting international legislation to protect rainforests and their inhabitants. Pretests confirmed that people inferred that these applicants had high and low SDO levels, respectively. Simulated employers hired more apparently low-SDO candidates into hierarchy-attenuating jobs and hired more apparently high-SDO candidates into hierarchy-enhancing jobs. They also hired more women into hierarchy-attenuating jobs and more men into hierarchy-enhancing jobs. Because men have higher average SDO levels than women (Pratto et al., 2000; Sidanius et al., 2000; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1994; see also Sidanius, Pratto, & Brief, 1995), this bias would also assort more high-SDO people into hierarchy-enhancing roles and more low-SDO people into hierarchy-attenuating roles. Likewise, when choosing among white, black, and Hispanic job applicants for these roles, people preferred to hire white applicants for hierarchy-enhancing roles and especially preferred to hire black and Hispanic job applicants for hierarchy-attenuating roles (Pratto & Espinoza,
This race bias also contributes to compatibility between employees’ SDO levels and the roles for which they are selected because of racial differences in SDO levels (Pratto, 1999; Sidanius, Pratto, & Rabinowitz, 1994).

**Institutional socialization.** Another process leading to compatibility between individuals’ discriminatory predispositions and their roles within social institutions is institutional socialization. Formal institutional rules, peer pressure, institutional incentives, dissonance reduction processes, and other subtle and direct pressures may all induce people to adopt the values, beliefs, and attitudes compatible with the social roles they occupy. For example, Teahan (1975a) examined the racial attitudes of 97 white police officers upon entry into the police academy and over the next 18 months. As the officers progressed through their police training, their racial attitudes became progressively more hostile toward blacks. In a separate study designed to examine the effects of role-playing experiences on the attenuation of racial hostility, Teahan (1975b) found that role-playing increased racial hostility toward blacks among white officers, whereas it decreased racial hostility toward whites among black police officers. In essence, socialization for the hierarchy-enhancing role of police officer led members of dominant groups to hold more hostile attitudes toward subordinates, and led members of subordinate groups to develop more obsequious attitudes toward dominants. Similarly, Dambrun et al. (2002) examined how the impact of “hierarchy-enhancing vs. attenuating” academic majors related to racial stereotypes of French Arabs, SDO, and perceived social norms regarding tolerance in samples of psychology students (hierarchy-enhancing majors) and law students (hierarchy-attenuating majors) from a French university. Relative to law students, psychology students were found to have lower levels of anti-Arab stereotyping and SDO as well as higher support for tolerance norms (see also Guimond, 2000).

A major study of political socialization shows similar evidence of the differential effects of socializing environments on dominants and subordinates. In a little-noted finding from a large panel study of American high school students, “good citizenship” attitudes were studied as a function of the number of civics courses taken among white and black high school students (Jennings & Niemi, 1974). Being a “good citizen” could be defined either as political participation (e.g., voting, running for political office) or as showing obedience and loyalty to leaders and political institutions. Consistent with normative democratic theory, Jennings and Niemi (1974) found that the more civics courses white students took in high school, the more likely they defined “good citizenship” in terms of participation rather than as loyalty to political authority. However, the opposite trend was found among black students. The more civics courses black students took, the more they defined “good citizenship” as loyalty to authority rather than as political participation. This trend was especially pronounced among black students with well-educated parents.

Although these results are at odds with normative democratic theory, they are very consistent with the general spirit of social dominance theory. Together, these
results suggest that not only will social institutions socialize people to function effectively within the social roles assigned to them, these socialization effects are also likely to be qualitatively different depending on whether a person is a member of a dominant or subordinate social group. If institutional socialization encourages children and adults from dominant groups to participate in the political process and to hold dominant racial attitudes while encouraging those from subordinate groups to display political obedience and submission to dominants, such socialization should lead to the continued authority of dominants and political passivity of subordinates. Because of these differential socialization effects, the American secondary school system would have to be classified as hierarchy-enhancing.

In contrast, there is some evidence that American higher education has hierarchy-attenuating effects. Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies show that prejudice against subordinates usually decreases with increased higher education (e.g., Bobo & Licari, 1989; Sidanius, Pratto, Martin, & Stallworth, 1991). For example, Sinclair, Sidanius, and Levin (1998) examined social attitudes and racial policy preferences among 1,623 students at UCLA just before their enrollment and upon completion of their freshman year. After 9 months of exposure to the university environment, students became reliably less group dominance–oriented, less convinced of the inevitable conflict between racial groups, less racist, less opposed to the egalitarian distribution of social resources, and less opposed to welfare for the poor.

Differential reward. If institutions are interested in ensuring that their personnel display role-appropriate behavior, one should expect them to reward behavior compatible with their social roles and to punish behavior incompatible with those roles. For example, personnel in hierarchy-enhancing roles should enjoy institutional rewards for displaying aggressive, demeaning, or oppressive attitudes toward members of subordinate groups, at least so long as these oppressive behaviors do not too obviously violate broadly accepted norms of “fairness and justice.” Consistent with this idea, Leitner and Sedlacek (1976) found that campus police officers with higher racial prejudice scores were more likely to receive positive performance evaluations from their supervisors, even after controlling for a number of other factors. Similarly, in a comprehensive investigation of the Los Angeles Police Department following the infamous Rodney King police brutality case, personnel files of the 44 officers with the highest number of civilian complaints for brutality, use of excessive force, and improper tactics revealed that their supervisors had favorable impressions of them and were unusually optimistic about their future prospects on the police force (Christopher et al., 1991). Together, these findings suggest that race-targeted cases of police brutality (e.g., the torture of Abner Louima; the police shootings of Amadou Diallo, Patrick

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3 For exceptions and nuances to this general trend, see Jackman (1981), Jackman and Muha (1984), Weil (1985), and Sidanius, Pratto, and Bobo (1996).
Doresmond, and others) and “racial profiling” are not really examples of “a few bad apples” on the police force, but rather represent extreme examples of a more general pattern in which the police force enacts its hierarchy-enhancing function by behaving in an especially intimidating fashion toward members of subordinate groups. The fact that ethnic subordinates (i.e., blacks and Latinos) experience more fear of the police than do ethnic dominants (i.e., European Americans) also indicates that the hierarchy-enhancing and differentially threatening character of the police force is being communicated (see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, pp. 220–223).

