

# Status of public sector employees

## The applicability of the Social Dominance Theory as basis for an analysis of social hierarchies

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### ABSTRACT

*Numerous scholars have debated the reasons why status in individual and organisational behaviour deserves attention as well as how status is socially constructed. Scholars such as Gould (2002:1143) are of the opinion that the importance of the manifestation of status is a result of the social and institutional factors that guide inter-subjective evaluations that lead to difference in status orderings. Other scholars might argue that status can be determined by an individual's position within his/her social circles (Pearce 2011:27). In this article the term "status" refers to an individual's or group's prestige or honour as well as an individual's claim to respect and compliance in relations with others (Weber 1968 and Blau 1964 in Pearce 2011:25). Status may not necessarily be associated with the qualities that an individual might have, but the emergence of an individual's status is formed by the social process of inter-subjective evaluation.*

*This article will elaborate on the applicability of the Social Dominance Theory (and the Social Dominance Orientation Scale) to analyse the manifestation of status as a result of the operation of group-based social hierarchies in the South African public sector. Sidanius and Pratto (1999:38) are of the opinion that the Social Dominance Theory draws on a wide range of disciplines and theories in social sciences and highlight the kinds of status hierarchies that exist on the basis of age, gender and other criteria such as ethnicity. When applying the aforementioned theory and scale, the emphasis should be on studying status hierarchies based on ascribed criteria, rather than earned criteria.*



***In this article, the organisation and sociological literature on status formation will be outlined. This article is exploratory in nature and aims to test the validity of the Social Dominance Orientation scale to test social hierarchies within the South African public sector.***

## INTRODUCTION

*"All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others."*

– George Orwell, *Animal Farm*.

Status is important to people and research on status in organisations has been of interest to social scientists (Sociology and Social Psychology) and scholars of management and organisation theory for years. Pearce (2011:1) mentions scholars like Barnard (1938 and 1968) who suggest that acquiring status was one of the major incentives of being employed in an organisation while Vroom (1964) is of the opinion that seeking status might be the main reason why people work. Maslow (1943) is another scholar who suggests that the reverence of others is one of the fundamental higher order human needs (Pearce 2011:2). Employees' social status might have a strong impact on their work satisfaction and organisational performance and individuals will go to surprising lengths to gain and guard their status. Very few studies have focussed on an employee's status in public sector organisations and few public sector organisational behaviour scholars have employed the Social Dominance Theory in their research. Research for this article has largely utilised the construct of Social Dominance Orientation (as the psychological component of the Social Dominance Theory), and therefore did not fully take advantage of the multi-level nature of the Social Dominance Theory.

## STATUS FORMATION AND SOCIAL HIERARCHIES

Organisations (and for the purpose of this article public sector organisations) increasingly rely on team work and task groups to perform their work and deliver services to the public and, therefore, the ability of these groups to effectively leverage the expertise and knowledge of individual members has become ever more important. When an employee interacts and communicates in different groups in an organisation, he/she will get a special rank or value that reflects the individual's status (Rostamy, Hosseini, Azar, Khaef-Elahi and Hassanzadeh 2008:77). Weber (1968:305) emphasised how status enables an *"effective claim to social esteem in terms of positive or negative privileges"* and in that way status distributes esteem, deference, honour and prestige within a social collective. Pearce (2011:5) refers to the work of authors such as Marx (1894/1967) and Weber (1968) who argue that an individual's status in the past is derived from the particular category that the person occupied in a social setting but with modernisation (as social division became more complex and fluid) *"the terms 'estates' gave way as the terms 'orders', 'degrees' and 'ranks' were added to*

refer to the multitude of social hierarchies in more mobile societies". Scholars have found it difficult to distinguish between status as a subjective evaluation and status as an objective and structural reality. Pearce (2011:5) questions whether status is simply a perception of individuals, however much those perceptions may disagree with one another, or is status something about which some degree of social consensus should be expected and that acts on individuals whether or not they personally approve or accept it.

According to Sandiford and Seymore (2010:90) the academic interest in the concept of status in organisations falls into three interlined strands, namely:

- social status – associated with particular occupations within the wider society and is derived from a variety of occupational factors such as the socially constructed value attributed to the skills present in an occupation or the nature of the work itself;
- status attributions within a particular organisation by employee themselves – include the analysis of the social structure of statuses or rank through which an organisation's sub-culture can be studied; and
- employees' own perceptions of their status – may be different than the status attributed to them through the internal allocation of status.

