



Rooting for the top dog: How social dominance motives shape group preference in intergroup competition



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Past research suggests that people tend to root for the underdog in intergroup competitions (IC).
- However, Studies 1–3 demonstrate that social dominance orientation (SDO) is associated with a greater top dog preference.
- This SDO effect was mediated by beliefs about IC as being opportunities to maintain versus challenge hierarchy (Study 2).
- The SDO effect on top dog preference was independent of hierarchy domain (i.e., economic versus athletic status; Study 3).

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ABSTRACT

Moving beyond prior research establishing people's preference for underdogs, we examined the role of social dominance orientation (SDO) in shaping individuals' preference for underdogs versus top dogs in intergroup competitions. Because a victorious underdog can be seen as a threat to hierarchy, we predicted that SDO would be negatively associated with underdog support. In the context of two real-world group competitions—i.e., the FIFA World Cup and the Olympic Games—we found that SDO was positively associated with a greater preference for top dogs rather than underdogs (Studies 1–3). This SDO effect on group preference was mediated by beliefs about international sports competitions as opportunities for hierarchy maintenance versus equality promotion (Study 2). Furthermore, SDO and top dog preference were positively associated regardless of the hierarchy domain—i.e., countries' economic power versus athletic achievement (Study 3). We discuss the theoretical implications of these findings for intergroup research.

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1. Introduction

Past research has established that when a disadvantaged party (underdog) faces an advantaged opponent (top dog), people tend to root for the underdog (Kim et al., 2008; Vandello, Goldschmied, & Richards, 2007). Underdog preference has been studied in several domains of disadvantage, including in terms of relative resources and likelihood of success (Vandello et al., 2007). In addition to greater liking of, and more support for, underdogs (Vandello et al., 2007), such work has shown that individuals perceive underdogs as more physically attractive (Michniewicz & Vandello, 2013) and as heroic (Allison & Goethals, 2011). Indeed, it has been argued that because overcoming unlikely odds and/or adverse conditions can be seen as a form of heroism (Allison & Goethals, 2011), underdogs provide a social, moral, model for others (Franco, Blau, & Zimbardo, 2011). Thus, with regard

to unequal competitions, prior work suggests that individuals prefer a disadvantaged underdog over an advantaged top dog.

However, past work has not considered how individual differences in attitudes toward hierarchy might shape people's preference for underdogs versus top dogs. The current work is aimed at filling this gap in the literature by examining if, and how, social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) shapes individuals' preference for underdogs versus top dogs in intergroup competitions. SDO refers to individuals' preference for hierarchical, non-egalitarian relationships between social groups, and has been shown to be a powerful predictor of a wide range of social attitudes and behaviors (Kteily, Sidanius, & Levin, 2011; Pratto et al., 1994). For example, high SDO individuals are more likely to seek hierarchy-enhancing professional roles (e.g., police officers, marines) as opposed to hierarchy-attenuating roles (e.g., teachers, civil rights activists; Pratto et al., 1994). Similarly, low SDO individuals, compared to high SDO individuals, are generally more supportive of social policies that are aimed at promoting intergroup equality, such as affirmative action (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). In the current research, we depart from the notion of a universal

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preference for underdogs, as we propose that the tendency to prefer intergroup hierarchy, as captured by SDO, will shape individuals' preference for underdogs versus top dogs in the context of intergroup competition.

When an underdog beats a top dog in sports or political elections this is referred to as an “upset” victory or win (e.g., Tani, 2015) and the victorious underdog is dubbed as the “giant-killer” (e.g., Rothenberg, 2015). In line with this terminology, we argue that a victorious underdog can be seen as upsetting, or challenging, the hierarchy between competing groups. Therefore, we predict that individuals who value hierarchy—i.e., those relatively high in SDO—will support underdogs less than those who value equality—i.e., those relatively low in SDO. Similarly, because a victorious top dog can be seen as maintaining hierarchy between competing groups, we predict that support for top dogs will be greater for those high rather than low in SDO.

We tested the above mentioned hypotheses in the context of real-world intergroup competitions involving underdog and top dog contenders: The FIFA World Cup (Studies 1 and 2) and the Olympic Games (Study 3). These competitions constitute two of the world's largest and most prestigious sports tournaments (e.g., Bauder, 2014). International sports competitions have been found to heighten ingroup favoritism and nationalism, resulting in intergroup rivalry when one's in-group is competing (Bairner, 2001; Blank & Schmidt, 2003; Wann & Grieve, 2005). The current work moves beyond prior work's focus on ingroup preference, to examine the role of SDO in shaping individuals' preference for underdog versus top dog groups in international sports competitions involving outgroups. Finally, because we wanted to test the relationship between SDO and underdog preference across domains of hierarchy, we operationalized underdog status in terms of relative economic and political power (Studies 1–3) as well as in terms of athletic achievement (Study 3).

