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Elaine N. Forbes
Georgia Southern University

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The #MeToo Movement and Social Dominance Orientation

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the
Department of Psychology.

By
Elaine Nicole Forbes

Under the mentorship of Dr. Amy Hackney

Abstract

Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) is a measurement of an individual's desire for the current social hierarchy to be maintained (Sidanius & Pratto, 1994). SDO has long been considered relatively stable, and men have been shown to exhibit higher SDO than women on average. However, recent research suggests that men's SDO scores may increase in response to an outgroup threat (Sugiura et al., 2017). The current study aimed to use the #MeToo Movement as an outgroup threat to investigate the effect of a modern real-world event on SDO scores in men compared to women. Modified news articles covering the #MeToo Movement were used to prime the participants with outgroup threat. Participants read the articles and responded to the SDO₇ Likert-Type scale to measure SDO. A 2 (Control vs #MeToo) x 2 (Men vs Women) between-subjects ANOVA was used to analyze the data. We predicted that perceived threat priming by the #MeToo Movement articles would lead to enhanced SDO in male participants. The results were considered inconclusive due to a low representation of men in the sample and low statistical power, but this novel area of research has much potential.

Thesis Mentor: _____

Dr. Amy Hackney

Honors Director: _____

Dr. Steven Engel

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Department of Psychology
University Honors Program
Georgia Southern University

Introduction

Social Dominance Orientation and Outgroup Threat

As social creatures, human beings desire to define their social identity. Such definition creates a distinction between the group that the individual identifies with, or the ingroup, and groups that they do not identify with, or outgroups. Past studies have shown that humans divide themselves into groups and behave more favorably towards the ingroup even when the individual receives no benefit from such behavior (Billig & Tajfel, 1973). If two groups have conflicting goals, the ingroup may feel threatened by the outgroup. Outgroup threat usually incites behaviors like ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation, in which members of the ingroup readily discriminate against the outgroup, even in laboratory settings (Yuki & Yokota, 2009).

Because of an individual's need to find a place for themselves in a social structure, they may have varying levels of belief in the necessity of hierarchies. An individual's support for social hierarchy can be quantified by their Social Dominance Orientation (SDO). Sidanius and Pratto (1994) clarified that SDO is an individual personality variable that describes how much an individual feels that the ingroup should be superior to the outgroup. SDO is commonly used to predict an individual's attitudes regarding intergroup relations; it has been shown to predict the degree of an individual's discrimination against an outgroup. SDO has been shown to correlate positively with sexism, ethnic prejudice, and political conservatism, among other ingroup-favoring ideals (Sidanius & Pratto, 1994). The same studies also found that men, on average, have significantly higher SDO than women.

In contrast to past studies that consider SDO a predictor variable, Morrison and Ybarro (2008) theorized that SDO may be dependent on social context as well as group

identification. In situations where inequality benefits the ingroup, such as when outgroup threat is present, individuals with strong group identification may experience enhanced levels of SDO. Three studies were conducted, manipulating outgroup threat and measuring SDO response of the participants. Ingroup identification level of the participants was also taken into account. In all three studies, participants primed with outgroup threat exhibited significantly higher levels of SDO than those not exposed to threat, especially when the individuals identified strongly with their ingroup. The results suggested that outgroup threat can increase SDO, and the relationship between threat and SDO may be moderated by level of ingroup identification (Morrison & Ybarro, 2008). Such context-dependent SDO has greater implications as to the nature of psychological behaviors like prejudice. Because outgroup threat has now been shown to increase SDO, and SDO correlates positively with outgroup prejudice (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), the authors suggested that SDO may act as a mediator between outgroup threat and prejudice. Thus, an event that threatens an individual's group may enhance their SDO, which then leads to increased prejudice.

Expanding on the theory that SDO may be context-dependent, Sugiura, Mifune, Tsuboi, and Yokota (2017) studied enhancement of SDO as a psychological mechanism triggered in response to outgroup threat. Research suggested that men, more so than women, tend to use adaptive behaviors in times of intergroup conflict. Such adaptive behavior commonly includes ingroup bias, in which the individual tends to discriminate against the outgroup and cooperate with the ingroup. SDO may be one of the psychological mechanisms producing adaptive behaviors like ingroup bias. Seeking to explore the differences between male and female response to intergroup conflict, Sugiura

et al. (2017) designed an experiment to test whether SDO would be enhanced only in men primed with outgroup threat.