There are a wide variety of factors that contribute towards the construction of individual and group identity and an individual's self-perception of status. Ascribed status, according to Sandiford and Seymore (2010:89) "... is derived from relatively fixed influences such as gender, ethnicity and age, while achieved status focuses on accomplishments over which people have more control". Status derived from characteristics that an individual has no control over are therefore said to be ascribed status and the opportunities to exert individual effort toward the acquisition of certain characteristics (education, occupation and income) and be called achieved status. Sullivan and Steward (in Pearce 2011:27) are of the opinion that status can be independent of or loosely associated to an individual's true quality or observed performance and that an important feature of status is that it can be transferred "through association and through relations that involve either exchange or deference". Status is the degree to which an individual or group is respected or admired by others. Given the importance of status in individual and organisational behaviour, scholars have also been studying how these social constructs are formed and have used different approaches to address how status is socially constructed – although this is not the focus of this article.

Rostamy *et al.* (2008:78) believe that status is a unit of the social system because it is the most basic component thereof and that status is a position which an individual obtains within a group. Pratto, Sidanius and Levin (2006:271) state that no matter a society's form of government, the complexities of its social and economic arrangements or the contents of their belief system, individuals tend to organise as group-based social hierarchies in which at least one group enjoys greater social status and power than other groups. In organisations, groups are typically vertically ordered into status hierarchies which ascribe relative status and power (O'Brien and Dietz in Pearce 2011:55). The aforementioned is especially relevant in public sector organisations. Dominant groups enjoy more than their reasonable share of *positive social value*—which might be classified as the material and symbolic issues for which people strive, such as political authority and power as well as high social status (Sidanius and Pratto 1999:32). *Negative social value* (hierarchies) are organised along age, gender and other arbitrary-set characteristics (such as race, ethnicity and religion among others) (O'Brien and Dietz in Pearce 2011:58). "Although

*the degree, severity and definitional bases of group-based hierarchical organisation vary across societies and within the same society over time, the fact of group-based hierarchical organisation appears to be a human universal” (Pratto, Sidanius and Levin 2006:272).*

## **SOCIAL DOMINANCE THEORY AND SOCIAL DOMINANCE ORIENTATION**

Quist and Resendez (2002:287) state that according to the Social Dominance Theory (SDT), intergroup dynamics are often influenced by the groups’ perceived positions within the social hierarchy. Within the South African public sector this is also evident in positions that are held within a political party structure as well as a position within government. Sidanius and Pratto (1999:31) summarise the theory as an effort to connect individual personality and attitudes with the fields of organisational behaviour and social structure.

SDT is a theory relating to “... *the operations of group-based social hierarchies in societies*” (Pearce 2011). One would normally find a more dominant group at the top and one or several sub-ordinate groups at the bottom of an organisational hierarchy. Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) stems from the dominant group’s belief which tends to be anti-egalitarian (note that a pro-egalitarian belief would be that all people are equal and should enjoy equality and is indicated as SDO-E). Individuals based in anti-egalitarian groups have larger social dominance orientations and would be motivated to keep their higher status and the privileges, thus the positive social value, associated with it. This is referred to as “hierarchy legitimising myths” which means that “... *beliefs (stereotypes) and attitudes (prejudice) suggesting that subordinate groups deserve their status*” (Quist and Resendez 2002:287). Sidanius and Pratto (1999:41,45) assert that myths are legitimised through the sharing of stories resonating values, attitudes, beliefs, ideologies and stereotypes that provide the foundation for intellectual and moral justification for the difference of status of social groups. It is interesting to note that the above reminds one of the development of organisational cultures. At an organisational level, rules, procedures and actions contribute to the development and maintenance of group-based social hierarchies. One of the propositions of this article is that maintaining the belief in legitimising myths serve the purpose of also maintaining the hierarchy, thus a Social Dominance Orientation that is anti-egalitarian (SDO-D).

SDO has been described as the psychological component of SDT and reflects the individual’s validation of group-based social hierarchies. Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth and Malle (1994:742) provide the following definition for SDO:

*“We consider SDO to be a general attitudinal orientation towards intergroup relations, reflecting whether one generally prefers such relations to be equal, versus hierarchical that is, ordered along a superior-inferior dimension”.*

In 1996, Sidanius *et al.* in Pearce (2011) redefined the definition to:

*“SDO is also thought to express a view of human existence as zero-sum and relentless competition between groups, the desire for generalized, hierarchical relationships between social groups, and the desire for ingroup dominance and superiority over outgroups.”*

According to Romm (2013:117-118) people higher in SDO will believe and endorse policies and various practices that will maintain group dominance in various ways and those lower in SDO will tend to favour practices and ideologies that enhance inequality.

