

This chapter extends classic social comparison research to explain how people think about group-based hierarchies and how they act within them. People spontaneously compare themselves to others in terms of relative status and power, not only as individuals but also as members of groups relative to other groups. Using a social dominance framework, the authors discuss the impact of such comparisons on socio-political attitudes and behavior. Social dominance theory describes how certain attitudes, values, and social practices enhance group hierarchies, whereas other attitudes, values, and social practices are hierarchy-attenuating. Power differentials within any type of group hierarchy are given by the balance between these forces that play out at three levels of analysis: in societal institutions (macro level), in intergroup relations (meso level), and among different individuals (micro level). The authors discuss not only how social comparisons shape hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating outcomes at each level but also how these outcomes, in turn, can mute the natural consequences of group-based power comparisons.

social dominance theory, group comparisons, power, status, social hierarchies, social comparison

Chapter 20

Social Dominance Theory and Power Comparison

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He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot, will be
victorious. (Sun Tzu, *c.* 500 BCE)

Many animals intuit what Sun Tzu put in writing two and a half thousand years ago: They consistently assess their own fighting abilities and those of their opponents, and they only choose to fight when there is a reasonable chance of success. Assessing fighting abilities makes them more victorious in the ultimate contest of surviving (e.g., Arnott & Elwood, 2009; Parker, 1974). Primates are also strategic in this sense on a collective scale: Chimpanzees as well as human hunter-gatherer tribes will rarely (if ever) initiate an open attack on a larger group, but they will engage smaller outgroup parties, and particularly lone outgroup individuals (e.g., Chagnon, 1997; Wrangham, 1999). In complex human societies, social dominance theory (SDT; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) seeks to explain when, how, and why people choose to fight (physically or by other means) for their groups, as compared to seeking pacification, given the comparative power and status of groups. As such, SDT suggests that the classic social comparison question of what a person can do relative to others (e.g., Jones & Regan, 1974; Suls et al., 2002) often depends on the power of his or her group. More broadly, SDT was introduced to explain the origin and consequences of social hierarchies and oppression (Sidanius, 1993; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), and it

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does so by combining principles of evolution with psychological research on group behavior and political attitudes. This implies an analysis that integrates “cynical” realism in group relations (that groups do what they can, based on their relative power) with idealism and normative beliefs about what society *should* look like, and particularly whether or not society should have group-based hierarchies (see, e.g., Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994).

This chapter extends classic social comparison research to explain how people think about, and act within, group-based social hierarchies. Social comparison research has addressed how people compare themselves to others to assess their abilities but also how people form and update opinions (e.g., Suls et al., 2002; see also Chapters 1 and 3 of this volume for an introduction to this research). A classic notion in the social comparison literature is that people can either shift toward the comparison target (assimilation) or away from it (contrast; Mussweiler, 2003; see also Chapter 2 in this volume). In this chapter, we apply and extend these themes to social opinions, attitudes, and behavior in contexts in which individuals, and especially groups, are comparatively high or low in power. We further detail the behavioral consequences of such group comparisons. We start with a review of the role of power and status in social comparisons, both at the individual- and group-based level. Next, we introduce the SDT framework in greater detail and describe what it suggests for social comparisons within group-based hierarchies.

Power and Social Comparisons

Power is inherently comparative, defined as the ability to exercise influence over others, as well as to control resources (e.g., Johnson & Lammers, 2012). Having or lacking power plays a large role in how a person thinks, feels, and acts (see, e.g., Galinsky, Rucker, & Magee, 2015; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), and this in turn influences the perceptions and treatment by others. Individuals are therefore motivated to (a) accurately determine the structure of power hierarchies in any given context and (b) know their level of power compared to others in the situation. In this way, understanding power dynamics helps solve a core problem in a social species, namely the distribution of resources between interdependent individuals (Keltner, Van Kleef, Chen, & Kraus, 2008). Power dynamics dictate with whom to form alliances and negotiate, as well as to whom one must acquiesce. Navigating relationships successfully means increased access to resources and opportunities, as alliances with powerful people can mean increased power for the affiliated (Goldstein & Hays, 2011).