Participants were all undergraduate students from a Japanese university, consisting of roughly equal numbers of men and women. The three-part study included priming the experimental group with a reading activity insulting their ethnicity, making group boundary salient in all participants using a Prisoner's Dilemma game, and then measuring SDO. In both the experimental and control groups, male participants exhibited higher SDO than female participants. As expected, men primed with the outgroup threat exhibited significantly higher SDO than men not primed, while no significant difference was found among female participants. The results indicated that, in addition to men exhibiting higher SDO than women regardless of context, context-dependent SDO may be enhanced in men as a response to outgroup threat.

The current study uses a real-world scenario as an outgroup threat, an extremely relevant event that has had a high level of impact on American society in the recent years: The #MeToo Movement.

#MeToo Movement

In October of 2017, a new wave of social activism rose up in the form of a trending hashtag on the social media platform Twitter: #MeToo. This hashtag was used by actress Alyssa Milano in the wake of multiple allegations of sexual assault against movie producer Harvey Weinstein (Tippet, 2018). In her tweet, Milano encouraged other Twitter users to post "#MeToo" if they have ever experienced sexual assault or harassment in hopes that the attention would raise awareness to the problem. Within the next day, the hashtag had been used over half a million times and had gained the attention of people around the world within a week. The phrase "Me Too" had originally been used

by Tarana Burke back in 2007 as a name for a group aiming to encourage victims of sexual violence (*Guardian*, 2018). The more current movement was described as possessing similar goals: to bring attention to the multitude of individuals affected by sexual violence, to encourage victims and others to speak out, and to urge businesses and legislators to take action.

The #MeToo Movement seems to have achieved these goals; the movement has spread to dozens of other countries, women are sharing personal testimonies previously kept hidden due to shame and fear, and around 200 men accused of various forms of sexual harassment have been fired from their jobs within the first year (*The New York Times*, 2018). Multiple men have also stepped forward to share their personal accounts and to show support. However, backlash against the movement ensued as soon as a month after Milano's initial use of the hashtag. Some warned of an impending witch hunt while others compared the whirlwind of allegations to mid-20th Century McCarthyism (*The Baltimore Sun*, 2017). The #MeToo Movement has also caused a major shift in workplace social dynamics, according to studies from the Society of Human Resource Management (Gurcheik, 2019). Further studies on workplace climate post-#MeToo found that men are more reluctant to hire attractive women, have one-on-one meetings with female coworkers, and have close interpersonal interactions with female coworkers (Atwater et al., 2019).

For social movements as important as #MeToo, being able to predict negative reactions, effects, or consequences is highly necessary. Investigating how the #MeToo Movement influences individual men will lead to better understanding of how the movement continues to affect the groups involved as well as society as a whole.

Significance

Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) has long been considered a relatively stable individual personality variable, but the current study could further support research that suggests it may be context dependent. Additionally, high SDO is associated with some harmful social attitudes, such as prejudice against outgroup members. It is important to identify the social situations that increase SDO and, in turn, possibly intensify harmful social attitudes. Furthermore, the #MeToo Movement is a modern, real-world event that impacted American society greatly and continues to influence workplace culture today. Possible effects of this movement should continue to be investigated. Finally, the current study is the first, to our knowledge, to investigate the effects of a real-world event on SDO.

We predicted that the #MeToo Movement would be perceived as an outgroup threat by men, and that in turn those men would exhibit increased SDO scores. We hypothesized that men exposed to the #MeToo Movement would exhibit higher SDO scores than both men and women not exposed to the #MeToo Movement.

Methodology

Participants

Participants consisted of undergraduate college students at Georgia Southern University. Participants were recruited through the Georgia Southern Psychology department's SONA system and completed the survey on Qualtrics using any computer in any location of their choosing. Participants did not come to a research lab. They received class credit upon completion of the study. Two studies were conducted, and participants were not allowed to take both studies. Study A had 74 participants total, 10

male and 64 female, after filtering with suspicion and attention criteria ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.45$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 3.00$, 66.2% White, 21.6% African American, 5.4% Hispanic or Latino/Latina, 2.7% Multiracial, 2.7% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 1.4% American Indian or Alaskan Native). Study B had 75 participants total, 16 male and 59 female, after filtering with suspicion and attention criteria ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.28$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.25$, 58.7% White, 24.0% African American, 10.7% Hispanic or Latino/Latina, 4.0% Asian or Pacific Islander, 1.3% Multiracial, and 1.3% Other).

Procedures: Study A

Study A was a pilot study designed to assess the construct validity of the independent variable (the #MeToo Movement articles) that was also used in Study B. Study A was intended to verify that the #MeToo Movement was perceived as a threat by men before studying the effects on SDO. After providing informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to either the control or experimental condition. Participants in the control condition received a sports news article (Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014). Participants in the experimental condition received an excerpt from one of three news articles about the #MeToo Movement. One of the three news articles was randomly distributed to a participant to prevent possible confounds from the language of one article alone.