We have found evidence for differential rewards for role-appropriate group dominance attitudes in other organizations as well. For example, van Laar et al. (1999) examined the grades given to university students as a function of how well their racial attitudes fit their academic major. On the basis of academic major, 5,655 students at the University of Texas at Austin were classified into one of three categories: hierarchy-enhancers, hierarchy-attenuators, or “neutrals.” As expected, hierarchy-enhancers had reliably higher racism scores than neutrals, and hierarchy-attenuators had reliably lower racism scores than neutrals. Next, students were classified as either “congruents” or “incongruents” depending on the precise configuration of their racial attitudes and their college majors. Students were classified as congruents if they had racism scores in the top third of the distribution and had hierarchy-enhancing college majors, or if they had racism scores in the bottom third of the distribution and had hierarchy-attenuating college majors. Students were classified as incongruents if they had racism scores in the top third of the distribution and had hierarchy-attenuating college majors, or if they had racism scores in the bottom third of the distribution and had hierarchy-enhancing college majors.

One of the major kinds of institutional feedback provided to college students is course grades; all else being equal, we therefore expected congruents to enjoy relatively higher grade-point averages than incongruents. This predicted interactive pattern was supported by the data. The majority of students with incongruent attitudes received less than a C average, whereas the majority of students with congruent attitudes received above a C average. This pattern held even after controlling for racism, college major, ethnicity, political conservatism, and year in school. If this result generalizes, it would indicate that, all else being equal, people are rewarded when displaying attitudes toward group-based social hierarchy that are compatible with their social roles and are punished for displaying attitudes that are incongruent with these social roles (see also Sidanius et al., 2003).

**Differential attrition.** Given that people may be differentially rewarded or punished for holding role-compatible or role-incompatible group dominance attitudes, we also expect differential attrition from social roles among congruents and incongruents. People with incompatible attitudes toward group dominance (i.e., incongruents) should leave their hierarchy roles at higher rates than people with compatible attitudes (i.e., congruents). Because high grades were likely to be
differentially given to students with a good match between their racial attitudes and their chosen college majors, van Laar et al. (1999) expected that there should be evidence of an increasing match between students’ racial prejudice scores and their chosen majors as students progress through the university. Again, the data were consistent with expectations. Among freshmen, incongruents tended to be significantly overrepresented, whereas congruents tended to be significantly underrepresented. However, among juniors, the opposite trend was found. This increasing match between students’ racial attitudes and their college majors held even when controlling for other factors (e.g., gender, ethnicity, political ideology). This increasing match can be accounted for by at least two processes: greater attrition of incongruents from inconsistent majors, or institutional socialization leading students to change their racial attitudes toward greater congruence. Overall, this evidence for the assortment of individuals into compatible social roles shows that, over time and given appropriate feedback, people are self- and institutionally selected, socialized, and rewarded such that their orientations toward group dominance fit with their surrounding institutional contexts.

In sum, rather than being an exercise in psychological reductionism, social dominance theory argues that group-based social hierarchy and its attendant manifestations (e.g., prejudice and discrimination) are the results of the interactions among phenomena at several different levels of analysis. Among these processes are the interactions between the individual’s ideological predispositions and the individual’s immediate social contexts, including the contexts created by social institutions.

**The Claim of Conceptual Redundancy**

Social dominance theory has also been criticized for merely renaming familiar constructs such as authoritarianism and political conservatism with new labels such as social dominance orientation (J. Citrin, personal communication, November 1997; Turner, 1999).

*Social dominance orientation versus authoritarianism.* One of the several major contributions that authoritarian personality theory made to the literature on intergroup relations was the observation that people who are prejudiced against one group are also likely to be prejudiced against other groups. This generalized ethnocentric predisposition was not merely an isolated attitude toward outgroups, but was found to be part of a larger syndrome of personality characteristics and sociopolitical beliefs consisting of components such as political conservatism, pseudo-patriotism, and religiosity. This complex of personality and sociopolitical beliefs was labeled the *authoritarian character* (see Fromm, 1941).

Like authoritarian personality theory, social dominance theory assumes that people’s ethnocentric orientations and sociopolitical attitudes are reflections of, and are rooted in, personality and cross-situationally consistent behavioral predispositions. However, despite this commonality, the specific etiologies and foci
of authoritarianism and SDO are assumed to be qualitatively different. First, authoritarianism is regarded as a pathological state of mind and a complex set of ego-defensive mechanisms designed to protect the individual from feelings of inadequacy and almost existential anxiety, all resulting from oppressive and highly conditional parent-child interactions (see Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Frenkel-Brunswik, 1948). Whereas social dominance theory lacks a detailed etiological explanation for the development of SDO, rather than being regarded as a pathological condition, SDO is a dimension thought to reflect normal human variation and to be influenced by a combination of socialization experiences, contextually sensitive material and symbolic interests (e.g., high social status), and dispositional differences in factors such as aggression and lack of empathy.