Power assessments are present early in human development, as well as evident in other social animals (e.g., chimpanzees and wolves; see De Waal, 1982; Mech, 1999). Children as young as nine months track simple dominance relationships in which A is more powerful than B and B more powerful than C, and they expect these power relationships to remain stable in different scenarios (Mascaro & Csibra, 2012). As children get older, they spontaneously create and maintain dominance hierarchies among their peers through aggression and affiliation (Hawley, 1999; Strayer &

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Trudel, 1984), and they give children at the top of the hierarchy more attention and deference. By adulthood, attending to power in relationships is so automatic that people are able to determine the relative power of two people from photographs (Mast & Hall, 2004) or from less than 60 seconds of interactions (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Unconscious cues such as size (Schubert, Waldzus, & Giessner, 2009; Thomsen, Frankenhuys, Ingold-Smith, & Carey, 2011), spatial position within a group (Giessner & Schubert, 2007; Pellegrini, 1971), and nonverbal behavior like eye gaze and head posture (Brey & Shutts, 2015; Smith & Galinsky, 2010) are all used accurately to attend to and determine power dynamics in the moment.

Humans are quick to assess not only the position of others in a hierarchy but their own position as well. Contrary to the idea that we consistently think of ourselves as above average (Alicke, 1985), people are remarkably accurate at determining their relative level of power in a group. Not only are people accurate at self-status perceptions within a dynamic group (Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006), but they err on the side of being humble. The cautious strategy is a sound one, as individuals who engage in status self-enhancement are liked less, incur social costs, and are socially ostracized (Anderson, Ames, & Gosling, 2008).

Although attending to cues of power is a basic, unconscious ability of humans (Smith & Galinsky, 2010), there are distinct differences between those with high and low power in terms of behavior and cognition, once one's relative power has been determined. Power and status hierarchies are self-reinforcing (Magee & Galinsky,

2008), and with particularly well-reinforced hierarchies, those who have power engage in behaviors that allow them to maintain their power or gain more, while those who do not have power engage in behaviors that reinforce their lower status. In general, those possessing a relatively higher level of power are characterized by a distinct self-focus that allows them to be highly goal oriented and less concerned with following the social norms around them. For example, power reduces the psychological salience of goal-constraining information (Whitson et al., 2013), as well as reduces the likelihood of incorporating other people's opinions and feedback into behavior (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008). People with power are less likely to engage in meta-stereotyping, or think about how other people view them (Lammers, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008). Meta-stereotyping is often used as an adjustment mechanism, as it requires one to attend to other people and use the information gleaned to determine how to behave and act in social situations. In short, once power is established, it impacts the nature and degree to which a person engages in social comparisons.

Explicitly, power mutes social comparison effects among the powerful. Classic findings suggest that people display assimilation when a comparand is similar to them and/or when the comparand's status is attainable (e.g., Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), whereas dissimilarity tends to produce contrast effects (Mussweiler, 2003; Suls et al., 2002). Introducing primes of low versus high power, Johnson and Lammers (2012) found both assimilation and contrast effects under low power conditions but no

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social comparative effects in the high power conditions. In particular, low-power participants rated themselves more positively when compared to a successful partner than an unsuccessful one (assimilation). They further rated themselves more negatively when compared to an unattainable partner but higher when compared to a younger partner (contrast). Participants primed with high power did not show these differences, illustrating that holding power blocks the influence of social comparison information. Findings like these illustrate the importance of power in individual social comparisons and how these comparisons are used in modifying self-perception and behavior. As we discuss in detail next, these dynamics extend upward from the individual level to also operate at the group level.

Social Comparisons at the Group Level

People do not only compare themselves with others as individuals but also as members of groups. Most research on group-based comparisons focuses on self-esteem and self-enhancement as underlying motives, adopting assumptions and predictions from social identity theory (for a review, see, e.g., Hogg, 2000).

According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), people strive for a positive self-view and use social comparisons with other groups to proclaim the superiority of the own group and its members, which filters down to perceptions of the self. Of course, a major caveat is that some groups are in a better position for this than other groups—it is easier for members in powerful and high status groups to claim superiority. The social identity literature on this topic has been a major

inspiration to SDT (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), but here we also note a point of departure for divergent theorizing in SDT and social identity theory.

