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## Sex Differences in SDO



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### Synonyms

[Gender differences in SDO](#)

### Definition

Gender predicts social dominance orientation (SDO) such that men typically express higher levels of SDO than women.

### Introduction

Research across a wide variety of cultures has provided a great deal of evidence showing that men, compared to women, have generally higher levels of social dominance orientation (SDO), an individual difference variable reflective of support for unequal, hierarchical relationships between groups. Although the sex difference in SDO is relatively well established in the literature, the questions of (i) how contextually invariant the relationship between sex and SDO is and (ii) what underlies this sex difference in SDO contribute to an ongoing debate among scholars.

## Sex and SDO

Social dominance theory (SDT; Sidanius and Pratto 1999) states that the purpose of group-oriented social hierarchies is to reduce conflict between groups and maintain human survival over time. According to SDT, individuals differ in their preference for hierarchical group-based systems of inequality, with this preference being termed “social dominance orientation” (SDO). Individuals high on SDO endorse group hierarchy and believe that groups do and should differ in status and power, whereas individuals low on SDO endorse group equality and oppose differentiation of groups based on status and power (Pratto et al. 2000). This individual-difference variable is assumed to have its origin in both cultural (socialization) and biologically influenced factors (Sidanius et al. 1994).

The gender hierarchy is one of the most prominent group-based hierarchies in societies around the world. Gender has been found to consistently predict SDO with men as members of the higher-status group expressing higher SDO than women as members of the lower-status group. Men’s greater expression of SDO compared to women’s helps in explaining the existing gender difference in women and men’s attitudes in a wide range of sociopolitical domains (see Pratto et al. 1997). For example, women are more politically liberal than men (e.g., Feather 1977) such that they express less prejudice (Ekehammar et al. 1987) and authoritarianism (Altemeyer 1981) and show

more support of social equality (Ekehammar and Sidanius 1982). In addition, women have less punitive attitudes than men (e.g., Ekehammar 1985), and they are more likely to favor policies that support the disadvantaged (e.g., Shapiro and Mahajan 1986).

### **SDO and the Gender Invariance Hypothesis**

Men's greater scores in SDO compared to women's is one of the most consistent findings in research examining SDO and has led to the formulation of the *gender invariance hypothesis* (Sidanius et al. 1994). The gender invariance hypothesis asserts that, *all else being equal*, gender differences in SDO will be found such that men will exceed women in SDO scores and that this difference will be relatively universal and invariant across cultural, social, and situational factors. Sidanius et al. (1994) however differentiate between a strong and a weak version of the invariance hypothesis. According to the strong version, the gender difference in SDO should remain invariant across cultural factors, situational factors, or both – i.e., no significant interaction between sex and cultural-situational factors should be found. In contrast, according to the weak version, the gender difference in SDO might vary somewhat across certain cultural-situational factors, but women should not exceed men on SDO scores – i.e., sex might interact with cultural-situational factors, but this interaction will always be of ordinal and not disordinal nature.

The gender invariance hypothesis has been supported by numerous studies including student and general-population samples that produced one of the most robust findings in SDO research even when considering a range of covariates and moderators (e.g., Pratto et al. 2000; Sidanius and Pratto 1999; Sidanius et al. 1994). Some scholars have however challenged the gender invariance hypothesis (e.g., Huang and Liu 2005; Schmitt et al. 2003; Wilson and Liu 2003; Zakrisson 2008). For example, Wilson and Liu (2003) found an apparent cross-over interaction between

sex and gender identification such that women with low levels of gender identification have higher SDO scores than men with low levels of gender identification, whereas men with high levels of gender identification have higher SDO scores than women with high levels of gender identification. These findings however were criticized by Sidanius and Pratto (2003) who argued that the “*ceteris paribus*” principle of all else being equal was violated and stated that the “analysis is about as meaningful as comparing female members of police death squads (hierarchy-enhancers) with male social workers (hierarchy-attenuators), a comparison also likely to find women with higher SDO scores than men” (p. 210). Wilson and Liu (2003), in both studies, however also included gender identification as a covariate instead of a moderator in additional analyses and found that the previously significant sex difference in SDO disappeared. Other scholars also obtained evidence inconsistent with the gender invariance hypothesis. For example, when women and men were exposed to a majority of female members in voluntary associations (Zakrisson 2008), or when ethnic rather than gender identity was made salient (Huang and Liu 2005), men and women did not differ in SDO scores. Cross-cultural research also sometimes failed to show the expected sex difference (e.g., in two out of six samples, see Pratto et al. 2000). Taken together, the inconsistent findings regarding the relationship of sex with SDO shows that the dispute about the gender invariance hypothesis is far from being settled.

### **Causes for Sex Differences in SDO**

According to the biocultural interactionist perspective, biologically influenced factors (e.g., temperament, personality) as well as cultural factors (e.g., socialization) contribute to individuals' SDO (see Sidanius et al. 1991, 1994). Greater SDO in men than women is seen as important for the male reproductive strategy, where dominant groups of males aim to monopolize female reproductive resources (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). Gender-role socialization into typically

female roles, such as teacher, nurse, or children's caretaker, requires concern for other people, which is negatively correlated with SDO. In contrast, gender-role socialization into typically male roles, such as police officer, soldier, or manager, requires a willingness to dominate other groups with legal means or violence (Pratto et al. 1994). The "gendered" roles of caretaker and war maker are consistent across cultures and might also contribute to explaining the consistent sex difference in SDO and the invariance hypothesis (Pratto et al. 1997).

Some scholars however feel that this biocultural interactionist perspective is too backward looking and that it leads to "SDO being an outcome of the past rather than the present" (p. 805; Batalha et al. 2011). These scholars therefore favor a cultural-deterministic perspective and more immediate situational explanations for the presence or absence of sex differences in SDO (e.g., Batalha et al. 2011; Huang and Liu 2005; Schmitt and Wirth 2009; Wilson and Liu 2003). From a cultural-deterministic perspective, the invariance hypothesis should not hold as any sex differences in SDO are the result of a specific gendered socialization pattern, culturally transmitted gender roles and self-stereotyping, and contextual or environmental factors. For example, demonstrating the importance of context rather than gender, Batalha and colleagues found women and men to differ in SDO when the ideologies that they were exposed to sanctioned values that promoted group hierarchy. In contrast, the authors found that men and women converged in their SDO beliefs, when these ideologies were minimized.

## Conclusion

Gender is one of the most consistent predictors of SDO with men typically exceeding women in their preference for group hierarchy and for differentiation of groups along the lines of status and power. The question to what extent this sex difference is invariant is part of a lively scholarly debate and awaits further careful and systematic investigation of the "all else being

equal" principle of the gender invariance hypothesis. In addition, scholars also cannot definitively conclude the origin of the sex difference in SDO, but they found considerably evidence that SDO is related to a large number of gender differences such as mating strategies, occupational role, and political attitudes. Future research might shed further light on the questions of *why* and *when* examined "gendered" preferences for group hierarchy are stable or malleable as a function of the context that we are socialized and embedded in.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Dominance Hierarchy](#)
- ▶ [Evolved Sex Differences](#)
- ▶ [Self-Stereotyping](#)
- ▶ [Social Dominance Orientation](#)

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