All participants were instructed to read the articles with the intention of answering questions about the articles. After reading the article they received, participants answered 11 Hostile Sexism Subscale (HSS) questions. Participants then answered three multiple-choice attention check questions and a Likert-type manipulation check question about the article they received. Next, participants completed a demographic questionnaire that

asked for age, racial/ethnic identity, gender identity, and college. Finally, participants provided an open response as to what they thought the purpose of the study was to check for suspicion of the hypothesis. Counseling resources were provided at the end of the study.

Procedures: Study B

Study B was designed to test our hypothesis about the effects of the #MeToo Movement on male participant's SDO scores. Participants read two articles and then answered a variety of questions. After providing informed consent, all participants were instructed to read a short distractor article about a family reuniting with a dog that had been missing since the Paradise, California wildfires (*BBC News*, 2019). They answered three multiple-choice attention check questions and one Likert-type question about the article afterwards. For the second article, participants were randomly assigned to either the control or experimental condition. Participants in the control condition received the same sports news article as in Study A. Participants in the experimental condition also received a #MeToo news article as in Study A, randomly cycled between three articles.

After reading their second article, participants answered three multiple-choice attention check questions and a Likert-type manipulation check question about the specific article they received. Participants then answered 16 Likert-type SDO₇ questions. After completing the SDO₇ survey, participants completed a demographic questionnaire that asked for age, racial/ethnic identity, gender identity, and college. Finally, participants provided an open response as to what they thought the purpose of the study was to check for suspicion of the hypothesis. Counseling resources were provided at the end of Study B as well.

Materials

News Article Stimuli. The distractor article and three #MeToo articles were all from common online news sources (*BBC News*, *The New York Times*, *NBC News*, and *The Economist*), modified to control for length and difficulty of the reading level. All the #MeToo articles were the top results when “#MeToo” was searched on the internet in order to closely resemble exposure to the #MeToo Movement in a real-world setting. The control article was taken from Wilkins and Kaiser (2014). The article was unrelated to gender, but still about a shift in a social hierarchy; it mirrored the #MeToo articles in that it was about a lower-status group becoming a higher-status group. The multiple-choice attention check and Likert-type manipulation check questions were also modeled after ones from Wilkins and Kaiser (2014), with each set of questions modified and tailored for a specific article.

The Hostile Sexism Subscale. Hostile sexism (HSS) was used in Study A as a measurement of the level of threat experienced from the #MeToo articles. The HSS is a subscale of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996). A sample item is “Women exaggerate problems at work.” Cronbach’s alpha for HSS in the current study was 0.74.

Social Dominance Orientation. The most recent measure of Social Dominance Orientation, the SDO₇, was used to measure each participants’ belief in social dominance. The SDO₇ scale used in Study B is from Ho and colleagues (2015). The SDO₇ scale asks participants to indicate the degree to which they oppose or favor the presented statements using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly oppose to 7 = strongly favor). A sample

item is “Some groups of people must be kept in their place.” Cronbach’s alpha for SDO₇ in the current study was 0.87.

Results

Data from both studies were analyzed in SPSS using a 2 (#MeToo Movement vs. Control) x 2 (Participant Gender: Male vs. Female) between-subjects ANOVA. Overall differences between average HSS and SDO₇ scores were analyzed using an independent samples *t*-test.

Study A

The effect of the #MeToo Movement on threat perception was not significant, $F(1, 70) = .002, p = .968$. Men exposed to #MeToo Movement ($n = 8, M = 2.84, SEM = .28$) did not have significantly higher HSS scores than men in the control group ($n = 2, M = 2.96, SEM = .57$), women exposed to #MeToo Movement ($n = 42, M = 2.60, SE = .12$), or women in control group ($n = 22, M = 2.74, SEM = .17$). The overall average HSS scores of the men ($n = 10, M = 2.86, SEM = .28$) was not significantly different from those of the women ($n = 64, M = 2.64, SEM = .10$), $t(72) = .815, p = .418$.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of HSS Scores by Gender

	M_{Male}	SEM_{Male}	M_{Female}	SEM_{Female}
Control	2.96	.57	2.74	.17
#MeToo	2.84	.28	2.6	.12
Total Average	2.86	.28	2.64	.10