Rosenblatt (2011:237, 239-240) states that the SDT makes provision for three processes at a multiple level of analysis namely aggregated individual discrimination, aggregated institutional discrimination and behavioural asymmetry. It is postulated that these three processes are "... coordinated by person-environment fit mechanisms and legitimizing norms, values, beliefs, scripts and ideologies". Individual discrimination refers to acts of favouritism that are often unintentional and where one individual could be favoured based on power-based inequalities and group-based hierarchies. When the discrimination is aggregated, it involves a large number of people. Favouritism can refer to employment being given to alumni from the same university or even cadre deployment. Aggregated institutional discrimination relates to the allocation of resources, specifically social resources and in terms of this discrimination dominant groups will enjoy greater benefits to maintain their hierarchical position. The SDT distinguishes between Hierarchy-attenuating (HA) and Hierarchy-enhancing (HE) institutions. HA includes organisations, groups and societies that are devoted to equal opportunities such as human rights organisations. HE includes groups and organisations that in nature protect the wealthy such as profit-maximising companies. Strictly speaking, public sector organisations should be hierarchy-attenuating organisations. Behavioural symmetry claims that group-based hierarchies are initiated and supported by the "...coordinated differences in behavioural repertoires of dominants and subordinates that produce better outcomes for dominants than for subordinates" (Pratto et al. 2006:279). This is where dominant group members will show more support and preference towards their own ingroup and the subordinates also tend to favour the more dominant ingroup. Thus subordinates participate on some level in their own subordination (Rosenblatt 2012:240). Empirical research indicates that SDO, among others, relate to political opinions and power relations (Romm 2013:118, 123). Greater social value is allocated to the so-called ingroup. Perceptions currently exist that in the North West Province, where the Economic Freedom Front (EFF) enjoys the majority seats after the 2014 National Elections, that members supporting the African National Congress (ANC) will not have the same status and therefore enjoy the same benefits, such as studies being paid for from the municipality's budget, as previously when the ANC enjoyed the majority rule in the province (Marumola personal interview 8 September 2014).

## Gender, age and length of employment variables

According to Sidanus and Pratto (1999:33) hierarchies and specifically social hierarchies are organised according to age, gender and *arbitrary-set* characteristics. Age-based is often more flexible as age is not necessarily a predictor of experience or educational levels. Gender-based stems from patriarchy where the perception exists that men have more social and political power than females. Arbitrary-set hierarchies include sexuality, religion, race and ethnicity and it is with these hierarchies that oppression, violence and even brutality can occur.

It is consistently the case that groups operating in an organisation will be composed of members who differ in their knowledge relating to the task at hand as well as the expertise (and by implication the status) that they bring to the group (Bunderson and Barton in Pearce 2011:215). These abovementioned differences may correlate with differences in education,



experience, training or inborn capability and can, according to Bunderson and Barton (in Pearce 2011:215), “*emerge naturally or as the result of intentional design decisions that place individuals with greater expertise in groups with less-expert individuals*”. The identification of the expertise of members in a group (whose expertise can be leveraged by less-expert individuals in decision-making) is not a simple process as expertise is not always a visible or observable characteristic. Bunderson (2003:589) found that expertise assessment in groups is fundamentally a status-organising process and that, once developed, this status hierarchy plays a critical role in group interaction – by suggesting that the opinions and contributions of some members should be seen as more relevant than those of others. According to Magee and Galinsky (2008:354) to arrive at a hierarchical form of social relations “... *members of social groups must either engage in creating a formal system with rank-ordered roles or take part in a process of informal interaction where rank ordering of individuals or groups organically develops on at least one valued social dimension*”. The aforementioned process is identified as hierarchical differentiation and a status hierarchy is branded by an ordering of individuals or groups according to the esteem/respect they receive from others (Magee and Galinsky 2008:359). Status develops from expectations that individuals in groups have for their own and other’s performance and these performance expectations can be based on past task performance or, according to Magee and Galinsky (2008:360), on other educational and demographic qualities (such as education, functional background, length of employment, age, race and gender).

## THE SOCIAL DOMINANCE ORIENTATION SCALE

There are primarily two versions of the Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) scale, the first comprising of 14 items (SDO5) which taps SDO in general and the more commonly used version (which was also used for this article), comprising 16 questions, called SDO6 (Pratto *et al.* 2006:282). SDO5 mentions *groups* directly only once whilst SDO6 specifically mentions *groups* in 13 of the 16 items. As SDO6 focuses more on intergroup relations and group dominance, it is better suited for the purpose of this article. The SDT, and the attendant construct SDO, is a useful basis to develop a better understanding of the development and relative durability of group-based social hierarchies in public sector organisations. According to Sherman, Lerner, Renshon, Ma-Kellams and Joel (2015:1) individual differences are explored by making use of SDO which is “... *an ideological orientation grounded in the belief that social inequalities are appropriate and even preferable*.”