2. Method Study 1

2.1. Participants

Just days before the 2014 FIFA World Cup semi-finals in Brazil, participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk to complete a survey about the FIFA World Cup. Participants all completed at least 50 studies prior to this study, with an approval rate of at least 90%, and had an IP address originating in the US. A sample of 138 people completed the survey (88 men and 50 women), with ages ranging from 18 to 70 ($M = 30.36$, $SD = 9.16$). Fourteen participants self-identified as African American/Black, 101 as European American/White, 10 as Hispanic/Latino, 9 as Asian, 1 as Native American, 1 as Pacific Islander, and 2 as Other. Participants received monetary compensation for completing the study.

2.2. Procedure

After granting informed consent and providing basic demographic information, participants completed the 16-item social dominance orientation scale (Pratto et al., 1994; $\alpha = .95$). Next, participants were presented with the names and flags of the four countries that qualified for the semifinals, in randomized order: Argentina, Brazil, Germany, and the Netherlands. To determine perceived status differences between the four countries, we asked participants how wealthy (1 = very poor, 7 = very rich) and how powerful (1 = not at all powerful, 7 = very powerful) they thought each country was. In addition, we asked participants to rate how personally connected they felt to each country (1 = not at all connected, 7 = very connected) and how competent they thought each country's soccer team was (1 = not at all competent, 7 = very competent). This allowed us to control for group identification and perceived group competence, respectively, when testing the effect of SDO on group preference. Next, participants were presented

with the actual line-ups for the two semi-final games (Argentina vs. the Netherlands and Brazil vs. Germany) followed by the four possible line-ups for the World Cup final game (Argentina vs. Brazil, Germany vs. Argentina, the Netherlands vs. Brazil, and the Netherlands vs. Germany) in randomized order. For each of these six line-ups, participants indicated which team they wanted to win, after which they were thanked and compensated.

3. Results

3.1. Perceptions of countries' relative status

To test for differences in perceived status between countries, we averaged participants' ratings of perceived wealth and power for each country ($r_s = .37$ – $.68$, all $p_s < .001$). Next, pairwise comparisons were conducted to test for differences in perceived status between countries (see Table 1). The Netherlands and Germany were perceived as being significantly higher status compared to Brazil and Argentina. Among the high status countries, Germany was perceived higher status than the Netherlands. Among the low status countries, Brazil and Argentina were perceived as equally low status. Therefore, all but the latter line-up of these countries constituted an intergroup competition between an underdog and a top dog.

3.2. SDO and a preference for top dogs

For each of the line-ups involving a higher vs. lower status country—i.e., every line-up except for Brazil vs. Argentina—we coded participants' preferred team as either 0 (underdog team) or 1 (top dog team). Adding these scores together resulted in a continuous variable ranging from 0 (preference for underdog in all five games) to 5 (preference for top dog in all five games). Overall, participants expressed no clear preference for underdog or top dog countries, as the mean score did not significantly differ from the midpoint of the scale ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.52$, $t(137) = 0.95$, $p = .34$, 95% CI [-0.13 , 0.38]). To test our prediction that SDO would be associated with a greater preference for top dog rather than underdog countries, we regressed people's team preferences on SDO. In total, 52% of participants picked a top dog country more often than an underdog country (i.e., at least 3 out of 5 line-ups). As predicted, we found that SDO was associated with a greater preference for teams from top dog countries, $\beta = .24$, $SE = .11$, $t(137) = 2.83$, $p = .005$, 95% CI [0.09 , 0.51].

Next, we examined whether SDO predicted team preference above and beyond group identification and perceived merit. We conducted two regression analyses, entering group identification and perceived team competence and SDO as predictors. As hypothesized, we found that after controlling for participants' identification with each country, SDO was still significantly associated with a greater preference for top dog countries, $\beta = .20$, $SE = .10$, $t(134) = 2.44$, $p = .02$, 95% CI [0.05 , 0.45]. Similarly, it was found that after controlling for participants' perceived competence of each countries' team, SDO remained significantly associated with a greater preference for teams from top dog rather than underdog countries, $\beta = .18$, $SE = .10$, $t(134) = 2.22$, $p = .03$, 95% CI [0.03 , 0.44]. Finally, when simultaneously controlling for perceived team competence and group identification, it was observed that SDO was still marginally significantly associated

Table 1

Pairwise comparisons of perceived status between countries in Study 1.

	M_{diff}	SD	t	p
Germany–Brazil	1.94	1.48	15.40	.000
Germany–Argentina	2.07	1.47	16.59	.000
The Netherlands–Brazil	0.88	1.38	7.44	.000
The Netherlands–Argentina	1.01	1.26	9.38	.000
Germany–The Netherlands	1.06	1.08	11.50	.000
Brazil–Argentina	0.13	1.06	1.45	.151

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