It is well known that people engage in social comparisons for many reasons, and self-esteem is but one of them (Suls et al., 2002). As such, SDT makes no assumption about self-esteem as the principal reason for social comparison (as assumed in social identity theory; see Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Instead, the social dominance approach incorporates several assumptions from evolutionary psychology, such as the notion that human eusociality (or hypersociality; see Wilson, 2012) and its associated forms of social organization (e.g., ingroup cooperation, the potential for intergroup competition and hierarchically structured social relations) developed as a means of optimizing reproductive fitness for homo sapiens over evolutionary time. One component of this eusociality is intergroup social comparisons, which in turn facilitates intergroup competition (see Gat, 2006; Mazur, 2005).

Understood most broadly, while many theorists have been concerned with *proximate* causes of group-based social comparison, SDT and related evolutionary models of human behavior attempt to explore *ultimate* causes of social action. From the latter perspective, the ultimate cause of social comparison then is not positive self-esteem but the success in passing one's genes into future generations. Accurate comparisons of power seem highly adaptive in interpersonal settings (e.g., Nguyen, 2018), and the social dominance perspective stresses that the same should hold true in coalitional or group-based comparisons (see also Wrangham, 1999).

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For social comparisons between groups, an important question is how people deal with situations in which their group is at disadvantage. A common perspective here is that people either dis-identify and distance themselves from such groups or seek to challenge the hierarchy if their identification remains strong (either through social creativity or collective action; e.g., Bettencourt, Dorr, Charlton, & Hume, 2001; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). From the SDT perspective, however, it is not simply the case that strong group identification will always be associated with challenges to group disadvantages or the alternative of group disengagement. Rather, SDT suggests that people care about group hierarchies above and beyond their own group's position and that some individuals reconcile beliefs about the rightfulness of group hierarchies with a strong identification with subordinate group (e.g., an "Uncle Tom" who combines Black identification with the belief that his [or her] group should be subjugated). A key prediction in SDT is that the consequences of group-based comparisons, particularly cases of acting for or against the group interests, are moderated by values and beliefs promoted at other levels of analysis.

Core Principles of Social Dominance Theory

Given the argument that power assessments represent a central aspect of group-based comparisons, we now describe how SDT extends this notion to explain both stability and change in group-based hierarchies. Group relevant attitudes, values, beliefs, ideologies, and social practices that contribute to the production and maintenance of

group-based hierarchies are labeled *hierarchy-enhancing* in SDT, while group-relevant attitudes, values, beliefs, ideologies, and social practices that contribute to the reduction of group-based inequality and hierarchy are labeled *hierarchy-attenuating* (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The extent of power differentials within any type of group hierarchy is given by the balance between hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating forces. For example, the notion of aversive racism suggests that many people who endorse egalitarian values in principle (hierarchy-attenuating attitudes) will still display subtle, and potentially unconscious, negativity toward ethnic minorities (hierarchy-enhancing attitudes; e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). There is no excess positivity for the minorities in this equation (only neutrality at best), and the net result is thus in the direction of group-based hierarchy maintenance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

More generally, hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating forces operate at three levels: societal institutions and cultural ideology at a *macro level*, intergroup relations at a *meso level*, and among individuals at a *micro level* (see, e.g., Kunst, Fisher, Sidanius & Thomsen, 2017; Sidanius, Cotterill, Sheehy-Skeffington, Kteily, & Carvacho, 2016). Hierarchy-enhancing forces work for the benefit of existing group hierarchies, such as banks issuing mortgages (macro level), discrimination and ingroup favoritism as exercised by dominant groups (meso level), and individual endorsement of meritocratic values while ignoring or minimizing societal restraints on subordinate groups (micro level). Hierarchy-attenuating forces have the opposite

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effect, such as welfare institutions (macro level), collective action among disadvantaged groups (meso level), and personal commitment to egalitarianism (micro level). In short, across all levels of analyses, hierarchy-enhancing forces aid some group to stay at the top of the social hierarchy, at the expense of other groups, whereas hierarchy attenuation is a counterforce that evens the playing field somewhat between those at the top and the bottom.

