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Social Dominance Orientation: A root of resistance to intercultural dialogue?



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ABSTRACT

Intercultural dialogue is a process central to creating a just social world. Despite this, people are often prejudiced against it. In order to better understand the nature of this antagonism, the present research investigated the role of Social Dominance Orientation as one potential source of resistance. Across three studies, the direct and mediated impact of SDO on both self-reported and behaviorally-indicated dialogic engagement was assessed. Results provide evidence that increasing levels of SDO encourage ideological beliefs and social evaluations that, in turn, prejudice participants against dialogue with an African-American woman. The significance of these results is discussed, along with suggestions for future research.

In a 21st century filled both with more cultural contact and fault lines than ever before, the promise of intercultural dialogue has never been greater. As Ikeda puts it, “dialogue is the starting point and unifying force in all human relationships” (n.d.). Provided its importance in present age, intercultural scholars have sought to better understand dialogue in hopes of better promoting it (Ganesh & Holmes, 2011). Dialogue, however, does not come easy. People often have some small—or even tremendous—resistance to it. The present research aims to investigate one such potential source of resistance: Social Dominance Orientation (SDO). When individuals adopt a social dominance ideology, do they take a step back from the promise dialogue holds for our world?

Social dominance orientation

Although rarely examined within the purview of communication studies (however cf., Garrett, Nisbet, & Lynch, 2013; Saleem, Prot, Anderson, & Lemieux, 2015), Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) is a widely used and central construct within social psychology, one best described as “a general preference for group-based hierarchy” (Fischer, Hanke, & Sibley, 2012, p. 282). Individuals high in SDO agree with statements such as “it’s OK if some groups have more of a chance in life than others”, whereas individuals low in SDO agree with statements such as “increased social equality is desirable” (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). At first glance, SDO appears to be a measure of outgroup prejudice or intergroup bias. However, those endorsing SDO do not necessarily favor their own group (Jost & Thompson, 2000; Levin, Federico, Sidanius, & Rabinowitz, 2002), thus researchers recognize it as more than simple bias. Indeed, SDO is a rare instrument that seemingly captures an individual’s *foundational orientation* toward social group relations—one predicting a wide range of secondary beliefs “including political conservatism, noblesse oblige, just world beliefs, nationalism, patriotism, militarism, internal attributions for poverty, sexism, rape myths, [and the] endorsement of the Protestant work ethic... across a range of cultures” (Ho et al., 2012, p. 587). Viewing this, it is important to consider whether SDO may also be one root of resistance to intercultural dialogue.

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Intercultural dialogue

Although difficult to define, many scholars agree that dialogue typically denotes interaction that is somehow sacramental, communal, and distinct from everyday conversation (e.g., Buber, 1965; Freire, 1970; Gadamer, 1982). As Bohm (2003) put it, “a key difference between dialogue and an ordinary discussion is that, within the latter, people usually hold relatively fixed positions and argue in favor of their views... In dialogue, however, a person may prefer a certain position but does not hold it non-negotiably” (p. 295). Dialogue is thus not about self-confirmation, but rather about openness to the other. Exactly how it is achieved remains a mystery, yet scholars have nevertheless endeavored to identify characteristics that help transform monologic interactions into genuine dialogic ones. As one such example, Johannesen (2002) submits that the key attributes of dialogue are authenticity, inclusion, confirmation, presentness, a supportive climate, and a spirit of mutual equality. Although much has been written about all of these attributes, it is this last one that deserves particular attention in the current effort to understand SDO’s potential impact on intercultural dialogue.

In a world filled with interaction across a range of social hierarchies, genuine dialogue emerges only when each party believes in the fundamental rights and dignities of the other. Put differently, dialogue demands a spirit of mutual equality.

Dialogue is the encounter between [people], mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming—between those who deny other [people] the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them (Freire, 1970, pp. 76–77).

As described, SDO is a foundational preference for group-based hierarchy. Consequently, it should logically engender a secondary and specific view that some dialogue participants have more of a “right to speak” their word than others. In purely conceptual terms then, SDO is antithetical to a spirit of mutual equality—among other characteristics—and should therefore stand opposed to dialogue.

