



## Short Communication

## On the path to social dominance? Individual differences in sensitivity to intergroup fairness violations in early childhood


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## ABSTRACT

According to current literature, individual differences in Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) are assumed to consistently manifest only around young adulthood. Here, we examined, to our knowledge for the first time, whether individual differences in sensitivity to intergroup inequality – a defining characteristic of SDO – have expressions already in early childhood. We expected young children to be less sensitive to moral standards of intergroup fairness to the extent that their parents supported social inequality. Using a sample of 75 preschoolers and their parents, we found that children's sensitivity to intergroup fairness violations varied systematically in line with their parents' SDO levels. Specifically, children of parents low in SDO penalized ingroup members' fairness violations in the intergroup context, whereas children of parents high in SDO showed no such penalization. These findings suggest that individual differences in sensitivity to intergroup equality have expressions significantly earlier than currently acknowledged in the literature.

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People vary in the degree to which they endorse social inequality. This individual-difference – commonly operationalized as Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) – has been found to predict a long list of important social and political outcomes including, among others, prejudice, intolerance, and economic conservatism (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). People high in SDO are characterized by insensitivity to moral violations and the welfare of social others, and are driven by a perception that the world is a competitive jungle in which one must ‘trump the competition’; whereas people low in SDO are motivated by egalitarianism and altruistic social concern, and prioritize fairness and harm-avoidance (Duckitt, 2001; Federico, Weber, Ergun, & Hunt, 2013; Sidanius et al., 2013).

Several theoretical articulations have pointed to early socialization as a central source of SDO (Duckitt, 2001; Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006; Weber & Federico, 2007), and accordingly, researchers have expected and found intergenerational concordance in levels of SDO among young adults and their parents (e.g. Chatard & Selimbegovic, 2008; Duckitt, 2001; Duriez & Soenens, 2009). Yet, no work has examined expressions of SDO in early childhood, likely due to the general consensus that such differences do not consistently manifest and congeal before young adulthood (Chatard & Selimbegovic, 2008; Duckitt, 2001; Duriez & Soenens, 2009).

Research in developmental science, however, suggests that children demonstrate both awareness of intergroup relations, and sensitivity to intergroup inequality already early on (LoBue, Nishida, Chiong, DeLoache, & Haidt, 2011; Tomasello & Vaish, 2013). For example, preschoolers demonstrate ingroup preference in resource allocation (e.g. Dunham, Baron, & Carey, 2011; Moore, 2009) and are sensitive to the context of intergroup competition (Rhodes & Brickman, 2011). At the same time, children also enforce moral norms for both ingroup and outgroup members and prioritize fairness considerations over group bias (Killen, Margie, & Sinno, 2006; Schmidt, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2012). Especially relevant is the finding that preschoolers are less likely to favor an ingroup member after viewing her divide resources unfairly with an outgroup member (Hetherington, Hendrickson, & Koenig, 2014). Recent research also suggests that systematic differences consistent with parents' socio-political orientation may be captured in early childhood by examining age-relevant manifestations (Reifen Tagar, Federico, Lyons, Ludeke, & Koenig, 2014). The goal of this work, therefore, is to examine behavioral expressions of individual differences in SDO in early childhood.

## The current research

In the current literature, children's sensitivity to intergroup fairness is regarded as a general human tendency reflecting normative development (Fehr, Bernhard, & Rockenbach, 2008; Killen, 2007). However, considered through the lens of individual differences in SDO, one might expect systematic individual differences in this tendency.

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Correspondingly, we hypothesized that children of parents high (versus low) in SDO would show lower sensitivity to intergroup inequality and particularly to violation of fairness norms in division of resources with the outgroup. To examine this hypothesis, we crossed data in which children's intergroup fairness considerations were assessed (Hetherington et al., 2014) with a survey administered to these children's parents, assessing their levels of SDO. Specifically, we expected that parent's level of SDO would moderate the extent to which children penalize intergroup fairness violations, such that higher parent scores in SDO would correspond to less child penalization.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants and procedure

Eighty 4- to 5-year-old children (38 girls, mean age = 4.86; range = 3.9–5.7) and a parent of each were recruited through a university based database. All recruitment and experimental procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), target sample size was determined a-priori based on similar earlier work (Rhodes & Brickman, 2011), and all analyses were conducted after completion of data collection. Three children did not complete the study due to lack of cooperation and two for technical reasons.