SDT further describes the interplay of these forces and makes a critical point of how they interact with social comparative processes: Hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating ideologies at the macro and micro levels can mute the strategies that are expected, from a politically rational standpoint, as a consequence of social comparison at the meso level. That is, rational group members could be expected to use strategies as outlined in social identity theory (e.g., dis-identify or engage in collective action when a social comparison is unfavorable), and yet institutional and individually endorsed hierarchy-enhancing ideology can prevent these from materializing. In the upcoming sections, we detail such interplay between social comparisons and ideology at a macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis, as applying to institutions, group processes, and individual differences.

Macro-Level Analyses: The Role of Institutions

Institutions have been described as the mere aggregate behaviors of individuals and groups and arenas for competing interests (for a brief review of this position, see March & Olsen, 2010). Yet once institutions are in place, they regulate human options

and behaviors in return (e.g., March & Olsen, 2010; North, 1990, Schotter, 2008).

Here we discuss such a recursive process in terms of (a) how institutions are shaped by assessments of relative power among groups with different interests and (b) how institutions in turn regulate human conditions and behaviors to enhance or attenuate group hierarchies. In other words, the first step depends (in part) on social comparisons, whereas the second regulates the behavioral consequences of being in an advantaged or disadvantaged position.

As for the first step, there are plenty of examples of how groups use institutions to either enhance or attenuate existing hierarchies in society. Apartheid designed by White South Africans (hierarchy enhancement) and labor unions helping to shape legislation (hierarchy attenuation), are just two examples. This indicates that people act in accordance with knowledge, be it explicit or implicit, about the power of their group as compared to other groups and seek to use their relative strengths in strategic ways (e.g., strength in numbers in the case of labor unions). Yet more direct evidence of social comparison processes, as opposed to static (e.g., demographic) explanations, comes from the actions of political parties. Both liberals and conservatives use the political system to their advantage and put their mark on institutions while in office. Examples include the timing of referenda and the appointment of judges (e.g., Epstein, & Segal, 2005; Meredith, 2009). Thus, the behaviors vary according what to expect from actors engaging in social comparisons, and particularly comparisons of relative power.

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Psychological studies further suggest that people placed in a high-power group prefer to discuss nonconsequential questions first while negotiating with low-power groups, thus stalling decisions that could change the extant relative relations among groups. Conversely, people placed in a low-power position prefer to discuss consequential issues first (Kteily, Saguy, Sidanius, & Taylor, 2013; see also Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009). As these effects are observed when people are randomly assigned to high or low power, such findings indicate that these strategies are based on flexible assessment of relative power and not merely on stable differences in the mindsets of people from high- and low-status groups. From the perspective that institutions are arenas for negotiating interests, this illustrates how such parleys can be shaped by power-based social comparisons.

The other side of the coin concerns how institutions, once in place, regulate conditions and behaviors that enhance or attenuate hierarchies and mute the “natural” consequences of group-based social comparison (e.g., hampering social protest in light of a negative comparison). Hierarchy-attenuating institutions constrain the behavioral repertoire of powerful groups (e.g., labor unions regulate the behaviors of company managers), whereas hierarchy-enhancing institutions constrain the behavioral repertoires of comparably powerless groups (e.g., health insurance and private education, as determined by income). In sum, what these arguments suggest is that social comparisons within group-based hierarchies fuel the functioning of institutions, but these processes can also be muted as a consequence.

Meso-Level Analyses: Behavioral Asymmetries

In the beginning of this chapter we noted that the question of “what can I do?” depends on a social comparison of group power. There we focused on how power shapes behavior, but SDT is also concerned with how these behaviors in turn reinforce existing group hierarchies. This could be described as the essence of the behavioral asymmetry hypothesis in SDT (Pratto et al., 2006; Sidanius et al., 2016; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Members of high- and low-power groups are clearly afforded different behaviors for a number of reasons, for example because hierarchy-enhancing institutions disproportionately aid powerful people and/or disproportionately restrict the powerless (see previous discussion). Nevertheless, SDT suggests that there are behavioral effects that reinforce group hierarchies above and beyond such constraints. The *behavioral asymmetry hypothesis* suggests that low-status group members behave in ways that, on average, put them at a disadvantage compared to members of high-status groups, even when these behaviors reflect active choices (which is not to negate that options are typically better and more plentiful for members of high-status groups). For example, smoking and excessive drinking are more common in low-status groups, and both behaviors are associated with poorer health outcomes and, by extension, higher medical expenses (see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). SDT refers to this class of acts as *group debilitating behaviors*. While it is obviously individuals who perform these behaviors, the focus is on average group differences and how they are

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shaped by intergroup dynamics (i.e., it is a meso-level analysis in the sense of describing average members of high- and low-status groups). More to the point, SDT does not posit that these asymmetries are due to some innate differences in, for example, intelligence or inherent ability but rather the salience of unfavorable group comparisons within a power or status hierarchy.

