Journal of European Psychology Students, Vol. 2, 2010

Towards a Comprehensive Socio-Psychological Perspective

A Critique of Social Dominance Theory

Bahar Tunçgenç
Middle East Technical University
Contact: bahartuncgenc@gmail.com

Abstract

Psychology aims to understand human cognition and behavior, which necessitates making use of sociological-political theories. Social Dominance Theory (SDT) is one of the psychological theories that try to explain the individual-society relationship from a broad perspective. Yet, this theory has its shortcomings too. In an attempt to contribute to a well-grounded theory for psychological research, the paper at hand will discuss the shortcomings of SDT. The main discussion concerns following appropriate logic while making assumptions, and proper interpretation of historical and evolutionary data: it is suggested that no single theory, including SDT, is capable of embracing such a wide subject and SDT can be utilized only in some aspects of this subject.

Introduction

It is societal systems that turn human beings into people. Societal systems make up and define the ways people earn their livings, the traditions people practice in their daily lives, and the cultural values which construct the basis of many actions including scientific and artistic foundations. At first glance, psychology seems to deal with personal issues and take individuals as its level of investigation. Yet, in order to understand a person's psychology, one must figure out the building blocks of the society that person lives in. Indeed, this corresponds to systems theory of psychology, which claims that individual behaviors are a co-product of a person's biology and social environment. The systems approach emphasizes that psychology cannot be investigated at the individual level only, and the 'system' the person lives in must be taken into consideration (Oltmanns & Emery, 2007).

Fortunately, there have been plenty of philosophical and sociological theories about the analysis of social systems. This provides a considerable amount of convenience, in that there are many resources that a psychologist can employ for application to human systems and behavior. One of the most widely known of these theories is Social Dominance Theory (SDT). SDT has been developed by social psychologists Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto (2001), for the purpose of analyzing the psychological and societal mechanisms that relate to the maintenance of social systems and the prevalent role of hierarchies and dominance relationships in human societal systems. In this sense, SDT has been widely used in psychological research.

Being such an effective theory about human societies, a critical analysis of SDT might be both necessary and fruitful for further research. The paper at hand will take into consideration the main arguments of SDT and approach them with a critical eye. The aim of

this paper is to question how much of the societal systems SDT can explain and, in turn, how much psychological research may benefit from SDT. Before starting the actual analysis, one point about the content of this paper is to be mentioned: SDT examines upon which bases the social systems are constructed as well as how these bases are kept throughout the endurance of those very systems. Naturally, such an examination is quite wide in terms of its scope and includes in it a number of levels depending on the details. A complete analysis of each and every aspect of such a wide theory will exceed the capacity of this paper. Therefore, the paper will limit itself to the analysis of only the basic statements of the theory and consider SDT from this focal point. In this respect, the paper will begin with raising the main arguments of SDT. The criticism of these arguments will follow. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn in which suggestions about the usage of SDT in psychological research will be made.

Social Dominance Theory

The constructors of Social Dominance Theory, Sidanius and Pratto (2001), begin their analysis with the basic observation that "[a]ll human societies tend to be structured as systems of group-based social hierarchies" (p. 31). Based on this observation and in order to explain the driving forces of these hierarchies, they state the "basic assumptions" of SDT as follows:

1) "While age - and gender-based hierarchies will tend to exist within all social systems, arbitrary-set systems of social hierarchy will invariably emerge within social systems producing sustainable economic surplus." (p. 38)
2) "Most forms of group conflict and oppression (e.g. racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, nationalism, classism, regionalism) can be regarded as different manifestations of the same basic human predisposition to form group-based social hierarchies." (p. 38)
3) "Human social systems are subject to the counterbalancing influences of hierarchy-enhancing (HE) forces, producing and maintaining ever higher levels of group-based social inequality, and hierarchy-attenuating (HA) forces, producing greater levels of group-based social equality." (p. 38)

Some terms used within these basic assumptions are worth elaborating to gain insight into what exactly is meant. Beginning with the basic observation, it is argued that human societies have the tendency to form not individual-based, but *group-based* social hierarchies. This discrepancy is an important distinction of SDT from many other psychological theories of society; as it puts groups, not individuals, into the focus of investigation. Secondly, after stating the basic observation that there is a tendency to form group-based hierarchies, SD theorists attempt to identify the mechanisms leading to the formation of these group hierarchies. They introduce the term 'Trimorphic Structure', which includes three systems, all of which produce and maintain the hierarchical structure in societies. Namely, these are 1) the age system, 2) the gender system, and 3) arbitrary-set systems.