Children were first randomly assigned to a minimal group by being told that they were going to play some games and would be assigned to the blue/red group. Children then received a T-shirt and wristband of the corresponding color. Next, in a between-subjects design, children viewed one of three series of short video clips, in each of which they witnessed an ingroup member and an outgroup member – as marked by their T-shirt color – both seated at a table, and a third person ('moderator') presenting them with a single coveted resource (e.g. a candy bar) and noting that there was only one. Depending on condition, children either saw the ingroup member claim the resource for herself and refuse to share with the outgroup member ('Unfair In-group' condition;  $n = 25$ , 12 girls, mean age = 4.86; range = 4.07–5.50); the outgroup member declare that she was happy to share and that they can each have half, while splitting the scarce resource into two equal parts and handing half to the ingroup member ('Fair Outgroup' condition;  $n = 25$ ; 13 girls, mean age = 4.84; range = 4.07–5.70); or the moderator saying they can each have half, and split the scarce resource in two equal parts providing half each to the ingroup and outgroup members, such that no moral behavior was demonstrated by the ingroup or outgroup member (control condition;  $n = 25$ ; 13 girls; mean age = 4.89; range = 3.87–5.71); Across conditions, each participant saw three clips, with the same dynamic occurring each time. This procedure was developed based on previously established designs (e.g. Dunham et al., 2011; Rhodes, 2012; Schug, Shusterman, Barth, & Patalano, 2013).

Parents were seated at the back of the room, behind their children, to enable the young children's comfort in the new environment while minimizing the parent's impact on the children's decision making, based on common practice in earlier related work (e.g. Reifen Tagar et al., 2014). In addition, the experimenter was instructed to look away when the child was making the allocations. All actors were female, and ingroup and outgroup member actors were counterbalanced across participants, such that the same actor might once be the ingroup member and once the outgroup member.

The focal comparison of interest was that between the Unfair Ingroup condition and the Control condition, the latter providing the baseline for ingroup favoritism in the absence of inequality. This comparison would enable us to see if ingroup unfairness would differentially lead to reduced ingroup favoritism conditional on parent's level of SDO. The goal of the third condition was to test if parent's SDO would also moderate the extent that outgroup moral behavior would trump baseline ingroup favoritism. This additional comparison enables testing whether parent SDO would impact child sensitivity uniquely to

violations of intergroup fairness as we expect, or also to signals of lower intergroup competition indicated by outgroup cooperativeness.

Following the clips, children's understanding of which agent was an ingroup member and which was an outgroup member was tested by presenting a still image of the two agents and asking 'is this person in your group?'. All children ( $n = 75$ ) completed this test correctly. All children in the two experimental conditions ( $n = 50$ ) also successfully completed a manipulation check by identifying whether the agent had shared or not. Next, children completed a set of measures including a liking measure and resource allocation measure (described below) as well as other measures irrelevant for the present hypothesis (for full details see Hetherington et al., 2014). While children were engaged with these activities, parents completed a short survey including measures of Social Dominance Orientation, authoritarianism, and demographics.

### 1.2. Measures

#### 1.2.1. Parent Social Dominance Orientation

An 8-item SDO measure (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) was used (e.g. "It's probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom"). Responses were recorded using a 7-point Likert scale with verbal anchors *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (7). Responses were averaged to create a single scale ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ), with higher values reflecting higher levels of SDO.

#### 1.2.2. Parent authoritarian predisposition

In order to test whether any moderating effect of SDO is unique and not simply capturing conservatism or intergroup prejudice, we included a measure of authoritarian predisposition. This was measured using four forced-choice items in which parents were asked which of two child-rearing values (authoritarian and nonauthoritarian) they found more important (Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Stenner, 2005). Responses were averaged to create a single scale ( $\alpha = 0.62$ ), with higher scores indicating a stronger authoritarian predisposition.

#### 1.2.3. Child resource allocation

Across three trials, children were asked to distribute all fifteen paper coins between the two agents they had seen in the video clips (i.e., one ingroup member and one outgroup member) by placing coins in two cups, bearing the image of each agent. The gap in total number of coins distributed to the ingroup versus the outgroup member across the three trials was calculated, with larger numbers reflecting greater ingroup preference.

#### 1.2.4. Child explicit liking

Children were presented with a still image of each agent and asked to rate how much they liked each using a 6-point pictorial response scale ranging from very negative to very positive. A difference score between ingroup and outgroup liking was calculated, with a higher score representing greater ingroup preference.

## 2. Results

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among study variables. To test our hypothesis, we examined whether parents' level of SDO moderated differences in children's ingroup favoritism in the presence versus absence of fairness violation. Specifically, we examined whether higher parent scores in SDO corresponded to children penalizing ingroup members to a lesser degree for dividing resources unfairly with an outgroup member. We further examined whether parent SDO would moderate child sensitivity to cues of cooperation from the outgroup, to see if the role of SDO was indeed unique to the presence of inequality.

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