Second, modern conceptualizations of authoritarianism largely focus on the individual’s relationship to the ingroup, including the individual’s proclivity to submit to ingroup authority, display ingroup-sanctioned aggressiveness toward individuals, and adhere to ingroup norms (i.e., conventionalism). In contrast, SDO focuses entirely on attitudes toward hierarchical relationships between groups and the desire to promote intergroup domination.4

Third, although both SDO and authoritarianism are individual-difference constructs, the construct of SDO is embedded within a much larger and multilevel theory of intergroup relations. In contrast, authoritarian personality theory really is a strict personality theory of prejudice and focuses almost all of its attention on intrapsychic mechanics. Consequently, whereas most research stemming from authoritarian personality theory paid almost no attention to the role of cultural or ideological context (see Pettigrew, 1958), the role of cultural and ideological context has been central to social dominance theory’s understanding of how discriminatory practices are justified and rationalized (see, e.g., Pratto, 1999; Pratto et al., 2000; Sidanius, 1993; Sidanius, Levin, Federico, & Pratto, 2001; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Not only are authoritarianism and SDO conceptually distinct, but a consistent line of research shows these two constructs to be empirically distinct as well. For example, whereas both modern scales of authoritarianism (e.g., right-wing authoritarianism) and SDO have been found to be strong predictors of prejudice against generalized outgroups (women, blacks, gays, foreigners, prisoners, etc.), they make quite independent contributions to the prediction of these attitudes while being largely independent of each other (see Altemeyer, 1998; Duckitt,

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4 Whereas the earliest conceptualizations of SDO defined it as expressing the desire for ingroup domination over outgroups (e.g., Sidanius, 1993), the definition has been modified to reflect a more general desire for hierarchical relationships among social groups (see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). This also implies that, in the terms of system justification theory (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2001), SDO should be conceived as “system-justifying” rather than “group-justifying,” although for members of dominant groups, SDO is both system- and group-justifying.
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2003; Jackson & Esses, 2000; McFarland & Adelson, 1996; Pratto et al., 1994; Whitley, 1999; Whitley & Aegisdottir, 2000; for a detailed discussion, see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Social dominance orientation versus political conservatism. Some scholars have also claimed that SDO is simply another term for political conservatism (e.g., J. Citrin, personal communication, November 1997). Of course, the degree to which one views these two constructs as overlapping depends on how one chooses to define “political conservatism.” Of the 13 definitions of conservatism discussed by Sidanius and Pratto (1999), there is one that bears some conceptual similarity to SDO. Edmund Burke (1790/1955), widely known as “the father of conservatism,” defined political conservatism, among other ways, as opposition to social leveling and support for the rule of “social superiors” over “social inferiors.” In Burke’s day, this meant continued support for the political dominance of European aristocracy and opposition to political democracy and universal suffrage. However, few if any contemporary conservatives would be willing to endorse this definition as representing core or even peripheral ideas within modern conservatism. Rather, contemporary conservatives tend to define political conservatism as some admixture of respect for the integrity of “individual freedom,” belief in the importance of maintaining established values and institutions, opposition to government interference in the economy, and the sanctity of private property (see Buckley & Kesler, 1988). Some conservatives even claim that conservatism is centrally concerned with support for equality of opportunity as opposed to equality of result (e.g., Connerly, 1997). Thus, not only are modern political conservatism and SDO conceptually distinct, but previous research shows that they are empirically distinguishable as well (see, e.g., Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1994). For example, across 15 independent American samples, Sidanius and Pratto (1999) found that the median correlation between political conservatism and SDO was about .28, an association much too low to indicate conceptual redundancy.

The Claim of Biological Determinism

Another criticism of social dominance theory is that it is just an exercise in biological determinism (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Turner & Reynolds, 2003; Ward, 1995). At its heart, the thesis of biological determinism assumes that much of human behavior is a function of the autonomous actions of genes rather than environmental or cultural factors. Thus, within the conceptual framework of biological determinism, it is quite reasonable to go in search of such things as “the gene for” alcoholism, schizophrenia, intelligence, or aggression. Although this simplistic “geneticism” did indeed characterize most Darwinian and evolutionary thought of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this type of biological determinism does not represent the thinking of modern evolutionary psychology in general, nor of social dominance theory.
Furthermore, rather than regarding “cultural” and “biological” factors as sovereign and competing sources of human behavior, modern evolutionary psychology theory (and social dominance theory) regard both “nature” and “nurture” as mutually dependent and continuously interacting sources of human action (see, e.g., Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Sober & Wilson, 1998; Wrangham & Peterson, 1996). It is now broadly recognized that the manner in which a given genotype expresses itself as a phenotype is very strongly dependent on environmental and contextual factors. Because “evolved predispositions” and “cultural phenomena” are mutually interdependent, the duality implied by the “nature versus nurture” framing is both misleading and intellectually sterile. What we consider “culture” may be attributable to the aggregated and highly interactive action of genes expressed within specific environmental contexts, and the continued evolution of genetic predispositions takes place within the selection environments created, in part, by “culture.” Instead of falling into the theoretical black hole of the “nature versus nature” fallacy, together with other evolutionary psychologists, social dominance theorists have strongly argued that social behavior must be seen as the result of a complex and mutually endogenous interaction between “genetic” and “social” factors (Caporael & Brewer, 1991; Cosmides, Tooby, & Barkow, 1992; Sidanius & Kurzban, 2003; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Even more profoundly, we have argued that the mutual endogeneity of these “genetic” and “social” factors is so fundamental and so powerful that it is essentially meaningless and quite misleading to even try to separate one set of factors from the other, or to speak in terms of the percentages of behavior due to either “genetic” or “environmental” factors. In addition, unlike some evolutionary theorists who argue that the forces of natural selection are strictly located at the genetic level (see, e.g., Dawkins, 1989), in agreement with Sober and Wilson (1998), we suggest that it is much more reasonable to think of the forces of natural selection as operating at several different levels simultaneously, including the genetic, the organismic, and the level of social norms and forms of social organization (see also Gould, 2001). In short, we should regard human action as the result of an enormously complex interaction between an array of weakly determinative factors, including genotype, specific environmental conditions at multiple levels of organization (e.g., intercellular, interpersonal, intergroup, etc.), and pure chance. This multilevel and inherently interactionist perspective is a far cry from the simplistic genetic determinism of the past, or “pallid interactionism” in which psychological predispositions dominate and distinctly social factors are treated merely as epiphenomena (see Reicher, 2004).