The age system defines the condition in which "adults and middle-aged people have disproportionate social power over children and younger adults" (p. 33). SDT conceptualizes the age system as a fixed system over time and space.

The gender system defines the condition in which "males have disproportionate social power compared with females (patriarchy)" (p. 33). Similar to the age system, the gender system is also considered to be a fixed one over time and space; insomuch that the gender system is argued to be the most fixed one among all these three systems.

Lastly, the arbitrary-set systems create groups based on any "socially relevant group distinction that the human imagination is capable of constructing" (p. 33). Racism, nationalism, classism, regionalism and many other concepts can serve as examples for arbitrary-set hierarchies. Different from the age and gender systems, it is argued; the basis of the arbitrary-set system is flexible and *can* change with differing historical periods, social and political contexts, and the dynamics of the

country in question. This plasticity of arbitrary-set systems stems from its dependence on the production of a sufficient amount of economic surplus. In fact, this is its main distinction from the former two systems.

At this point, we need to further zoom into the reasoning of SDT to understand the survival conditions of these trimorphic structures. The initial observation that "all human societies tend to be structured as systems of group-based hierarchies" (p. 31) is set, since there is no one human society encountered so far in which there were no distinct groups in terms of their possession of social or economic power. Moreover, evolutionary data is argued to support the maintenance of group-based hierarchies. SD theorists argue that the examination of primates and species most closely related to humans will reveal the existence of trimorphic structure. It is argued that this "suggests not only that humans will tend to live in group-based and hierarchically organized social systems, but also that this form of social organization should tend to be found among other species closely related to humans" (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001, p. 54).

A similar reasoning applies to the age and gender systems. SD theorists argue that when the history of humankind is examined, it can be seen that such hierarchical positioning have always occurred whether it was hunter-gatherer societies or the industrialized, modern society: Men have always dominated over women and adults have always dominated the young. Hence, according to SDT, historical data supports the stability arguments related to age and gender systems.

In addition, it is suggested by SD theorists that the evolutionary record supports the notion of the gender system. With reference to the "parent investment theory" of Trivers (1972), it is asserted that women spend more energy and time than men during reproduction processes. To satisfy their reproductive needs and instincts, males search and mate with numerous females at a time, while females can have the chance to mate with only one male at a time. Consequently, intra-sexual competition among males is higher than it is among females. In order to win this intra-sexual competition, males need to make their female mates dependent on themselves. Stemming from this point, it is argued in SDT that "patriarchy and economic hierarchy are both partly the result of differential male/female reproductive strategies" (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001, p. 265).

The persistence of arbitrary-set systems is claimed to be dependent on the existence of a sustainable amount of economic surplus; because considering the historical background it is seen that hunter-gatherer societies, which did not possess a sufficient amount of economic surplus, did not tend to have arbitrary-set group hierarchies. The sustainability of surplus is determined through examining the role specializations, allowance of some portion of the society to have control and act more freely, while leading some others to work hard to obtain food and re-produce the resources. Therefore, arbitrary-set systems are said to comprise much "flexibility, and situational and contextual sensitivity" in comparison to the age and gender systems (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001, p. 33).

Criticism of Social Dominance Theory

As mentioned above, it is argued that historical and evolutionary data supports the assumption that group-based hierarchies are ubiquitous. There are two fallacious points in this argumentation, both of which will be analyzed in this section. The first of these is related to the usage of historical data and the other to the usage of evolutionary data.

Criticism about Usage of Historical Data

In making use of historical data, there is a problem with the generalization that human societies have the *tendency* and the *predisposition* to form group-based hierarchies. This premise does not directly mean that what has been observed up until today will be observed in the future as well, nevertheless, the words "tendency" and "predisposition" have implications for the future. Moving on further with SDT's argument, it is said that hierarchies are formed on the basis of age, gender, and arbitrary-set

systems; two of which are defined as being fixed over time and space. Combining these two premises leads to the following conclusion: the tendency of humans to form group-based hierarchies has a stable nature (due to the age and gender systems).

Such reasoning can be formulized as: "The reverse of X has not been observed so far in history; thus X will be observed in the future as well." This kind of a premise corresponds to a logical fallacy called informal inductive fallacy. Logic is defined as the analysis of arguments through clarification of their reasoning. As Gensler (2002) states "a good argument (…) should be deductively valid (or inductively strong) and have all true premises" (p. 319). Hence, it is important not to include logical fallacies in the arguments while constructing a scientific theory. In the case of SDT's statements about the basic observation, the informal fallacy named 'Appeal to Tradition' is committed.