Speaking to the role of group comparisons, research suggests that group stereotypes about cognitive abilities have direct effects on subsequent test performances (see, e.g., Nguyen & Ryan, 2008). For example, Asian women have been found to underperform (compared to a control condition) on math tests in situations in which gender is made salient (i.e., when they are primed to compare men and women), while doing better (than a control condition) when their Asian identity is salient (Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999). Thus, a salient group comparison seems sufficient to produce debilitating behaviors in the stereotypically disadvantaged group. Interestingly, however, being primed with words related to high power seems to counteract, or buffer against, stereotype threat effects (Van Loo & Rydell, 2013).

Other experiments suggest that when people are assigned to conditions that simulate the experience of low power and socioeconomic status (induced resource scarcity), they make worse financial decisions (e.g., Shah, Mullainathan, & Shafir, 2012). As another recent example, Sheehy-Skeffington and Sidanius (2014, 2015) primed participants with a positive or negative social comparison in terms of status (visualizing high versus low placement on a socioeconomic ladder) and found that an

average low-status participant viewed him- or herself as less efficient and made worse economic decisions than an average high-status participant. In other words, at least some group-debilitating behaviors can be viewed as a direct consequence of negative social comparisons with respect to status.

Another type of behavioral asymmetry relates to classic studies on social comparisons and group-based self-enhancement, as reflected in ingroup evaluations being more favorable than evaluations of outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The asymmetry that SDT predicts in this case is that ingroup favoritism will be more pronounced in high-status groups, as compared to low-status groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; see also Bettencourt et al., 2001; Mullen et al., 1992). At the extreme, low-status group members may sometimes show a reverse bias, that is, favoring a high-status outgroup. The latter finding is emphasized in system-justification theory (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), whereas social identity scholars maintain that outgroup favoritism is the exception rather than the rule (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2008). SDT takes a middle ground in this debate, proposing that ingroup biases among low-status groups can be robust but are rarely of the same *magnitude* as ingroup biases among high-status groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; see also Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002).

Returning to the specific role of social comparison, studies show that attitudes about outgroups vary with perceptions of relative deprivation and relative gratification. For example, Guimond and Dambrun (2002) found that anticipating that

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one's group (French students) would have a bright future (i.e., positive social comparison) led to greater ingroup biases compared to a control condition. They also found that anticipating a tough economic future for the group (i.e., negative comparison) led to an increase in biases but only in one of the two studies. These results suggest that comparative processes consistently increase ingroup biases, but in line with SDT's reasoning, that is particularly the case when one's group is in a position of future advantage.

Taken together, people in a position of advantage versus disadvantage tend to be asymmetrically oriented to act in line with their self- and group interests. Such behavioral asymmetries are central in the SDT analyses, as they reinforce existing group hierarchies.

Individual-Level Analyses: Personal Ideological Beliefs

From an intuitive, self-interest perspective, members of high-status groups should normally defend group hierarchies when engaging in social comparison, whereas members of low-status groups should reject them. For an *average* group member, the proposition about high-status groups is typically true, whereas the proposition about low-status groups is a truth with modification (see previous section). Still, there is a good deal of individual variation around these mean values, and some individuals defend group hierarchies seemingly regardless of their own position in the hierarchy, whereas others will reject them just as systematically. These inclinations are captured

in the concept of Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; Ho et al., 2015; Pratto et al., 1994).

Earlier work on SDO assumed an ingroup promoting motive (i.e., a desire for one's own group to dominate other groups), but more recent reconceptualizations have instead emphasized a preference for group-based hierarchies irrespective of one's own position (e.g., "some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups"; Ho et al., 2012; Ho et al., 2015; Sidanius et al., 2016). Thus, we discuss SDO as conceptually distinct from ingroup favoritism but recognize that it often interacts with the latter in predicting support for socio-political attitudes and policies (Pratto et al., 2006; Sidanius et al., 2016).