The accusation of biological determinism may in part be generated because, in emphasizing the ubiquity of group-based dominance in human societies and

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5 The “nature versus nurture” question is also referred to as “Galton’s error” (see Wrangham & Peterson, 1996).
the instability of egalitarian societies, we have written about the seeming “inevitability” of group dominance (e.g., Sidanius & Pratto, 1993). Although it is not the place of scientific theories to predict the future, we have emphasized the ubiquity and stability of group-based inequality precisely because so many of our colleagues insist that “democratic” societies such as the United States, Canada, and Germany are so fundamentally different from empires, dictatorships, monarchies, and other group-based dominance hierarchies. Despite some obvious differences between “democratic” and “nondemocratic” societies, blindness to the underlying similarities among these societies leads many social scientists to trivialize the suffering of subordinates, to underestimate the stability of group-based inequality, and to ignore many of the subtle and converging social forces that contribute to the stability of this hierarchy (e.g., Blossfeld & Shavit, 1993). Simply put, scientists cannot be expected to theorize about inequality if they do not first admit its existence and examine its form.

The accusation of biological determinism may also have been aimed at social dominance theory because social dominance theory argues that the political psychology of gender is qualitatively different from the political psychology of “arbitrary sets” (e.g., differences between social classes, ethnic groups, tribes, or nations; see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, chapter 10). Research on social dominance theory has found small and rather context-invariant male/female differences in SDO and associated political and social attitudes (Levin, 2004; Pratto, Sidanius, & Stallworth, 1993; Sidanius, Cling, & Pratto, 1991; Sidanius et al., 2000; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996). We have interpreted these male/female differences as partly determined by the long-range male/female differences in mating strategies. However, even if one accepts the notion of certain predispositional differences between males and females with respect to intergroup aggression and group-based hierarchy, in contrast to the implications of Huddy (2004), this does not imply a deterministic relationship between gender and SDO. Rather, just as with male/female differences in height, this sex difference is probabilistic rather than deterministic. This is to say that even though males are taller than females on average, and even though this difference most likely has a substantial evolutionary component, there are still a substantial number of women who are taller than the average male.

Moreover, this evolutionary interpretation of the average male/female difference in group dominance orientation does not necessarily imply that one is also endorsing the notion of the autonomous and sovereign action of “genes” and thereby falling prey to the “nature versus nature” fallacy. Rather, to the extent that there are robust and situationally stable male/female differences in intergroup aggression and social dominance, these differences should also be seen as the result of complex interactions between genotypes and social and cultural environments unfolding over broad swaths of evolutionary time.
Finally, because social dominance theory is centrally concerned with the resilience and ubiquity of group-based social hierarchy, some critics have accused the theory of providing moral and intellectual legitimacy for continued social inequality (e.g., Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001). Ironically, we have repeatedly spoken out against the misuse of scientific theorizing as an ideological justification for gender and race inequality (Pratto, 1996, 1999; Pratto & Hegarty, 2000; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, chapter 11). To conflate evolutionarily informed descriptions of human behavior with morally proscriptive statements is to commit the naturalistic fallacy. Whereas the naturalistic fallacy was a central feature of the notorious distortions of evolutionary theory represented by scholars such as Edmund Spencer and his followers (commonly misnamed “social Darwinism”), this idea is not only rejected by most contemporary evolutionary theorists, but was also definitely rejected by Charles Darwin himself. For example, in a letter to a good friend, Charles Lyell, Darwin wrote: “I have noted in a Manchester newspaper a rather good squib, showing that I have proved that ‘might is right’ and therefore Napoleon is right and every cheating tradesman is also right” (Rachels, 1990). Following G. E. Moore’s arguments of almost 100 years ago (see Wright, 1995), evolutionarily informed analysis of human behavior is no more a moral endorsement of that behavior than geology is a moral endorsement of earthquakes, epidemiology a moral endorsement of Ebola outbreaks, or psychiatry an endorsement of madness.

With optimism that is unanticipated by its critics, and following Marxist and feminist thinking rather than Spencerian fallacies, social dominance theory has highlighted the problem of group-based inequality as a starting point to seeing the problem addressed. Rather than being an endorsement of oppression, social dominance theory can be seen as a prerequisite to morally driven intervention. That is, when the processes producing and maintaining group-based social hierarchy are acknowledged and well understood, moral beings can then make informed decisions about how to modify these processes and make them more consistent with their values, whatever those values may be. Whereas hierarchy-enhancers could certainly use our research to further their goals, they are not the ones most in need of help from science to accomplish their goals. Indeed, human history shows that tyrannical and ferociously hierarchical social systems are all too easy to establish and maintain. In contrast, complex social systems even approaching “democratic” and egalitarian ideals appear to be horribly difficult to establish and are only maintained with great difficulty and near-constant vigilance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, chapter 1). Basing social action on unrealistic and false assumptions about human nature will not only fail to bring us any closer to the elimination of group-based oppression, it will also make this task seem more intractable than it really is. Rather, because we would like to see societies with democratic ideals actually realize these goals, it is critical that hierarchy-attenuators appreciate how
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social hierarchies *actually function* rather than allow their analyses to be compromised and distorted by how they would prefer social hierarchies to function.

**Similarities and Differences Among Social Dominance Theory, System Justification Theory, and Social Identity Theory**

*Social Identity Theory*

As one of social psychology’s major contemporary theories, social identity theory and its derivatives have deeply inspired and influenced the development of social dominance theory (see Sidanius, 1993). In particular, social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) emphasizes the dynamic ways in which people can construct their social identities to suit their needs. This flexibility influenced us to conceptualize the group distinctions based on race, nationality, class, ethnicity, and religion as “arbitrary-set” distinctions, because we note similarities in how they function, regardless of the particular histories and local ideologies on which they are based. Another influence derives from social identity theory’s surprising but robust finding of ingroup favoritism in minimally defined groups—that is, groups in name only—even when these “groups” have no prior history, no actual interaction, and no material stakes (see Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992). Although the exact meaning of this phenomenon is still in dispute, it suggests to us that, besides paying attention to the sociostructural situations in which people live, we must also consider the possibility that people have a predisposition to form situationally contingent ingroup/outgroup distinctions and to discriminate on the basis of these boundaries. Finally, social identity theory is one of the most elegant social-psychological theories there is, describing in detail how people’s psychological motivations (e.g., desire for positive regard) interact with their understandings of their social situation (e.g., whether group boundaries are stable or legitimate) to influence intergroup attitudes and behaviors.

