



## Reports

## The power of generosity to change views on social power

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## ABSTRACT

Intergroup helping behavior by high status group members typically functions to support and further entrench systems of social hierarchy (Nadler, 2002). This research examined whether the virtue of generosity could increase support for more egalitarian group relations, as indexed by reduced social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Pilot testing ( $N = 367$ ) revealed a negative relationship between self-reported generosity and SDO. In Study 1, two long-term experimental manipulations of generosity in 110 college students reduced SDO. One manipulation involved a nine week community service learning project, and the other involved a five-part reflection paper assignment on generous individuals. In Study 2, a brief generosity prime in 58 college students reduced SDO scores. The potential benefits of targeting SDO directly, and the importance of examining the motives behind generosity are discussed.

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## The power of generosity to change views on social power

Immigration reform, universal healthcare, and gay marriage are some of the most hotly debated issues in the United States today. While each issue is unique and complex, a shared feature amongst them is the power differential between the “haves” (e.g., those with citizenship, economic resources, or majority status) and the “have nots.” A robust body of literature in psychology has shown that people are motivated to maintain and preserve systems of social power (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Kay et al., 2009; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius, Pratto, van Laar & Levin, 2004). Changing public opinion on issues that challenge the status quo or that require shifts in social hierarchy can be a seemingly insurmountable task.

There are, however, differences in the extent to which people endorse the correctness of social hierarchy. Social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto et al., 1994) is an individual difference construct that describes an individual's preference for hierarchy in a social system. Those who are high in SDO believe that it is appropriate for certain groups to dominate in society, while those who are low in SDO favor a more egalitarian approach to group relations. While SDO is generally stable over time (Sidanius, Levin, van Laar, & Sears, 2008), it can be influenced by social context and situational variables (Duckitt & Fisher, 2003; Guimond, Dambrun, Michinov, & Duarte, 2003; Huang & Liu, 2005; Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007), including helping behavior (Brown, 2011).

Intergroup helping relations often involve social power dynamics (Jackson & Esses, 2000; Nadler, 2002; Nadler & Halabi, 2006), and

can be used to maintain unequal status relations in a social hierarchy (Cunningham & Platow, 2007; Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002; Worchel, 1984). Nadler's model of Intergroup Helping as Status Relations (IHSR) assumes that “the helping behaviors of members of high status groups are expected to be driven by their wish to maintain their group's advantageous position” (2002, p. 493). For example, Nadler, Harpaz-Gorodeisky, and Ben-David (2009) found that when their status was perceived as unstable, high status groups protected their ingroup identity by providing dependency oriented-help to the lower status outgroup. Dependency-oriented help consists of providing full solutions to problems, thus reinforcing recipients' continued reliance on the givers of help. In line with this, Jackson and Esses (2000) found that under conditions of perceived economic competition with immigrants, participants showed decreased support for empowering forms of help, but stable levels of non-empowering forms of help.

Strategic helping behavior is one way that high status group members can maintain their social power, but not all acts of helping fall under this rubric. As Nadler notes in describing the limits of the IHSR model: “To be sure, however, this model neither assumes nor implies that all inter-group helping is driven by power considerations. Altruism and empathy certainly cannot be ruled out in the motives of members of higher status groups who help members of lower status groups” (2002, p. 494). History contains many generous exemplars whose helping behavior was a means to bring equality between groups rather than to entrench existing social hierarchy. This investigation focuses on the power of generosity to challenge views of social dominance.

Generosity has been defined in numerous ways over time and across scholarly disciplines, but contemporary psychologists view it as “the virtue of giving good things to others freely and abundantly”

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(Science of Generosity Initiative, 2009). This virtue entails the inclination and the action of giving liberally, and is conceived of as a basic personal moral orientation to life. Generosity has overlap with other constructs such as altruism, although it is not identical as generosity can stem at least partially from self-serving motives (Science of Generosity Initiative). While much is known about the benefits of generosity (Malloch, 2009), little empirical research exists to demonstrate its consequences for intergroup power relations (Collett & Morrissey, 2009). Research on individuals indicates that generous behaviors promote trust and improve cooperative behavior in the face of difficulties (Klapwijk & Van Lange, 2009; Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Tazelaar, 2002).

Most pertinent to the present study, Brown (2011) studied the effect of helping behavior on social dominance attitudes, as indexed by SDO scores (Pratto et al., 1994). Participants who were randomly assigned to do nine weeks of community service had lower levels of SDO compared to a control group at the conclusion of the service experience. This research seeks to expand on Brown's findings, by examining whether the virtue of generosity affects social dominance attitudes. By definition, generous individuals give liberally and abundantly, and are therefore less preoccupied with maintaining personal or ingroup dominance; by extension, they should have lower SDO than less generous individuals.

A pilot test was conducted to first establish the link between self-reported generosity and SDO. Study 1 utilized two long-term experimental methods in a field setting to elicit generosity; Study 2 utilized a short-term experimental priming method in a lab setting to elicit generosity. It was hypothesized that the experimental manipulations of generosity would decrease SDO.