> According to Kearns (1988), we apply this logical fallacy, when we support a belief or practice by citing the fact that it is traditional. (…) There is little reason for thinking that traditional beliefs are more likely to be true than false. (p. 20).

To illustrate better, we can think of the debate about the formula Albert Einstein developed: $E = mc^2$. This formula states that in case an object reaches the square of the speed of light, it will convert into another form; energy. In contrast to this scientific formula, which is experimentally verified for a number of times (Rainville et al. 2005; Dürr et al., 2008), religious explanations insist that it has never been observed until today, that an object transforms into energy or that energy transforms into an object. They claim that, anyway, God has made things the way they are and no other form is possible for any "creature" on Earth. Consequently, objects and energy are different entities, they are stable in nature, and cannot be transformed into one another. Making a logical abstraction about the reasoning of these religious people, the 'Appeal to Tradition' fallacy is observed in their arguments too. They show as evidence that objects and energy have been in their very forms since the beginning of life. Whether you take data from B.C. times or from the 21st century, you will see that change from an object to an energy form has not been observed at all.

To sum up, we come across the logical fallacy of 'Appeal to Tradition' in the explanation of the basic observation, the age system and the gender system. In order to overcome this logical fallacy, SD theorists should define the conditions under which their arguments take place; and thereby explain to what extent those arguments can be generalized. Only after that can they presume that age and gender systems will be observed as long as those circumstances persist. Otherwise, this premise will remain fallacious, untestable and unfalsifiable since the conditions of the event are not defined. One of the most distinctive properties of science is, however, that it is testable.[1] It would not be possible to dedicate premises with such fallacies as scientific.

In addition to the logical fallacy, the interpretations based on historical data seem to be erroneous in some sense. It is claimed in SDT that the hierarchical relationship among men and women has always persisted even though it could have lessened or increased in certain time periods and across societies. Such an attitude is risky in that it focuses on whether the hierarchical relationship exists or not. Social sciences, however, usually rely on differences in degree. Considering the gender system, it might be true that men have always dominated women. However; it can also be argued that this dominance relationship has dramatically lessened with the industrialization era. One could agree or disagree with this statement; yet, what is important here is the ability of the theory to reconstruct itself. It is more illuminating to try to find out which factors resulted in the alteration of the dominance relations, rather than simply stating that they exist. From the

[1] "It is the desire for explanations which are at once systematic and controllable by *factual* evidence that generates science. (…) This goal can be achieved only (…) by ascertaining the repeatable patterns of dependence in which these properties stand to one another" (Nagel, 1979, p. 4).

viewpoint of SD theorists which is criticized in this paragraph, it is much more probable that one will comprehend the mechanisms as never-changing and thus miss the transformations that take place.

Criticism about Usage of Evolutionary Data

There is a problem with the utilization of evolutionary data in the explanation of both the basic observation and of the gender system. To begin with some basic information on the mechanisms of evolution, its main principle, adaptation by natural selection, requires evolutionary change over time, not stability.[2] Therefore, finding the evolutionary roots of any behavior pattern does not mean that this pattern will be the 'fittest' all the time. Neither could this finding be used to claim that this behavior is more likely to survive than any other one.

In addition, it is important to take into consideration the different mechanisms between animal and human evolution, while deducing information from evolutionary data. In his incomplete, yet comprehensive article named appropriately *The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man*, Engels (1884/2001) talks about three main features of human evolution: erect posture, talking, and enlarging brain. He lists them chronologically, starting from the evolution of erect posture, which brought about the opportunity to use hands freely. According to Engels (1884), it is when people began to use instruments to produce things that marked the effect of labor in human evolution. Freeing usage of hands brought forth the ability to control natural conditions, which requires tremendous amount of labor and people to come together. Soon, people began to develop *language* to enrich their communication. Enriched communication and improvements in the capacity to use hands more and more efficiently continued to evolve as the amount of labor executed by people increased. As these capabilities increased, so did the amount of labor executed; so there was a bidirectional relationship in-between.

The major distinction of human beings from other species appears to be labor which is the main driving force of human societies. This is so, because division of labor and competition are the two leading determinants of distribution of social power and wealth to different groups of people. Historical evolution is added as another distinctive point, by which it is meant that humankind transmitted not only genes to one another, but also accumulated cultural, philosophical values and scientific knowledge. As a result of all these transitions, different cultures emerged in different areas of the world. Consequently, it is of vital importance to combine evolutionary data with societal and historical information in explaining the origins of certain behaviors.