Partly because of the many expansions of social identity theory and partly because of our own theoretical agenda, social dominance theory also differs substantially from social identity theory. As primarily a psychological theory, social identity theory posits that intergroup discrimination is motivated by the desire to achieve positive group distinctiveness for the purpose of enhancing individual self-esteem. However, there are three problems with this tenet. First, numerous studies show that self-esteem is not as consistently implicated in intergroup discrimination as social identity theory assumes. Specifically, it is unclear whether intergroup discrimination is a *cause* of enhanced self-esteem or a *result* of low self-esteem (see, e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). Second, whereas the desire for positive distinctiveness may explain ingroup favoritism (e.g., Brewer, 1979), it strains credibility to assume that it can also explain extreme forms of outgroup denigration such as hate crimes,
mass murder, or genocide (e.g., Mummendey, 1995) or discrimination by institutions. Indeed, institutional discrimination, arguably that form of discrimination having the greatest impact on people’s lives, has been almost completely neglected by social identity theory. Third, social identity theory expects people to evaluate their ingroups more favorably on dimensions that are directly tied to differences in group status (Mullen et al., 1992; Sachdev & Bourhis, 1987, 1991). However, outgroup favoritism is not uncommon (Hinkle & Brown, 1990), even among members of low-status groups, who presumably have the greatest need for positive identity (e.g., Clark & Clark, 1947; Gopaul-McNichol, 1988; Powell-Hopson & Hopson, 1992).

Social dominance theory has attempted to resolve some of the dilemmas in social identity research by paying more attention to the real social and asymmetrical context in which intergroup behavior takes place. Specifically, social dominance theory emphasizes that the means of achieving legitimacy, prestige, and a sense of belonging differ for members of dominant and subordinate groups because they are not equally legitimized by cultural ideologies and because they hold different amounts of power (see also some important work on social identity and social context by Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Ellemers, Barreto, & Spears, 1999; Smith, Spears, & Hamstra, 1999; Spears, Doosje, & Ellemers, 1999; Wigbolus, Spears, & Semin, 1999). For example, social dominance theory predicts that endorsement of hierarchy-enhancing ideologies and greater SDO will increase ingroup favoritism among dominant groups but will decrease ingroup favoritism among subordinate groups. When subordinates endorse hierarchy-enhancing ideologies to an extreme degree, they will not only fail to exhibit ingroup favoritism but will actually show outgroup favoritism, even on very general evaluative dimensions (see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, chapter 9). The notion that legitimizing ideologies will be differentially related to ingroup favoritism and ingroup identities among members of dominant and subordinate groups is known as the asymmetry hypothesis, and is an example of social dominance theory’s agenda of examining asymmetries between the situations of dominant and subordinate groups.6

Group asymmetries also explain why ingroup identification is not consistently associated with ingroup favoritism, contrary to predictions from social identity theory (Hinkle & Brown, 1990). Ingroup identification can serve both positive functions in promoting positive identity and negative functions in promoting intolerance and discrimination. Thus, as a descriptor of one’s goals vis-à-vis groups, SDO is an important moderator of the relationship between ingroup identification and ingroup bias. For example, Sidanius, Pratto, and Mitchell (1994) found that individuals with strong ingroup identification and high SDO exhibited the most ingroup bias, whereas Levin (1992) found that subordinate group members with

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6 Contrary to the claims of Turner and Reynolds (2003), the asymmetry hypothesis does not claim that subordinates will always display outgroup favoritism.
low ingroup identification and high SDO maximally favored the outgroup. Further, the direction of the association between ingroup identification and SDO also depends on group power. Individuals who favor group-based inequality should tend to identify more strongly with dominant ingroups because their members have greater access to resources (e.g., political power) that can be used to maintain social hierarchy. However, the situation of high-SDO individuals within subordinate groups is more problematic. Because desire for group-based inequality emphasizes the inferiority of subordinate groups, high-SDO individuals from low-status groups should disidentify with subordinate ingroups. High levels of SDO should thus be associated with increased ingroup identification among dominants and decreased ingroup identification among subordinates. Consistent with these expectations, Sidanius, Pratto, and Rabinowitz (1994) found that SDO was associated with increased ingroup salience and identification among whites but decreased ingroup salience and identification among Latino and African Americans. Similarly, in a study comparing whites and Latinos in the United States, Ashkenazi and Mizrachi Jews in Israel, and Israeli Jews and Arabs, Levin and Sidanius (1999) found that SDO was positively related to ingroup identification among all dominant groups (white Americans, Ashkenazi Jews, and Jews, respectively) but negatively related to ingroup identification among subordinate groups (Latinos, Mizrachi Jews, and Israeli Arabs). This study also indicated that SDO and ingroup identification have differential effects on ingroup and outgroup affect among members of high- and low-status groups. Specifically, whereas ingroup identification was positively associated with ingroup affect among all groups, SDO was associated with more negative affect toward low-status groups, regardless of one’s own group membership. Therefore, even if the ingroup identification processes emphasized by social identity theory can explain ingroup favoritism under certain conditions (see Hinkle & Brown, 1990), the desires for social dominance emphasized by social dominance theory may be able to better explain the derogation of low-status groups among members of both high- and low-status groups.

