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Social Dominance Theory

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Social dominance theory is a multi-level theory of how societies maintain group-based dominance. Nearly all stable societies can be considered group-based dominance hierarchies, in which one social group – often an ethnic, religious, national, or racial one – holds disproportionate power and enjoys special privileges, and at least one other group has relatively little political power or ease in its way of life. As examples, consider the relationship between contemporary Western European nations and their immigrant groups and Roma, between the ruling elites of South America and their indigenous peoples, or between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. In all cases, the economic, educational, and health outcomes are superior for members of the dominant groups from what they are for members of the subordinate groups. Moreover, societies recognize the legal rights of dominants and portray their ways of living as virtuous and characteristic of the whole society, whereas subordinates receive little social recognition and are even stigmatized. Group dominance societies also feature an intersecting kind of group oppression, namely sexism, men holding disproportionate power and freedoms compared with women, and heterosexism being privileged over other kinds of sexuality. Social dominance theory describes how processes at different levels of social organization, from cultural ideologies and institutional discrimination to gender roles and the psychology of prejudice, work together to produce stable group-based inequality.

USE OF FORCE AND INSTITUTIONAL DISCRIMINATION

Social dominance theory states that stable inequality among groups is maintained in part through the use of disproportionate force against subordinate groups. For example, as part of its “war on terror,” the United States has subjected foreign nationals to conditions of imprisonment that would be illegal under American law if they were used against US citizens (and may be illegal under International Humanitarian Law). Systematic force is also used by the criminal justice system, which in many societies disproportionately punishes members of subordinate groups, particularly men (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Another major way in which dominance is maintained is through institutional discrimination in the allocation of desirable resources. For example, public and private institutions typically provide better education, financial services, healthcare, and jobs for members of dominant groups rather than for members of subordinate groups (see *ibid.* for a review). In contrast to the thesis that oppression is maintained mainly by force and threat, as would be illustrated by police states such as Chile under Pinochet, the USSR under Stalin, and Germany under Hitler, social dominance theory claims that even democracies can function as group-based hierarchies. In fact, because forceful oppression sometimes gives rise to nationalist liberation movements (e.g. the Soviet occupation of Chechnya and Afghanistan; see Harff & Gurr, 2004) and can turn the public against acts of oppression performed in its name (e.g. the French colonization of Algeria, or US racism against Blacks), social dominance theory emphasizes the

important role of *legitimizing myths* both for disguising and for legitimizing oppressive actions and institutional discrimination.

LEGITIMIZING MYTHS

Uses of force and discrimination can be disguised or made acceptable by compelling cultural ideologies, called *legitimizing myths*. Legitimizing myths are widely known within a society and are linked to the basic cultural cosmology in ways that make them seem self-apparently true. Reflecting and reproducing culture, legitimizing myths change over historical time, in order to frame and legitimize different aspects of social structure. For example, the doctrine of manifest destiny and stereotypes promoting the idea that Native Americans were “savages” were used to legitimize US expansion of its territory through the 1800s; but, since the United States now views itself as the world’s premier egalitarian democracy, in contrast to the colonial powers of Europe, government officials describe US twentieth-century and twenty-first-century occupation of other nations as “democratizing” rather than “colonizing.” At present, legitimizing myths of national security, national interest, national liberation, or religious purity, together with stereotypic images of the enemy as barbaric, especially in contrast to images of one’s own nation and allies as virtuous, can justify war, pre-emptive strikes, arms build-ups, violations of national sovereignty, terrorism, and violations of the International Humanitarian Law. It should not be forgotten that even “liberal” legitimizing myths can be used to justify the use of force or warfare; for example, among the many reasons that former US President George W. Bush offered for invading Afghanistan was the oppression of women by the Taliban. Likewise, Israeli journalists excuse Israeli violence against Palestinians by touting Israeli democracy and restraint (Dor, 2005), and several Marxist and

“egalitarian” revolutionary movements, from the Russian revolution to Peru’s Sendero Luminoso [“Shining Path”], have employed massive and brutal violence. (See SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION THEORY.)

Recognizing that the content and functions of legitimizing myths are not equivalent, social dominance theory identifies two broad functional types of legitimizing myths. Hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths help maintain or increase group-based inequality, and hierarchy-attenuating legitimizing myths decrease group-based inequality and promote egalitarian relations among social groups. Legitimizing myths have a direct relationship with issues of human rights and social justice: the way people understand what they deserve and how they and others should be treated. Legitimizing myths that promote human rights (e.g. the universal rights of man, the democratic dogma of inalienable rights) are hierarchy attenuating because they suggest that all people should be granted certain rights and freedoms regardless of their group membership. By offering these rights to all people, these legitimizing myths argue for a reduction of the disparities that exist between social groups in their access to resources, power, and legitimacy. Other legitimizing myths suggest that some rights and privileges are reserved only for certain groups, and these help to increase group-based inequality and social hierarchy. Such hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths may achieve this result by directly specifying who is entitled to rights and privileges (e.g. the divine right of kings, racism, nationalism), or by *implying* who can be excluded from rights and privileges. Examples of the latter form include the Protestant work ethics, which disadvantages people who do not have the opportunities to be fairly compensated for their hard work (e.g. undocumented workers, homemakers) and “First-Worldism” – the implicit view that “people” are middle-class members of the “first world,” so that their lives,