Moving on to the explanation of the gender system, it is plausible and illuminating to highlight the similarities with evolutionary history; yet, one must be cautious. A comparison between humans and other species can reveal causal relationships for behavioral genetics if, and only if the compared objects are homologous traits, not analogous[3] (Gould, 1979) ones. There is, as of yet, no scientific

[2] Darwin (1859/1985) explains the term natural selection as follows: "variations useful in some way to each being in the great and complex battle of life (…) would have the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind[.] (…) This preservation of favorable individual differences and variations, and the destruction of those which are injurious, I have called Natural Selection, or the Survival of the Fittest." (p. 130- 131).

[3] The inventor of the concept homology, Richard Owen, defines homologue as existence of "the same organ in different animals under every variety of form and function" (Owen, 1843, p. 379) and analogue as "a part or organ in one animal which has the same function as another part or organ in a different animal" (Owen, 1843, p. 374). This definition is expanded by Darwin (1859/1985) in his Origin of Species "The characters which naturalists consider as showing true affinity between any two or more species, are those which have been inherited from a common parent" (p. 369). Evolution makes sense of the distinction between homology and analogy by seeing homology as evidence of common ancestry, and analogy as evidence of convergent evolution towards more or less similar form from dissimilar ancestry (Patterson, 1987, p. 4).

finding that reveals *reproductive behaviors of animals* to be a homologous trait with *reproductive behaviors of humans*. Therefore, SD theorists need to first prove that the two are "homologous" traits. Only after that can one make inferences about the reproductive behaviors of humans based on that of animals.

What Trivers (1972) states in his Parent Investment Theory, that reproduction is more costly to females as compared to males, is true. However, the question is whether there exists a parallelism between reproduction of species and SDT's gender system. SDT's gender system is not only related to reproductive behaviors of humans. Actually, it goes far beyond the limited scope of reproductive behaviors, and includes all kinds of economic and social relations between men and women. Considering the findings of a purely genetic and physiological condition, reproduction, to be one main determinant of why males tend to dominate females in the social life of human societies would be erroneous. Even if reproductive behaviors of humans and other primates were found to be homologous, it would still be misleading to deduce that the economic and social relations are also caused by these sex-based differences in reproductive behaviors. This is so because the link in-between the two concepts consists of so many unidentified steps. Hence, those connections should be brought into light before making such inferences about human societies.

Despite all these limitations, SDT is helpful in explaining how the hierarchies persist within a given society. Thus, it is worth mentioning the notions of Legitimizing Myths (LMs) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO). LMs "consist of attitudes, values, beliefs, stereotypes, and ideologies that provide moral and intellectual justification for the social practices that distribute social value within the social system" (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001, p. 45). They can be either hierarchy-enhancing (HE-LMs), supporting group-based inequality; or hierarchy-attenuating (HA-LMs), supporting group-based equality. The effectiveness of LMs is determined as a function of features called consensuality, embeddedness, certainty, and meditational strength. These features are shared by both the dominators and those who are being dominated.

SDO, on the other hand, "captures the extent of individuals' desires for group-based dominance and inequality" (Sidanius, Pratto & Levin, 2006, p. 281), and thereby helps us understand the psychology of both the victims and the executers of dominance relationships. Similar to LMs, four groups of factors are defined to describe the effect of SDO: one's identification with the arbitrary-set groups: various background and socialization factors, temperamental characteristics of the person, and lastly, gender. The gender factor states that males have greater levels of SDO than females. A similar critique to this factor may be raised as done with regard to the usage of historical and evolutionary data for the rationalization of the gender and age systems. However, SDO is still a valuable concept in that it helps a lot in describing the psychology of both the victims and the executers of dominance relationships.

Conclusion

Based on the criticism above, it is time to question where SDT stands with regard to psychological research. It is claimed so far in this article that SDT has such implications that cause one to misleadingly believe that hierarchical relationships within human communities will persist forever.

This implication seems to be inherent in SD theorists' arguments due to the way the gender and age systems are defined operationally. When the arguments of SDT are followed, it becomes hard to think of the possibility that the *tendency* of human beings to form group-based hierarchies will change some time. Rather, the theory begins with the idea that humankind is moving from *viciousness to viciousness* throughout the changing eras. Such way of thinking is important for psychological research. First, it may lead a clinical or community psychologist to question what the use of making any intervention is, if it is the case that people have such a tendency to move towards viciousness. Secondly, it will alter the perspective of a social psychologist

who examines the relation between the society and individuals.