A further distinction between the two theories is that unlike social identity theory, social dominance theory emphasizes the distinction between social status and social power. Social power refers to the ability to impose one’s will on others, despite resistance (e.g., French & Raven, 1959), whereas social status refers to the amount of prestige one possesses along some evaluative dimension (e.g., Weber, 1946). Given that achieving positive social identity is the focus of social identity theory, it is not surprising that its associated research focuses on social status (see, e.g., Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). As social dominance theory is more concerned with group-based inequality, it has focused on social power.

Recent research suggests that distinguishing between status and power is important because they have different effects, even in minimal-group contexts (for a review, see Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Whereas both group power (e.g., Ng, 1982b; Sachdev & Bourhis, 1985, 1991) and group status (e.g., Caddick, 1982; Commins
& Lockwood, 1979; Mullen et al., 1992; Sachdev & Bourhis, 1987, 1991; Skevington, 1981; Turner, 1978; Turner & Brown, 1978; van Knippenberg, 1984; van Knippenberg & van Oers, 1984) both enhance ingroup favoritism, they do so in different ways. Most important, whereas status may lead to ingroup favoritism, the existence of social power makes discrimination possible in the first place (Ng, 1982b, 1984; Sachdev & Bourhis, 1985, 1991). Thus, for example, groups with insecure high power show less ingroup favoritism (see Ng, 1982a, 1984), but groups with insecure high status show more ingroup favoritism (see Brewer & Kramer, 1985). Results such as these suggest that, whereas threats to the status of one’s group may indeed encourage compensatory ingroup favoritism, ingroup favoritism will not be attempted when the group’s ability to impose its will on others is in doubt.

In addition, there is evidence that status and power affect different group-relevant phenomena. Status differentials explain most of the variance in ingroup identification and intergroup perceptions, whereas power differentials explain most of the variance in actual discrimination (Ng, 1984; Sachdev & Bourhis, 1991). Thus, although considering status differentials does help to explain certain patterns of beliefs about groups, a complete understanding of the actual oppressive behaviors underlying group-based systems of hierarchy requires examining the role of power in intergroup relations, as social dominance theory does.

Another way in which social dominance theory differs from social identity theory and self-categorization theory is that the latter theories are concerned primarily with shifts in definitions of the self as a member of some generic ingroup in relation to some generic outgroup. This implies a theoretical equivalence between membership in groups based on different characteristics such as race, age, gender, or some minimal-group distinction. Failure to make a theoretical distinction between membership in different types of groups equates discrimination by whites against blacks, by adults against children, by men against women, and by any minimally defined ingroup against a minimally defined outgroup. In contrast, social dominance theory distinguishes among group relations based on gender, those based on the adult-child distinction, and those based on the most salient groups in a society (such as those based on race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, or class), which we call the “arbitrary-set” distinction. Although some aspects of these three systems are similar (e.g., the existence of stereotyping and discrimination for both gender and race), social dominance theory asserts that these three forms of group inequality are also qualitatively different. For example, gender and adult-child relations generally appear to have a strong paternalistic or familial component (see also Jackman, 1994). Whereas arbitrary-set relations can, at times, be personal and paternalistic (e.g., involving physical intimacy or common households), the level of oppression and violence against arbitrary-set groups typically surpasses the level associated with patriarchy or adult-child relations, at times becoming quite systematic and extensive. Thus, genocide, especially directed at outgroup males, is much more common than either “gynocide”
or mass infanticide. Social dominance theory argues that differences among the three systems occur because they serve different functions both for individuals and society at large. In particular, gender oppression appears to be an attempt by males to control the reproductive, sexual, and economic prerogatives of females, whereas arbitrary-set hierarchy is primarily an exercise in economic exploitation, debilitation, and aggression by ingroup males against outgroup males (see Pratto & Walker, 2001; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius & Veniegas, 2000).

In addition to social dominance theory’s emphasis on group differences in power and the different systems of group-based hierarchy, the theory can also be distinguished from social identity theory in its emphasis on the consensual nature of hierarchical intergroup relations. For example, and contrary to the claims of Jost et al. (2004), we have formally analyzed the extent to which legitimizing ideologies are consensually held across the groups that they either privilege or denigrate (Sidanius et al., 2001; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, chapter 4). As summarized above, many ideologies do not serve the social or psychological ends of subordinate groups as well as they do those of dominant groups. Not surprisingly, relative to members of dominant groups, members of subordinate groups tend to behave in less self-interested or group-interested ways (for a review, see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, chapter 9; see also van Laar & Sidanius, 2001). Thus, group-based inequality is not only the result of the greater power of and discrimination by dominant groups, but is also partly the result of the complementary and cooperative behaviors of subordinate groups. The notion that exploitative and hierarchically organized relationships between dominant and subordinate groups are, in part, the product of active cooperation between these two groups is an assumption shared with system justification theory (see Jost et al., 2004) and has been a part of social dominance theory since its inception (see Sidanius, 1993; Sidanius, Levin, & Pratto, 1996; see also Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, chapter 3). Having been heavily influenced by neoclassical elitism theorists (see, e.g., Marx & Engels, 1846/1970; Michels, 1911/1962; Mosca, 1896/1939; Pareto, 1901/1979, 1935/1963), social dominance theory has argued that legitimizing ideologies draw their formidable strength from the fact that they function to justify inequitable social relationships not only in the minds of dominants, but (perhaps even more important) in the minds of subordinates as well.

One of the key distinctions between social dominance theory and other models concerns the issue of “scope.” Many theories of intergroup discrimination and prejudice born during the “cognitive” revolution of the 1970s, including social identity theory and self-categorization theory, view discrimination and prejudice as products of the individual’s normal cognitive processes. Although social dominance theory does not dispute the importance of such psychological processes, it is both broader and more socially contextualized. Social dominance theory argues that a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of intergroup conflict and discrimination requires the integration of processes at several different levels of analysis, including the differential behavior of dominant and subordinate groups,
the subtly different strategies and goals of men and women, the role of distinctly different types of social institutions (e.g., hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating institutions), and the functions of consensually shared legitimizing social ideologies.