SDO has proven to be one of the strongest individual difference predictors of socio-political attitudes and policies (e.g., Altemeyer, 1998; McFarland, 2010; Sidanius et al., 2016). It is positively related to endorsement of numerous hierarchy-enhancing principles, such as conventional racism, sexism, nationalism, and support of warfare by powerful countries. Likewise, it is negatively related to attitudes and policies that favor disadvantaged groups, such as affirmative action, civil rights, and support of people with disabilities (for a review, see Sidanius et al., 2016). In other words, high SDO levels represent the archetype of a hierarchy-enhancing belief at the individual level of analysis, whereas low SDO levels represent the archetype of a hierarchy-attenuating belief. Noteworthy, these associations often generalize across cultures and demographic strata, including disadvantaged groups (Sidanius & Pratto,

1999). For example, SDO displays a positive correlation with anti-Black sentiments among both Whites and Blacks (Ho et al., 2015). Still, beyond such main effects, there are more complex (interactive) relations to consider and which underscore the importance of social comparisons within group-based hierarchies (see later discussions).

In addition to SDO, there are a number of other variables addressing why individuals vary in their endorsement or rejection of group-based hierarchies. Again, these are important to consider because they have the potential to mute the consequences of negative social comparisons within group-based hierarchies (e.g., engaging in collective action; see van Zomeren et al., 2008). These variables tend to focus on how individuals envision justice in the world. For example, beliefs in a just world (Lerner, 1980) can be summarized by the notion that “you get what you deserve and deserve what you get” (Lipkus, 1991, p. 1171). Similarly, the belief in meritocracy focuses on the belief that individuals do (or should) receive benefits in society solely on the basis of individual effort and/or abilities (McCoy & Major, 2007). These types of beliefs are strongly and positively related to SDO (Pratto et al., 1994). Further, as argued in SDT, they fulfill the same role in intergroup relations, namely reinforcing status hierarchies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). More importantly, by focusing on the individual, they can actively discourage group-based social comparisons. For example, those who strongly believe in a just world are also concerned with individual choices, thus they are likely to simultaneously redirect

attention away from social forces and group dynamics such as discrimination (e.g., Furnham, 2003; Lipkus & Siegler, 1993) to individual choice and responsibility. Likewise, there is some experimental evidence showing that the priming of meritocratic words may lead to reduced attributions of discrimination among members of low-power groups (McCoy & Major, 2007; but see also Son Hing, Bobocel, & Zanna, 2002).

Having made the argument that individual ideological beliefs and values can mute the strategic consequences of group comparisons, it is important to note that comparisons can still be psychologically salient. Ideology does not necessarily stop people from comparing groups—it merely interferes with group members immediately acting on these comparisons. In fact, a social comparison mechanism for assessing economic circumstances may be a leading cause for why revolts against the wealthy are relatively uncommon. Kuziemko, Buell, Reich, and Norton (2011) argued that people are not just concerned with their absolute wealth but also their relative standing. In particular, they stated that people care especially about not ending up last, at the very bottom of the social ladder. Based on this reasoning, Kuziemka et al. (2011) demonstrated that those in the second to last position are those least likely to help the last person financially and that those just above the minimum wage (the “last-place” wage in the job market) are least supportive of increasing those wages. As such, this social comparison could also help explain why hierarchy-attenuating

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attitudes are muted in low-status groups relative to hierarchy-enhancing attitudes in high-status groups.

From a social dominance perspective, it is also important to ask if some individuals are more likely to care about relative standings and competition than absolute welfare. There are a number of indications that individuals high on SDO are more likely to engage in competitive social comparisons. For example, Duckitt (2001) suggested that high SDO scores are driven by a competitive, “dog-eat-dog” worldview, whereas low scores are more driven by a cooperative orientation. Unlike collaboration, competition is inherently comparative. There is ample support for a link between SDO and such perceptions of the world (see Duckitt & Sibley, 2016; Perry, Sibley, & Duckitt, 2013b). High SDO individuals are also more responsive than others to realistic/competitive (e.g., economic) intergroup threats (Duckitt, 2006; Duckitt & Sibley, 2016) and are particularly concerned that they do not fall behind in competition with others (Cozzolino & Snyder, 2008). More importantly, there is direct evidence that the behaviors of high SDO individuals stem from a comparative mindset rather than self-interest in an absolute sense. As a case in point, Sidanius, Haley, Molina, and Pratto (2007) showed that dominant individuals are prepared to incur a cost to the ingroup (Whites), as long as a relative advantage is maintained in comparison to other groups (ethnic minorities). This would seem to suggest that a concern for relative advantage, as compared to absolute benefits (as in the case of last-place aversion), is particularly pronounced among socially dominant individuals.