Sidanius and Pratto (2001) mention in their book three thinkers, Mosca, Michels, and Pareto, all of whom have a different theoretical approach, yet adopt the same assumption that "democracy and group-based social equality [are] inherently unachievable" (p. 23). Although SD theorists do not seem to give much credit to this assumption, their arguments about gender and age systems eventually bring them to the same side with Mosca, Michels and Pareto.

In addition to this, Sidanius and Pratto list a set of conclusions in their book, right before they begin to explain their theory of social dominance. The sixth of these conclusions states that patriarchy and group-discrimination could have evolved as behavioral predispositions; yet, "we must not allow this thinking to degenerate into simple-minded geneticism" (p. 30). Unfortunately, however, it is seen in the later chapters of the book that parent investment theory is displayed as an explanation for the patriarchic relationships in human societies. This can have no other result but degeneration into simple-minded geneticism.

All these criticisms bring me to the conclusion that SDT is not promising in explaining how the societal structures are constructed and how the groupings among people emerge in the initial phase. In order to "understand how group-based social hierarchy is formed" (Sidanius et al., 2006, p. 272), it is suggested in this article that one should try to construct cause-effect relationships rather than simply rely on the population of statistical data. Though each is quite valuable in its own right, accumulating research results that support the trimorphic structure is not explanatory enough to account for the social systems. It will be more beneficial to analyze and incorporate into theory, for example to examine due to which factors we observe more dominance of men in one society as compared to another; rather than stating that men dominate women in all societies.

To sum up and bring to a conclusion what has been detailed so far, SDT aims to point to a very important subject about social sciences; the relation of individuals with the societal structures. When compared to other social psychological theories, SDT is definitely outstanding in that it tries to explain the phenomena through synthesizing information from psychology, sociology, economics and evolution.

In this regard, SDT can be a good guide for researchers examining how the societal relationships are maintained and reproduced, once they are constructed. In doing this, SDT analyzes the history and evolution of the social behaviors in order to form a background. However, SDT fails to capture how certain systems are formed in the first place and what factors cause changes within these systems. Although it is attempted through LMs and SDO to clarify how the gradual changes in the systems take place, they are not sufficient, since they remain descriptive rather than revealing the causal relationships. The consequences of these analyses have such implications that it might be misleading to rely on them while trying to understand the nature of human societal systems. Rather, it is suggested in this article that one should consult economical, structural, philosophical, sociological and other psychological theories to satisfy this need.

References

Darwin, C. (1859/1985). *The Origin of species*. London: Penguin Books.

Dürr, S., Fodor, Z., Frison, J., Hoelbling, C., Hoffmann, R., Katz, S. D.,...Vulvert, G. (2008). Ab inito determination of light hadron masses. *Science*. 322, 1224- 1227.

Engels, F. (1884/ 2001). The part played by labor in the transition from ape to man. In E. B. Leacock (Ed.), *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (pp. 251-265). USA: International Publishers Co.

Gensler, H. J. (2002). *Introduction to logic*. USA: Taylor & Francis.

Gould, S.J. (1979/ 1992). *Ever since Darwin: Reflections in natural history.* New York: Norton.

Kearns, J. T. (1988). *The principles of deductive logic.* State University of Albany: New York Press.

Nagel, E. (1979). *The structure of science: Problems in the logic of scientific explanation*. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.

Oltmanns, T. F., & Emery, R. E. (2007). *Abnormal Psychology*. New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Owen, R. (1843). *Lectures on the comparative anatomy and physiology of invertebrate animals.* Retrieved from:

http://books.google.com/books?id=_DYAAAAAQAAJ&pg=PA3&dq=Lectures+on+the+comparative+anatomy

Patterson, C. (1987). Introduction: Homology and analogy. In C. Patterson (Ed.), *Molecules and morphology in evolution: conflict or compromise?* (pp. 1-23). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rainville, S., Thompson, J. K., Myers, E. G., Brown, J. M., Dewey, M. S., Kessler, E. G., ...Pritchard, D. E. (2005). World year of physics: A direct test of E=mc2. *Nature*. 438, 1096-1097. doi:10.1038/4381096a

Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (2001). *Social dominance.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sidanius, J., Pratto, F., & Levin, S. (2006). Social dominance theory and the dynamic of inter group relations: Taking stock and looking forward. *European Review of Social Psychology*. 17, 271-320. doi: 10.1080/10463280601055772

Trivers, R. (1972). Parental investment and sexual selection. In B. Campbell (Ed.), *Sexual selection and the descent of man* (pp. 136-180). Boston: Butterworth- Heinemann.