rights, and concerns come first, perhaps even to the exclusion of the “second” and “third” worlds. Hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating legitimizing myths, which appeal to different kinds of people, as we will see below, counterbalance each other to stabilize social hierarchy. Social dominance theory does hold, however, that the more hierarchy-attenuating legitimizing myths are promoted, including those that advocate for allowing subordinate groups access to political power and resources, the less oppression and more peace can be attained.

There is no specified content to legitimizing myths. In theory, any ideas that refer to a culture’s cosmology and seem to make sense and to justify practices and policies can serve as legitimizing myths. For example, in the United States, a wide variety of anti-Black racist ideologies function as legitimizing myths, in that they help to justify continuing racist policies and are invoked against enacting anti-racist policies such as affirmative action and non-discrimination laws. Part of the reason why social dominance theory fits a variety of cultures is that legitimizing myths are specific to the systems of meaning and to the practices of each culture (Pratto et al., 2000). Social dominance theory does have an empirical standard for testing the legitimizing *function* of legitimizing myths: if endorsement can be shown to increase support for hierarchy-enhancing (versus hierarchy-attenuating) policies, or if endorsement of the ideology mediates such support and the general propensity for prejudice known as *social dominance orientation*, then its status as hierarchy-enhancing or as hierarchy-attenuating is established.

SOCIAL DOMINANCE ORIENTATION (SDO)

Social dominance orientation is defined as an individual’s psychological orientation to

group-based dominance. Generally people may prefer and endorse such hierarchies or reject them, and scales measuring social dominance orientation correlate robustly across countries with a variety of kinds of group prejudices (including sexism, sexual orientation prejudice, racism, nationalism) and with hierarchy-enhancing policies. Social dominance orientation correlates negatively with tolerance, egalitarianism, universalism, humanitarianism, and support for hierarchy-attenuating policies such as human rights (e.g. Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006). Compared with Americans who are low on social dominance orientation, those who are high on social dominance orientation are more likely to make decisions that protect US material interests than decisions that protect the lives of noncombatants (Pratto & Glasford, 2008). A number of independent scholars have found that, in the United States, people high on SDO supported the 1991 US invasion of Iraq and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, spending on the military and on a variety of weapons systems, whereas people low on SDO endorsed the use of the military for humanitarian ends in the Yugoslavian civil war, Afghanistan, and Iraq. In contrast, Lebanese who are low on SDO oppose US counterterrorism policies because they view them as a way to continue American world dominance (Henry, Sidanius, Levin, & Pratto, 2005).

Another important idea in social dominance theory is that the *confluence* of the various processes that maintain dominance societies helps to stabilize them (e.g. Pratto et al., 2006). For example, societies that promote militarism posture dominance towards external nations and towards subordinated peoples within their nations; but militarism also reinforces sexism. Men are disproportionately employed and promoted in the military (sometimes even to the exclusion of women), so militaristic policies provide economic advantages domestically to men, and reinforce the cultural stereotype

that leaders are men (rather than women). In this way, military practices that are ostensibly intended to promote “national security” for all may in fact be creating hierarchies among men and between men and women, as well as between the militarizing nation and its neighbors or enemies.

Another important kind of confluence concerns the assortment of people into hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating social institutions and roles. Generally men are higher on social dominance orientation than women are; they are strongly over-represented in hierarchy-enhancing roles (military, law, finance), whereas women are over-represented in hierarchy-attenuating roles (social work, charity work). Experimental and correlational evidence shows that this happens due to several processes: (a) self-selection; (b) institutional discrimination in hiring; (c) on-the-job ideological socialization; and (d) differential feedback and attrition. Similar assortment processes put into hierarchy-enhancing roles members of dominant groups, who are also higher on social dominance orientation and hold on to hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths more than members of subordinate groups do. The redundancy among different social processes helps to stabilize the functioning of the social system.

SUMMARY

Social dominance theory implies that dynamic ideological and political struggles occur even in fairly stable societies, and it also points out that normative institutional discrimination and cultural ideologies play as important a role in group oppression as force does. Social dominance theory does echo elite theories stating that, without a culturally normative and institutionalized control of power, social instability can

devolve into extremely violent civil warfare, as the recent examples of the Somalian and Yugoslavian civil wars show. However, social dominance theory also points out that stable oppression is systematically violent against subordinates. By implication, relatively non-violent peace may also involve a struggle to balance the power. On the whole, social dominance theory argues that the least oppressive kind of peace that societies can realize would result from reducing social inequality and from recognizing the rights of all groups to be empowered to obtain what they need.

SEE ALSO: System Justification Theory.

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