The following questions as per the SDO6 scale were used (Pratto *et al.* 2006:320):

1. Some groups of people are just more worthy than others.
2. In getting what your group wants, it is sometimes necessary to use force against other groups.
3. It’s OK if some groups have more of a chance in life than others.
4. To get ahead in life, it is sometimes necessary to step on other groups.
5. If certain groups of people stayed in their place, we would have fewer problems.
6. It’s probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom.

7. Inferior groups should stay in their place.
8. Sometimes other groups must be kept in their place.
9. It would be good if all groups could be equal.
10. Group equality should be our ideal.
11. All groups should be given an equal chance in life.
12. We should do what we can to equalise conditions for different groups.
13. We should Increase social equality.
14. We would have fewer problems if we treated different groups more equally.
15. We should strive to make incomes more equal.
16. No one group should dominate in society.

## RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA ANALYSIS

An exploratory, quantitative approach was followed for this article. Data was collected according to a specific set of steps to ensure objectivity as far as possible. A quantitative approach was followed as the applicability of a theory (Social Dominance Theory) and its instrument (Social Dominance Orientation Scale) that specifically focuses on an individual's validation of group-based social hierarchies. This article is exploratory in nature using an unrestricted Exploratory Factor Analysis with a limited sample.

An individual's SDO level is generally measured via a self-administered scale and participants need to indicate their degree of agreement to each point according to a 7 point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Participants indicated their degree of positivity versus negativity toward each statement e.g., "*Some people are just more worthy than others*". The original instrument developed by Pratto and Sidianus, namely the SDO6 Scale was used for data collection purposes. Participants received a self-administered questionnaire containing 16 items. In this instrument half the questions are phrased in the inequality direction and the other half in the equality direction. Items were reverse coded as high SDO scores would be indicative of a high desire for inequality between groups.

It should be noted that the sample size is a limitation and that generalisations cannot be made. However, the purpose of this article is to test the validity of the instrument to determine social hierarchies, not to provide an overview of the findings. The purpose of the research conducted for this article was thus to determine the applicability of this instrument in the South African public sector.

## Participants

The study consisted out of 74 adults participating on a voluntary basis. These adults are diverse in terms of race, socio-political attitudes, gender and age, ethnic and religious affiliation. The majority of the participants (76,7%) are employed in the South African public sector including national (37%), provincial (8,2%) and local government (31,5%) employees. The rest were employed in the private sector (15,1%) with the remaining individuals (8,2%) mostly employed in the education sector. The majority of the respondents (44,6%) were based in the Gauteng province.



According to Meyer (2012:25) none of the limited published South African studies which assessed the SDO levels of South Africans made use of the SDO6 scale (Heaven, Greene, Stones and Caputi 2000; Duckitt 2001; Duckitt, Wagner, Du Plessis and Birum 2002). Meyer (2012) tested the reliability of the scale to determine if it is an appropriate instrument to use within the South African environment and found that it was. It should be noted that the scale is most appropriate in the original, English version although the Afrikaans translation was also reliable and comparable to other South African societies. As it could not be determined if any SDO6 studies were conducted among public sector employees and specifically among South Africans, this exploratory study tested the scale among public sector employees. In order to determine the SDO6 scale's internal consistency, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was determined ( $\alpha = .772$ ) which is considered as acceptable. The scale's reliability was then determined for the different demographic groups and other descriptive statistics. In testing the validity of SDO6 within the South African environment, an Exploratory Factor Analysis was done on a Maximum likelihood with Promax rotation. According to Pallant (2013:193) certain assumptions need to exist such as the factorability of the correlation matrix. The correlation matrix should show some correlations of  $r = .3$  or greater. In the case of this study there are a number of correlations. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity should be statistically significant at  $p < .05$  and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value should be  $.6$  or above. These values are presented as part of the output from factor analysis.

**Table 1 KMO and Bartlett's test**

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.766
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	505.471
	Df	120
	Sig.	.000

From the above it can be deduced that the KMO value is 0.766 which is significant and the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is significant as the  $p$ -value is 0.000.

In the next step, the total variance explained was considered. In terms of the Initial Eigenvalues, those that are above 1 will be taken into consideration.