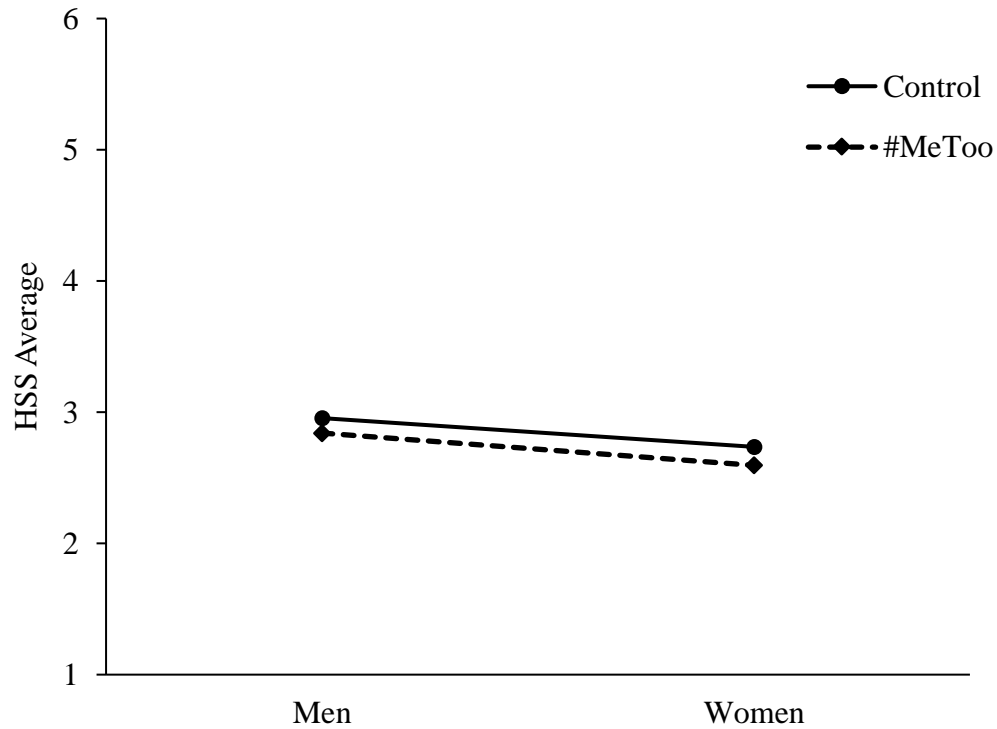


Figure 1. HSS scores by gender of participants who read control articles vs participants who read #MeToo articles.

Contrary to hypotheses, men who read the #MeToo Movement article did not report increased hostile sexism scores compared to men in the control group and women. We intended to first validate the construct validity of the #MeToo Movement article as an operationalization of outgroup threat before investigating the effects of exposure to the #MeToo Movement on social dominance orientation. However, due to constraints in participant recruitment and the time demands of the academic semester, we chose to proceed with Study B.

Study B

The effect of the #MeToo Movement as an outgroup threat on SDO_7 scores was not significant, $F(1, 71) = .090, p = .756$. On average, men exposed to #MeToo Movement ($n = 11, M = 2.85, SEM = .28$) did not have significantly higher SDO_7 scores

than men in the control group ($n = 5$, $M = 3.01$, $SEM = .42$), women exposed to #MeToo Movement ($n = 25$, $M = 2.66$, $SEM = .19$), or women in control group ($n = 34$, $M = 2.65$, $SEM = .16$). The overall average SDO₇ scores of the men ($n = 16$, $M = 2.90$, $SEM = .21$) was not significantly different from those of the women ($n = 59$, $M = 2.65$, $SEM = .12$), $t(73) = .943$, $p = .349$.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of SDO₇ Scores by Gender

	M_{Male}	SEM_{Male}	M_{Female}	SEM_{Female}
Control	3.01	.42	2.65	.16
#MeToo	2.85	.28	2.66	.19
Total Average	2.90	.21	2.65	.12

