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The study employed Social Dominance Theory in a communicative assessment of bullying in secondary education. Participants were 189 college students who completed a survey about their bullying perpetration in secondary school (physical victimization, verbal victimization, social manipulation, and attacks on property) and their current propensity to accept social hierarchy myths (social dominance orientation). Social dominance orientation was correlated positively with all four types of bullying behavior. Moreover, bullies' sex moderated the relationships between social dominance orientation and physical forms of bullying (physical victimization, attacks on property). For communication scholars assessing bullying, these findings propose that this single variable (social dominance orientation) be included when addressing the psychological underpinnings of bullying behaviors.

Keywords: Bullying; Social Dominance; Victimization

By now, it is common knowledge that bullying in schools is a widespread problem that creates physical and psychological issues for victims. Bullying is conceptualized as repeated and unwanted aggressive behavior characterized by an imbalance of power and intent to inflict harm (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014). Bullying at school can include a variety of repeated behaviors that can be physical, verbal, and social (Olweus, 2012). Though anyone, including bullies themselves, can

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be targets of victimization, students of a lower social status are most easily and effectively victimized by their peers (Smith, 2012). In this sense, bullies are opportunists who create and/or confirm social hierarchies to maintain their heightened position over others (Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003). This study empirically tested the assumption that bullying is linked to an underlying belief that social hierarchies are appropriate and that they should be reinforced. Specifically, we hypothesized links between college students' social dominance orientations (their adherence to the ideology that society *should* be hierarchied) and their retrospective self-reports of bullying other students during their middle school and high school education.

In understanding the drivers behind bullying, researchers provide strong evidence that mistreatment coincides with negative attitudes about social groups in which the aggressors do not belong. For instance, prejudicial attitudes about out-groups coincide with antisocial behaviors ranging from apathy to violent hate crimes against gay/lesbian, racial, and religious groups (Hecht, 1998). Conversely, and more hopefully, advocates of diversity are more likely to communicate with and be in support of *many* social groups, including those that are diverse from their own. Though not specifically assessed as a social dominance orientation, we see these trends suggested in findings that "social equality supporters" support better treatment of people across *all* social groups (Mack-Canty & Wright, 2004). Conversely, individuals accepting and/or encouraging discrimination might do so based on an underlying adherence to the notions that people are fundamentally unequal. This reasoning is at the heart of the social dominance theory and its enveloped construct of social dominance orientation.

Social dominance orientation (SDO) is a personality trait that reflects an individual's "degree of preference for inequality among social groups" (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994, p. 741). While many social psychological theories address how social group memberships coincide with mistreatment of those outside of our own groups (in-groups and out-groups), social dominance theory suggests there is an underlying mechanism by which individuals believe in inequality between, and subsequent differential treatment of, social groups. According to Sidanius and Pratto (1993), societies develop ideologies to legitimize the social inequality and social mistreatment of marginalized social groups that prevail across cultures and time (beliefs in chauvinism, retribution, racial inequality, and so forth). These ideologies, or "hierarchy-legitimizing myths" maintain social oppression as a "truth" rather than something that can be eradicated, and thus, the highly socially dominant individual mistakes these myths for truths.

Correlated with an array of prejudiced attitudes toward specific marginalized social groups (Hart, Hung, Glick, & Dinero, 2012) and resistance to social programs geared toward helping these groups (Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996), social dominance orientation is studied among non-school-aged samples. Although SDO has been shown to work with other morality-elevating messages to actually enhance prosocial behaviors such as increased charity donations (Freeman, Aquino, & McFerran, 2009), SDO's behavioral correlates are primarily negative. Higher SDO reports coincide with greater social distance as well as less helping of out-group

members (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius, Pratto, & Mitchell, 1994). SDO also correlates with prejudicial attitudes (Hart et al., 2012; Sidanius et al., 1996), which are a precursor to discriminatory behaviors. To our knowledge, this research only focuses on the construct's links with cognitions and has yet to identify the specific behaviors of highly socially dominant-oriented individuals. Because SDO explains the cognitions and communication of individuals who believe in inequality among social groups, we hypothesize that individuals having a stronger SDO will be more likely to mistreat others via the various forms of bullying assessed herein:

> H1: *Social dominance orientation will correlate positively with self-reported bullying of others (physical victimization, social manipulation, verbal victimization, attacks on property) in secondary school.*

Because some evidence of sex differences in bullying have been established—specifically, male students tend to report more physical forms of bullying and aggression than female students (Hartup, 2005)—we were interested in determining if sex acted as a moderator for the hypothesized relationship between SDO and bullying. Specifically, we were interested in determining if the relationships uncovered in testing H1 varied systematically as a function of bullies' sex. We believed that the more physical forms of bullying (physical victimization, attacks on property) would be perpetrated by male bullies:

> RQ1: *Does sex moderate the relationships between social dominance orientation and self-reported bullying of others (physical victimization, social manipulation, verbal victimization, attacks on property) in secondary school?*

Method

Participants

The participants sampled in this study were 186 undergraduate students (106 men, 79 women, one anonymous sex) who were enrolled in large lecture upper-level communication studies courses at a midsized northeastern university. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 36 years old ($M = 20.66$, $SD = 2.07$). The race of the participants was as follows: Asian ($n = 3$), Hispanic ($n = 7$), Native Americans ($n = 2$), Black/African American ($n = 12$), White/Caucasian ($n = 156$), and other ($n = 6$).