**Table 2 Total Variance Explained**

Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings <sup>a</sup>
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
1	5.172	32.324	32.324	3.611	22.571	22.571	4.708
2	2.659	16.616	48.941	1.098	6.860	29.431	2.064
3	1.547	9.667	58.608	2.069	12.932	42.362	2.111



Factor	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings <sup>a</sup>
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
4	1.115	6.971	65.578	2.038	12.737	55.099	1.841
5	.936	5.850	71.428				
6	.753	4.705	76.134				
7	.746	4.662	80.795				
8	.620	3.873	84.669				
9	.539	3.368	88.037				
10	.476	2.977	91.014				
11	.432	2.700	93.714				
12	.333	2.079	95.793				
13	.235	1.468	97.261				
14	.197	1.228	98.489				
15	.143	.895	99.384				
16	.099	.616	100.000				

Extraction Method: Maximum Likelihood.

a. When factors are correlated, sums of squared loadings cannot be added to obtain a total variance.

From the above, four factors could be identified (factors 1-4). The cumulative percentage (%) indicated variance of 65,578%. A follow up study needs to be conducted to determine these factors. The Pattern Matrix supports these four factors.

**Table 3 The Pattern Matrix**

Pattern Matrix <sup>a</sup>				
	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
B1		.294		-.214
B2	.257		.250	-.211
B3	.399	.337		
B4		.561		
B5	-.201	.577		
B6		.633		
B7	.246	.517		-.233

Pattern Matrix <sup>a</sup>				
	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
B8		.710	-.248	
R_B9	.299			.859
R_B10	.661			.394
R_B11	.935			
R_B12	.853			
R_B13	.828			
R_B14	.715			
R_B15	.503		.278	
R_B16			.954	

Extraction Method: Maximum Likelihood.  
Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.  
a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.

It is interesting to note that the preliminary study found that there are double factor loadings on some of the items. Literature as well as other studies suggests only two factors—Social Dominance Orientation-Dominance (SDO-D) and Social Dominance Orientation-Egalitarianism (SDO-E). Taking into consideration previous studies (such as Hindriks, Verkuyten and Coenders 2014), and the pattern matrix, it is very probable that only two factors are dominant and this warrants a follow up study.

These items were for example “In getting what your group wants, it is sometimes necessary to use force against other groups” and “Inferior groups should stay in their place”. As stated previously, Pratto *et al.* (2006:271) is of the opinion that individuals tend to organise as group-based social hierarchies in which at least one group enjoys greater social status and power than other groups. In terms of the items that showed double loadings, it would be necessary to also qualitatively investigate the reasons. In the current South African climate, one cannot help but wonder if Xenophobic attacks could among others be based on the perception that inferior groups need to *stay in place* and that various protests (such as service delivery protests) refer to the perceived necessity to use force.

## CONCLUSION

A major research stream in organisational behaviour over the past decade has been the study of racial, gender, ethnic or other prejudice based on ascriptive characteristics in the workplace. Research has been conducted on issues of bias and various models have been used to study workplace differences. Status should be increasingly important in the study of organisations dependent on fluid networks and the serving of communities, such as public sector organisations. It is crucial to refine and distinguish status and related concepts such as

gender, age and the influence of length of employment on organisational behaviour—which are critical distinctions in organisation and public administration and management research. The aim of the article was to test the validity of the Social Dominance Orientation scale in conducting research on social hierarchies within the South African public sector and from the above findings it is clear that the SDO6 instrument is valid and reliable to use within South African public sector organisations. A possible hypothesis for future research is that those employed in the South African public sector prior to 1994 will have a higher SDO score than those employed after 1994. Thus, those employed before 1994 would have a tendency to focus on power and would do anything to maintain their hierarchical positions. This, in support of suggestions made by Romm (2013:118) is that power relations and the dynamics of hierarchies in transition (such as South Africa after apartheid) must be empirically tested. The majority of previous studies conducted focused on gender, ethnicity, age and education levels as predictors of social dominance orientation and it is postulated that the length of employment has an effect on the social dominance orientation of public sector officials. It is acknowledged that research for this article (being exploratory in nature), has largely utilised the construct of Social Dominance Orientation and did not take full advantage of the multi-level nature of the Social Dominance Theory. “*Social hierarchies are not only maintained by those who benefit from them, but also by those who suffer under them* (Pearce 2011:79).” It could therefore be beneficial for future research to employ and extend the Social Dominance Theory as a tool for understanding public sector organisational hierarchies and thereby, the role of status in organisations.

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