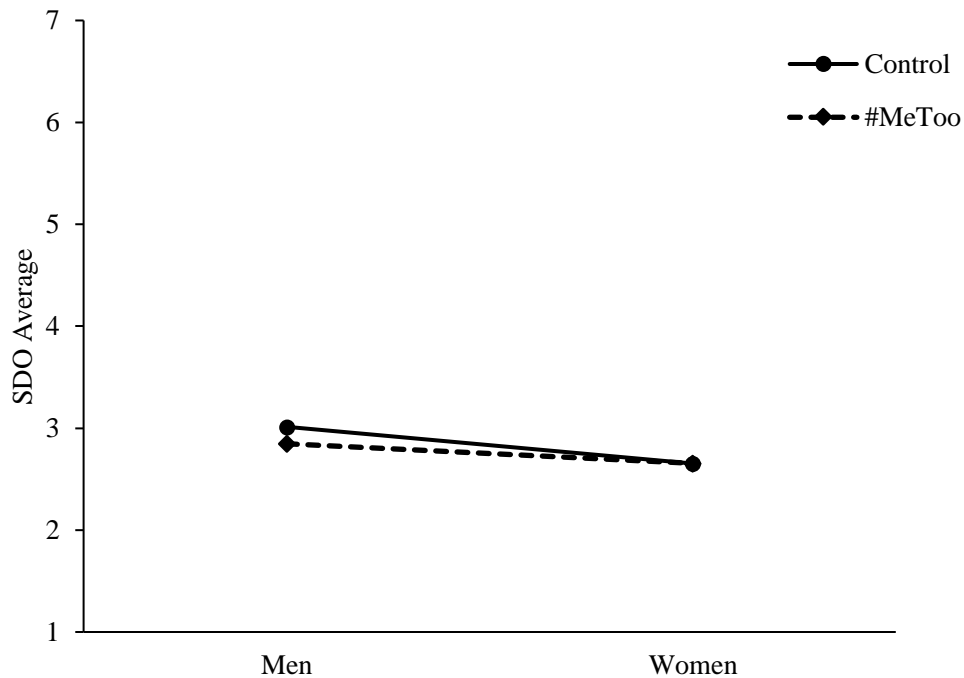


Figure 2. SDO₇ scores by gender of participants who read control articles vs participants who read #MeToo articles.

Discussion

Our hypothesis that men's Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) scores would increase following threat priming with the #MeToo Movement was not supported by the data. Outgroup threat, measured with the Hostile Sexism Subscale (HSS), was not increased in men who read about the #MeToo Movement. Men who read about the #MeToo Movement did not have higher SDO scores than other men or women. Overall, men did not have higher average HSS and SDO scores than women, which is not consistent with previous research (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Sidanius & Pratto, 1994).

The results of this study should be considered inconclusive due to a small and nonrepresentative sample. Our analysis was highly statistically underpowered, and the results of preliminary tests were not consistent with past studies on SDO. These inconsistent and underpowered analyses are most likely due to the limitations we had in the study.

Our biggest limitations were the extremely small number of male participants and the uneven distribution of male participants among conditions. We did not have enough men to accurately test the hypothesis. Additionally, participants were not evenly distributed into conditions by gender; only two male participants were assigned to the control condition in the pilot study. There was a condition assignment error in the study design that was eventually rectified, but not in time to balance the frequency of participants in each condition. Furthermore, the vast majority of participants were female undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses, preventing our sample from being representative of a community population. After the pilot study, we decided to try to improve the diversity of our sample by changing our recruitment method; we were

going to move beyond the SONA system and recruit participants from other areas of Georgia Southern. However, we were prevented from using the new recruitment method because of the university closure due to COVID-19. The university closure also caused time constraints that compelled us to begin data collection for Study B before the construct validation in Study A was completed.

Despite the limitations of the current study, this area of research has enormous potential. Future research should continue to investigate the relationship between Social Dominance Orientation and real-world events such as the #MeToo Movement. The current studies' strengths were apparent in the simple and effective method of exposing participants to the #MeToo Movement through reading simplified news articles, and future studies should build upon that method. Changes to our methodology that would increase statistical power are as follows: 1) recruiting participants from a community sample, raising the likelihood of a balanced number of men and women with a variety of social attitudes, and 2) separating participants by gender first and then randomly assign them into conditions to ensure an appropriate number of men and women in each condition. Future research should also verify the construct validity of the #MeToo Movement as an outgroup threat to men before studying its effects on SDO.

The necessity of future research in this area has become more apparent in the midst of the changing workplace climate due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As of April 2020, the United States has seen the largest unemployment rate since the Great Depression (Long, 2020). A social situation such as this may influence how men perceive the #MeToo Movement. Many men are worried about their job security, and they may find it easier to identify with the men who lost their jobs because of the #MeToo

Movement. Stronger group identity can lead to a stronger response to outgroup threat (Yuri & Yokota, 2009). If a man concerned about losing his job due to COVID-19 perceives the #MeToo Movement as a threat, it may have the potential to increase his SDO.

Again, further research on context-dependent Social Dominance Orientation is essential for understanding how cultural events like the #MeToo Movement can change people's social attitudes. Although no conclusions can be made from the data collected in the current study, this novel research design has the potential to carve a path for future research that may show how our reactions to social situations such as the #MeToo Movement can affect our personality tendencies and our attitudes towards social hierarchies.

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