Finally, one of the clearest and most fundamental differences between social dominance theory and social identity theory, and a difference related to the “levels of analysis issue,” concerns the question of individual differences. As already mentioned, social dominance theory is a multilevel approach in which the dynamics of intergroup relations are explored as a function of situationally contingent construals of social identity, societal-level legitimizing ideologies, the net effects of social institutions, and individual predispositions to discriminate against generalized outgroups. In contrast, social identity theory has put essentially all of its theoretical emphasis on situationally contingent social identities and the manner in which social groups are represented “in the head.” Most important—and completely at odds with social dominance theory in its attempt to completely reject anything resembling a “personality theory”—social identity theorists also tend to reject the notion of relatively stable individual differences or individual predispositions to discriminate against outgroups (see, e.g., Turner & Reynolds, 2003). As mentioned by Huddy (2004), this represents a rather extreme example of situationism and is a position that is rather difficult to reconcile with the empirical data. Even though an individual’s response to outgroups is multidetermined and also driven by situationally contingent social identities, all else being equal, certain individuals are still more likely to discriminate against outgroups than others, and people who discriminate against a particular outgroup are also likely to discriminate against outgroups in general.

System Justification Theory

Social dominance theory was developed just prior to and independently of system justification theory (see Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2004). However, the two models share a common theoretical heritage in the work of Marx and Engels (1846/1970). Marx and Engels argued that the social, political, moral, and aesthetic ideologies of society are widely shared and that these ideologies are largely manufactured to serve the political and economic interests of the dominant class. Because of their control of the means of intellectual production (e.g., mass media, universities), the “ruling classes” are able to convince non-elites of the moral and intellectual righteousness of social policies, especially allocative policies that primarily serve the interests of the owners of the means of production rather than the interests of the workers and lower classes (see similar arguments by Gramsci, 1971; Mosca, 1896/1939). Contrary to the claims of Jost et al. (2004), with certain modifications, both system justification theory and social dominance theory have applied this basic idea of “false consciousness” to the
general study of ethnic and intergroup relations. For example, both system justification theory and social dominance theory postulate that race, gender, and class stereotypes are not just cognitive simplifications or negative expectations of other groups. Rather, social stereotypes are also consensually shared across group boundaries, and they give moral and intellectual legitimacy to the hierarchical relations among these groups. In other words, social stereotypes not only serve cognitive or ego-defensive functions for individuals and group-validating functions for advantaged social groups, but also serve to support and justify entire systems of hierarchical relationships within the society as a whole. Although system justification theorists appear loath to admit it—perhaps out of a desire to manufacture positive distinctiveness—social dominance theorists have always been in complete agreement with them concerning their central thesis, namely that both dominants and subordinates participate in the legitimization of the hierarchical social system. Thus, within social dominance theory, the creation and maintenance of group-based hierarchy is very much a collaborative and cooperative enterprise between dominants and subordinates. Although subordinates will often not endorse the hierarchy-enhancing and system-justifying ideologies and myths with the same degree of enthusiasm as will dominants, this endorsement will often still be of sufficient magnitude and breadth as to lend net support to the set of hierarchically structured group relations (see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999, chapter 9). If there is any difference between system justification theory and social dominance theory on this point, it concerns the relative degree to which dominants and subordinates endorse hierarchy-enhancing social ideologies: System justification theory tends to view subordinate endorsement of these beliefs to be slightly stronger than found among dominants, whereas social dominance theory tends to posit the reverse pattern. Similarly, both theories imply that hierarchy-enhancing ideologies produce a more difficult social-psychological and political situation for members of subordinate groups than for members of dominant groups. Specifically, people’s needs for positive ingroup identification (i.e., “group justification” according to Jost & Thompson, 2000) are compatible with support for a hierarchical social system (i.e., “system justification” according to Jost & Thompson, 2000) if they are in dominant groups. For people in subordinate groups, ingroup identification is incompatible with support for the hierarchical social system (Pratto, 1999; Sidanius, Pratto, & Rabinowitz, 1994) and is associated with more neuroticism (Jost & Thompson, 2000) and ambivalence about problems confronted by ingroup members (Jost & Burgess, 2000). These theories neither presume that members of subordinate groups simply acquiesce to cultural ideologies that demean and restrict them, nor presume that people only adopt and are influenced by ideologies that serve their own interests. Rather, both theories

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For some important differences between system justification theory and social dominance theory with respect to the manner in which this idea of “false consciousness” is applied, see Sidanius et al. (2001).
distinguish between the social-psychological situation of members of dominant and subordinate groups by focusing on the different purposes that ideologies serve for members of these groups. This recognition is relatively new for system justification theory, and that theory has yet to articulate when people will and will not try to justify the social systems in which they live. Indeed, system justification theory relies on a universal cognitive bias to explain why people support systems that work against their own interests, characterized by acquiescence to “whatever is, is right” (Jost, 2001).

Although system justification theory and social dominance theory really do not differ with respect to their views concerning the functioning and dynamics of consensual social ideology, they really do differ with respect to two other issues. First, whereas system justification theory largely restricts itself to those ideologies that justify social hierarchies, social dominance theory has argued that social systems also contain widely shared ideologies, which serve to delegitimize hierarchy and its practices. Social dominance theory has argued that it is the balance of these hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating ideologies that contributes to the maintenance of hierarchical stability of a social system over time.

Second is the issue of “scope” we raised in the previous section. Whereas system justification theory largely restricts itself to one general level of analysis (i.e., the functioning of legitimizing ideologies), social dominance theory examines processes at multiple levels of analysis. Social dominance theory recognizes that human societies are complex systems, influenced by humans’ evolutionary past, people’s current reproductive, material, psychological, and social needs, and the historical context in which they have been socialized and behave. Furthermore, social dominance theory argues that group-based oppression is the result of the reciprocal influences of institutional, cultural, historical, and structural conditions on the one hand, and psychological and behavioral predispositions and fitness interests of individuals and groups on the other hand. Furthermore, like Marx and Engels’ classic work (1846/1970) and contemporary feminist Marxist theory, social dominance theory also argues that gender relations are not reducible to class, race, or other arbitrary-set group distinctions, but have dynamics that are uniquely their own, a refinement not generally appreciated by system justification theory or other modern models of intergroup relations.  