Procedures

Participants completed an anonymous survey that measured their current SDO and their retrospective reports of bullying other students in secondary school (middle school through high school). Secondary school was selected because bullying peaks in school during this time period (Smith, 2012), and retrospective recollections of bullying tend to be valid and stable reports of perpetration (Chapell et al., 2006) and victimization (Rivers, 2001). To measure these constructs, the survey included

demographic items, the Social Dominance Orientation Scale (Pratto et al., 1994), and the Multidimensional Peer-Victimization Scale (Mynard & Joseph, 2000).

The Social Dominance Orientation Scale is 14 items and is a direct measure of an individual's preference for inequality in social groups ("some groups of people are simply not the equals of others"). This scale used a 7-point Likert response format ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), and the summed scale performed reliably ($\alpha = .86$, $M = 35.15$, $SD = 14.53$). The Multidimensional Peer-Victimization Scale is 16 items and measures four types of bullying in school: physical victimization ("punched certain students"), social manipulation ("refused to talk to certain students"), verbal victimization ("called certain students names"), attacks on property ("deliberately damaged the property of students").[1] This scale used a 5-point Likert-type response format ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*most days*). The four subscales performed reliably: physical victimization ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 4.98$, $SD = 2.42$), social manipulation ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 5.76$, $SD = 2.75$), verbal victimization ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 7.44$, $SD = 3.36$), and attacks on property ($\alpha = .93$, $M = 4.70$, $SD = 2.17$).

Results

H1 predicted that reports of SDO would be correlated positively with reports of bullying in secondary school. This hypothesis was confirmed; moderate positive relationships were discovered between SDO and physical victimization ($r = .32$, $p < .001$), verbal victimization ($r = .26$, $p < .001$), social manipulation ($r = .43$, $p < .001$), and attacks on property ($r = .33$, $p < .001$).

Although H1 was confirmed, we were also interested in determining if these relationships were conditional upon the sex of the bully. Therefore, to answer RQ1, we calculated ordinary least squares regression analyses with SDO, sex (dummy coded: 0 = men, 1 = women), and an interaction term (SDO*Sex) predicting the four types of bullying. Significant moderated regressions were found for two forms of bulling: physical victimization, $R^2 = .19$, $F(3, 181) = 14.504$, $p < .001$; ΔR^2 due to interaction = .029 (B = −.216, $p = .011$), and attacks on property, $R^2 = .17$, $F(3, 181) = 11.942$, $p < .001$; ΔR^2 due to interaction = .041 (B = −.230, $p = .003$), indicating that sex moderated their relationships with SDO. The conditional effect of SDO on physical victimization was significant for men (B = .223, SE = .050, $p < .001$) but not for women (B = .007, SE = .068, $p = .914$), and the conditional effect of SDO on property attacks was significant for men (B = .235, SE = .046, $p < .001$) but not for women (B = .004, SE = .062, $p = .944$). No significant SDO*Sex interactions were found for verbal victimization (B = .001, $p = .994$) and social manipulation (B = −.144, $p = .132$).

Discussion

In an effort to demonstrate the links between a social dominance orientation and victimization spanning across a diverse array of social groups, we found positive associations demonstrating that young people's propensity to bully in secondary

school exists alongside their current adherence to the myth that social inequality is just. Moreover, these relationships between SDO and physical forms of bullying (physical victimization and attacks on property) were moderated by sex; that is, these conditional relationships were significant for male bullies.

This study's findings are novel in that they offer undocumented support for SDO's presence alongside aggressive behaviors. Bullying, then, appears to be a behavioral expression of perceived and preferred inequality. With a plethora of significant associations at the macrolevel, including discriminatory attitudes and resistance to prosocial policies (Pratto et al., 1994), our results reveal that SDO corresponds with self-reported behaviors and those that are micro in their targeting (person-to-person) but are certainly "macro" in their impact. With bullying producing incredibly damaging effects to the emotional and physical well-being of its victims (Cowie, 2013), future scholars should utilize social dominance orientation's potential power to predict which individuals have the greatest propensity to bully (using SDO measurement as a diagnostic tool to identify students who are prone to bullying). Finally, findings on males' heightened links between SDO and physical forms of bullying expand previous trends showing that males' social dominance orientation scores surpass females' (Sidanius et al., 1994), as do—as noted in our literature review—their physical bullying behaviors.

The results are limited by self-report and social desirability, though this is likely more consequential for the behaviors than the SDO, as the latter is so embedded in the American culture that the SDO individual feels justified in his/her thoughts. It is possible that some participants were uncomfortable admitting they victimized other students in secondary school. Still, this is more a picture of *who* admits to bullying and bigoted attitudes; thus further employment through more implicit measures might better assess people who uphold these beliefs but do not admit them to researchers (and perhaps are unable to admit them to themselves). Certainly, as SDO theory originators explained, the proliferation and subtle solidification of the "inequality among humans is a just and natural occurrence" myth exists across various cultures, and this cultural ingraining allows it to permeate our subconscious.

Given our evidence of SDO coinciding with these specific self-identified adolescent bullying behaviors, future research should consider the contexts of bullying and the communication that creates this social dominance. Seeing as other (in)equality ideologies and aggressive/abusive communication traits are transmitted through family interactions and given strong links between family communication and children's involvement as bullies and/or bully victims (Duncan, 2011), family communication surrounding social dominance orientation and bullying is our suggested avenue for future research and efforts on bullying interventions.

In conclusion, this study strengthens our understanding of cognitive drivers of bullying behaviors. SDO emerges as a potential "one-stop shop" for researchers who want to explain—and ultimately reduce—victimization in secondary school. This trait may be particularly important for understanding male bullies who tend to enact more

physical forms of bullying at school. Taken together, this attests to the utility of considering social group rankings in explaining bullying enactment in American schools.

Note

[1]   CFA results are available from the first author.

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