Taken together, at the individual level the relation between SDO, ideology, and social comparative processes is complex. Socially dominant individuals are particularly sensitive to, and prepared to engage in, competitive social comparisons between groups, and as such they could be expected to most aggressively promote their ingroups. However, within disadvantaged groups, the effect of SDO on support for hierarchy-enhancing policies suggests otherwise. If anything, the trend is that socially dominant individuals affirm the low status of disadvantaged ingroups relative to privileged groups. This would suggest something of a main effect of hierarchy preferences, and SDO is indeed conceptualized to fit that notion (Ho et al., 2015). To make sense of these different effects, it is worth noting that dominant individuals tend to have narcissistic and Machiavellian personalities (see, e.g., Duckitt & Sibley, 2016; Hodson, Hogg, & MacInnis, 2009). It is intuitive that individuals with such dispositions show a general preference for hierarchies (as hierarchies provide more opportunities for admiration and power) but also practice flexibility as to when they will use groups to channel their interests. Thus, dominant individuals in a disadvantaged group may dissociate their group identification from their ideological commitments and primarily express biases against those who are least likely to answer in kind (i.e., members of subordinate groups).

Interactions Between the Macro, Meso, and Micro Levels

Ideological Asymmetry

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At the group level of analysis, SDT suggests that members of high- and low-status groups act, on average, in different ways that in reaffirming group-based hierarchies (the behavioral asymmetry hypothesis). Another asymmetry concerns individual differences, and particularly the extent to which ingroup promotion/attachment and ideology are correlated within high- and low-status groups. Put differently, SDT proposes an interaction between group status at the meso level and individual levels of identification at the micro level in determining attitudes about group hierarchies. To understand the specifics here, consider first how the social identity literature suggests that members of disadvantaged groups tend to either dis-identify with the ingroup or endorse collective action (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2008). SDT agrees in part with that proposition (that identification with high- and low-status groups typically have opposite effects on endorsing hierarchy) but adds that the association should typically be *weaker* (i.e., closer to zero) in low-status groups. Extending previous research within SDT (Levin, Sidanius, Rabinowitz, & Federico, 1998), recent research also suggests that perceived *legitimacy* of social hierarchies is a critical moderator for the relation between identification and attitudes about group hierarchies.

In a series of preliminary studies conducted by our intergroup relations research lab, we found positive associations between group identification and hierarchy-enhancing attitudes within high-status groups and mostly weak negative associations within low-status groups. The exceptions to this trend were found when

group differences in resources were manipulated to be explicitly illegitimate. In this case, highly identified members of low-status groups rejected the group hierarchy as much as highly identified members of high-status groups defended it (i.e., the results were equally strong correlations but of opposite sign). Thus, legitimacy appears to essentially turn the political mobilization among identified low-status members on and off: High identifiers rally for the group's interest when there is a clear signal that the hierarchy is unfair but not otherwise (i.e., they are often politically undermobilized; Cotterill et al., 2019).

Most important from a social comparison perspective, these effects also appear in minimal (novel) groups, suggesting that they do not rely on long-term socialization or the effects of long-standing contact between specific dominant and subordinate groups. Instead, comparing the power and status of one's own group relative to other groups seems sufficient to produce an alignment of group identification and ideology for people in a high-power position, as well as dissociation in the case of low-power groups.

Taken together, the association between group attachment and ideology differs as a function of advantageous/positive comparison (for dominant groups) versus disadvantageous/negative comparison (for subordinate groups). For advantageous comparisons, there is a systematic link between ingroup-promoting (hierarchy-enhancing) ideology and group identification. However, when the comparison is

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disadvantageous and legitimized, the link between group identification and ideologies of collective action become relatively weak.