Supporting this argument, a variety of studies have found that participant levels of SDO successfully predict measures indicative of intercultural dialogue. Beginning in 2005, Oswald found that participants higher in SDO reported less willingness to interact with Arabs after the attacks of September 11. The following year, Diemer et al. (2006) found that high school students with higher levels of SDO were less likely to engage conversations about social justice issues with peers or family members. Similarly, SDO has been found to predict students’ willingness to discuss power inequalities with outgroup members (Bikmen & Sunar, 2013), attitudes toward communicating with the hearing impaired (LaBelle, Booth-Butterfield, & Rittenour, 2013), and “openness” to a testimony of race-based suffering (Cargile, 2015). Lastly, several studies have reported a negative relationship between SDO and intergroup contact (e.g., Asbrock, Christ, Duckitt, & Sibley, 2012; Dhont & Van Hiel, 2011). Together this evidence suggests that SDO figures in people’s reluctance to engage with some cultural others. But does SDO ground such resistance?

As many authors contend, SDO is a foundational orientation toward social group relations that is “strongly associated with and determinant of so many socially relevant behaviors and attitudes” (Sidanius et al., 2013, p. 315). Consequently, it is important to not only track the correlation between SDO and indicators of intercultural dialogue, but also to study the direct and indirect effects of SDO in a plausibly sequenced network of beliefs and responses. According to social dominance theory, SDO grounds a host of reactions in which the most direct outcome is support for beliefs and ideologies that maintain social inequality (i.e., hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths, Pratto et al., 2006). Subsequently, these beliefs and ideologies are considered to influence in-turn reactions to specific policies and particular social actors. In this manner, ideological beliefs are believed to mediate the impact that SDO has on responses made in context (see Sidanius & Pratto, 1993, 1999).

A considerable body of research has demonstrated that SDO effects are, in fact, consistent with models of mediated impact. Employing a variety of legitimizing myths (e.g., meritocracy, anti-black racism) in relation to a host of specific policies and judgments (e.g., military programs, Clarence Thomas), Pratto, Stallworth, and Conway-Lanz found that relevant myths entirely mediated the influence that SDO had on all contextualized reactions. “For all five samples, the theoretical model, in which SDO predicted support for legitimizing ideologies, and ideologies predicted attitudes towards policies, fit the data” (1998, p. 1869). The following year, Whitley argued that “stereotypes constitute one form of legitimizing myth” and found that they too mediated the relationship between SDO and self-reported affective responding to the group (1999, p. 127). Like these studies, subsequent ones have continued to detail the impact that SDO has on contextualized reactions as mediated by different forms of legitimizing myth (e.g., Crowson & Brandes, 2010; McFarland, 2005; Saunders, Kelly, Cohen, & Guarino, 2015). Because this mediated impact is well-established, legitimizing ideologies should also mediate the expected impact that SDO has on intercultural dialogue.

In addition to legitimizing ideologies, cognitive and affective responses also likely mediate SDO’s impact on dialogue. As Hodson and Dhont (2015) argue, intergroup interaction is influenced by a wide range of factors that are often studied independent of one another. In their view, research needs to better integrate these factors by, for example, including cognitive and affective variables alongside ideological ones (e.g., Bizer, Hart, & Jekogian, 2012). In this case, one cognitive and one affective variable were additionally considered for study as potential mediators: interpersonal trust (i.e., a belief about another’s dependability; Dirks, 1999) and empathic concern (i.e., feeling for the other; Batson, 2009). Beginning with trust, researchers generally view the lack of trust as a central determinant of intergroup prejudice (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; Tam et al., 2008) and have confirmed its role in mediating the impact of ideology on prejudice (Dhont & Van Hiel, 2011). Relatedly, SDO has been found negatively tied to trust in low-status group members (Xin & Chi, 2010), while trust itself has been positively tied to prosocial behaviors (Choi, 2006; Kosfeld, Heinrichs, Zak, Fischbacher, & Fehr, 2005; Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). Treating dialogue as a prosocial act (Taylor & Kent, 2014) dependent upon trust (James, 1999), it appears that trust should mediate the relationship between SDO and intercultural dialogue—a process wherein SDO decreases trust in low-status group members thereby producing an in-turn diminishment of dialogic engagement.

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