**Conclusion**

In comparing social dominance theory with other theories, we emphasize that social dominance theory is not an attempt to reject the insights of other important models of intergroup relations and discrimination, such as social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), authoritarian personality theory (Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1988), realistic group conflict theory (Blumer, 1960; Bobo, 2000; 

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8 For one exception to this general trend, see Jackman (1994).
Campbell, 1965; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961; Stephan & Stephan, 2000), and the several modern racism theories (see, e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998; Katz & Hass, 1988; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Sears, 1988). Such approaches contain too many valuable insights for such wholesale dismissal. Rather, social dominance theory is an attempt to integrate the most valid features of these other models into a more comprehensive and multileveled understanding of the dynamics of group-based social oppression. Whereas alternative models largely concentrate on a single level of analysis to the exclusion of others (e.g., the psychological, the interpersonal, the situational, the organizational, the structural), social dominance theory attempts to examine processes at several levels of analysis. Even more important, social dominance theory describes how processes at one level of analysis (e.g., individual differences) both affect and are affected by processes at other levels of analysis (e.g., institutional), all resulting in the creation and recreation of group-based social hierarchy. We suggest that it is only by efforts at “conceptual integration” across several different levels of analysis that major progress toward understanding the complex nature of prejudice, discrimination, and oppression may be achieved. Social dominance theory is one of the earliest attempts at such conceptual integration.

Our more synthetic method of theorizing and our broader theoretical agenda have also pointed out some new directions for research on prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, and ideologies. First, our work (like that of others, e.g., Ng, 1982b, 1984; Sachdev & Bourhis, 1985, 1991) resurrects the study of power, and not just prestige or status, as a central aspect of intergroup relations and social psychology. We suspect that this change in focus leads more naturally to considerations of inequality and political and material concerns than to the individualistic self and psychological construals of reality.

Second, our systems approach highlights the importance of shared social processes and aggregate social behaviors, such as social discourse, cultural ideologies, and institutional discrimination, rather than individual cognition and adjustment. Discourse analysis (e.g., Potter, Edwards, & Wetherell, 1993) and research on the communication of stereotypes have also promoted the importance of the shared nature of ideologies in recreating social inequalities, as have particular broad-minded anthropological studies of how ideologies reify social relations (see Sanday, 1981). Nonetheless, more research and theorizing on the origins of ideologies and how they are spread is needed.

Third, by active consideration of culture and of the shared meaning systems and action patterns of societies, social dominance theory has distinguished between patterns of relationships that are common and those that differ across cultures. Again, however, a more detailed understanding of alternative forms of gender, arbitrary-set, and adult-child relations and how these systems intersect is needed.

Fourth, social dominance theory suggests that we must pay more attention not only to the behavior of institutions in the creation and maintenance of group-
based social hierarchy, but also to the manner in which institutions interact with the behavioral predispositions of personnel within these institutions (see van Laar et al., 1999).

Fifth, inspired by feminist and ethnic studies, social dominance research has sought to examine the actual situations of people in oppressed or dominant positions, rather than assuming that laboratory experiments on peers can fully simulate such conditions. American psychologists' growing but still atypical habit of studying people other than white middle-class college students is only part of a step toward having researchers articulate the cultural, political, and historical context in which they work.

Sixth, following van den Berghe (1967), social dominance theory has pointed out that not all intergroup oppressive or exploitative relationships have the same properties, nor are they supported by the same kinds of ideologies. In particular, we have found that discrimination against men in subordinate groups takes a different and often more virulent form than discrimination against women (Jackman, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius & Veniegas, 2000; Wrangham & Peterson, 1996). Although some feminist critics have objected to this distinction, we believe that theorizing and examining the meaning of gender for both men and women, and pointing out variance among men as well as among women, is well in keeping with the feminist research agenda.

Finally, we agree with some of our critics (see Huddy, 2004) concerning one important limitation of social dominance theory. This limitation concerns the issues of social change and the obvious facts that the degree of intergroup hierarchy within a given society changes over time and that different societies display substantially different levels of group-based hierarchy, even stretching over relatively long periods of historical time (e.g., the differences in sexism between Scandinavia and Afghanistan). The fact that social dominance theory does not have well-developed mechanisms for dealing with intra- and intersocietal differences in the degree of group-based hierarchy (i.e., social change) was first pointed out by social dominance theorists themselves (e.g., Sidanius, 1993, pp. 217–218). However, this admitted shortcoming does not put social dominance theory at any particular competitive disadvantage because none of the other major models of intergroup relations contain well-theorized mechanisms of social change. Even more important, this accusation of being “theoretically static” is actually beside the point. Even though there are temporal and intersocietal differences in the “degree” of group-based social hierarchy, the sad fact of the matter is that all known surplus-producing social systems are, in fact, organized as group-based social hierarchies. There are no known exceptions. As already mentioned, the basic goal of social dominance theory is to identify and understand the multi-leveled mechanisms responsible for this ubiquitous form of social organization.

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9 By the term “surplus-producing social systems” we refer to societies that produce stable economic surplus, in contrast to the situation for most hunter-gatherer societies.
and how these mechanisms express themselves in the form of intergroup bias, discrimination, and intergroup oppression.

Social dominance theory has been greeted with substantial skepticism in some circles. From what we can tell, much of this skepticism is due to fundamental misconstruals and misapprehensions of what social dominance theory is actually about. We hope that the present paper will help dispel these misperceptions. We have tried to show that social dominance theory has benefited from several research traditions and has sought to build on some of their important findings and perspectives. Moreover, we have attempted to show how the methods and theoretical agenda of social dominance theory are quite compatible with some of the most intellectually and politically progressive movements in the social sciences today.

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