Conditional Expressions of Dominant Traits

Just as there is an asymmetry between high- and low-status groups in the strength of the association between ingroup identification and ideology (see previous section), the same is seemingly true for SDO and its correlates with basic personality (e.g., empathy, narcissism). In other words, the main effect of SDO on hierarchy support is qualified by an (ordinal) interaction with status and power—the association between SDO and hierarchy-enhancing attitudes is stronger in high-status groups than in low-status groups (see, e.g., Bergh, Sidanius, & Sibley, 2015; Ho et al., 2015). This suggests that individuals with dominant dispositions are sensitive to power- and status-based comparisons of groups, and this becomes even clearer when both upward and downward comparisons are possible.

Most studies of group-based status and power are based on a dichotomous comparison—participants are either in a high or low position (for reviews of such research, see, e.g., Jost et al., 2004; Sidanius et al., 2016). However, most real-life group hierarchies have numerous groups in between the two hypothetical extremes, and this leads to a fundamental social comparative question: Do dominant individuals defend the position of those above them as much as they defend their own position compared to those below them? The classic high versus low design cannot directly answer this question as it only allows for *either* an upward (low position) *or* a

downward (high position) comparison but not both. There is minimal data on how SDO plays out in the hypothetical middle of the hierarchy (but see Fang, Sidanius, & Pratto, 1998), while studies of associated personality variables (e.g., low empathic concern) reveal an intriguing pattern: There is no well-known personality signature of attitudes toward groups of higher status than the ingroup but strong personality correlates of attitudes toward lower status groups (Bergh, Akrami, Sidanius, & Sibley, 2016). This suggests that those disposed toward dominance primarily have their eyes on those below them in the hierarchy and that their main motivation is to keep subordinate groups at relative disadvantage (see also Sidanius et al., 2007).

Taken together, it would seem that expressions of dominance are primarily directed downward in group-based hierarchies, with the exception of the last rung of the ladder, at which dominant individuals turn on their own group. A dichotomous variable for status or power (high versus low) assures that members of the subordinate group have no one below them to compare themselves with, and these are also the studies showing ingroup derogation (e.g., Bergh et al., 2016; Ho et al., 2015; Jost et al., 2004; Roets, Van Hiel, & Dhont, 2012). Finally, dominant individuals tend to endorse cynical worldviews more than others (e.g., Perry, Sibley, & Duckitt, 2013a), so perhaps we should not be surprised that these individuals can be quick to desert from the group cause.

Taken together, the research discussed here suggests that a reason why dominance can appear to be orthogonal to ingroup interests (Ho et al., 2015) is

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because groups are just a means to an end (such as personal status and power).

Individuals with such motives seem clearly attuned to navigate status hierarchies by engaging in social comparison and fight for their groups when the costs or risks of fighting are relatively low.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we elaborated on the idea that power is of ultimate importance in interpersonal as well as intergroup social comparisons. From this premise, we detailed a social dominance perspective on the relation between social comparisons and group hierarchies. This perspective emphasizes that people are attuned to realistically compare groups in terms of relative status and power but also that the consequences thereof depend on normative beliefs that can lead to either enhancement or attenuation of group hierarchies. Within a multilevel analysis, we propose four principle conclusions that follow from this analysis. First, institutions are shaped by actors engaged in strategic power comparisons of groups, but, once in place, institutions also have the power to mute self- (and group-) interested behaviors, and the subsequent result can be either hierarchy enhancing or hierarchy attenuating. Second, when people engage in social comparisons of power, they start acting in ways that reaffirm group hierarchies, for example, via self-debilitating behaviors among those who are currently disadvantaged. Most importantly, experiments that manipulate a person's relative position (e.g., high vs. low socioeconomic status or advantageous vs. disadvantaged group identity salience) indicate how in vivo processing of social

comparison information can produce behavioral asymmetries between those at the top and those at the bottom of the hierarchy. Third, at an individual level, the outcomes of group-based social comparisons are often masked by normative or “idealist” beliefs about group hierarchies. Finally, the outcomes of social comparisons and group identifications are moderated by normative beliefs and values, as well as dominant personality dispositions. Taken together, we hope to have shown the natural place of a social dominance framework at the intersection of the classic research topics of power, intergroup relations, and social comparisons.

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