### Pilot study

There are no studies to date that have formally established a link between generosity and social dominance attitudes (although there is research examining SDO as a predictor of when and how people will help [Halabi, Dovidio, & Nadler, 2008; Jackson & Esses, 2000]). A pilot study was used to ascertain the correlation between the two constructs on self-report measures. Generosity was assessed with the Interpersonal Generosity Scale (IGS; Smith & Hill, 2009). The ten-item measure is scored on a Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Higher numbers indicate greater generosity. The measure assesses six dimensions of generosity: attention, compassion, openhandedness, self-extension, courage, and verbal expression (e.g., "I am known by my family and friends as someone who makes time to pay attention to others' problems," and "My decisions are often based on concern for the welfare of others"). Reliability was acceptable ( $\alpha = .80$ ). SDO was assessed using the Social Dominance Orientation Scale (Pratto et al., 1994). The SDO scale measures the extent that one prefers ingroup dominance and superiority over outgroups. It consists of 16 items (e.g., "Sometimes other groups must be kept in their place," and "Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups") rated on a Likert scale ranging from *extremely positive* (5) to *extremely negative* (1). Reliability for this scale was also acceptable ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

Students from lower-division psychology courses at a small liberal arts university in the Northwestern United States completed the measures ( $N = 367$ ). The sample was predominantly female (68%,  $n = 250$ ) and White (72%,  $n = 263$ ). Average age of participants was 19.38 ( $SD = 3.49$ ). A Pearson correlation ( $r = -.233$ ,  $p < .001$ ) revealed the hypothesized negative relationship between scores on the IGS and SDO scale. Independent t-tests found no gender differences in generosity,  $t(362) = .471$ ,  $p = .638$ , but there was a significant gender difference in SDO,  $t(362) = -3.88$ ,  $p < .001$ . Men ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = .96$ ) scored higher than women ( $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = .83$ ), consistent with previous research (Levin, 2004).

### Study 1

Pilot testing established the predicted negative relationship between generosity and social dominance attitudes using self-report survey methodology. Study 1 was designed to examine whether that relationship is a causal one, with generosity influencing one's level of SDO. As Peterson and Seligman (2004) mention in their chapter on Kindness (the character strength which encompasses generosity in their taxonomy of virtues): "Despite the massive literatures on moral development in education and guidance, surprisingly little seems to be known about how to encourage kindness and altruism directly" (p. 333). Thus, choosing methods to elicit generosity in participants was based on extrapolations from related literatures in social psychology.

In order to increase generalizability of the findings, two different methods were chosen to elicit (experimentally "cultivate") generosity in participants. The first method was a nine week service learning experience that required participants to engage in 18 h of service in their community (Brown, 2011). Sustained helping experiences of this type have been shown to contribute to altruism, willingness to help, and social responsibility (Moran, 2007; Scales, Blyth, Berkas, & Kielsmeier, 2000), although the effect on generosity has not been directly measured. The second method was a five-part reflection paper assignment written over the same nine weeks, which required participants to learn about and reflect on famous generous individuals. In this case, research based on social learning theory has repeatedly shown the influence of generous models on subsequent generosity, particularly in the presence of reinforcement (Gagné & Middlebrooks, 1977). In the present study, students learned about generous models, and this learning was reinforced by teacher evaluations of their reflections.

This was a between subjects 2 (Service Learning/Control)  $\times$  2 (Generosity Reflection/Control) factorial design. SDO and IGS scores were assessed at the end of the study. It was hypothesized that a) both experimental manipulations of generosity would result in lower SDO scores than their respective control conditions, and b) the relationship between the experimental manipulations of generosity and SDO scores would be mediated by self-reported interpersonal generosity on the IGS.

### Method

#### Participants

One hundred and ten students in an introductory psychology course at a small liberal arts university in the Northwestern United States participated in the service project as a course requirement, and in the survey assessments in exchange for extra course credit. The majority (66%,  $n = 73$ ) were female. Using random assignment to conditions, 28 participants were assigned to the Service Learning/Generosity Reflection condition, 28 were assigned to the Service Learning/Control Reflection condition, 28 were assigned to the Service Control/Generosity Reflection condition, and 26 were assigned to the Service Control/Control Reflection condition. Eleven other students enrolled in the course participated in the required service project but chose not to participate in the voluntary study assessments. The mean age of participants was 19.36 ( $SD = 2.60$ ), with the following self-identification of race: American Indian/Alaskan Native ( $n = 2$ ), Asian ( $n = 16$ ), Black/African American ( $n = 1$ ), Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander ( $n = 6$ ), White ( $n = 73$ ), or Other ( $n = 3$ ; missing  $n = 9$ ).

#### Service project procedures

On the first day of the academic quarter, students were informed that a service project would be a required component of the course.

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