

**THE EFFECTS OF AUTHORITARIANISM AND SOCIAL DOMINANCE  
UPON AMERICAN STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD ATTACKING IRAQ**

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**RESUMEN**

Se parte de la teoría del proceso dual de Duckitt (2001, 2002) como un esquema conceptual para analizar los efectos del autoritarismo y la dominancia social en el apoyo al ataque americano y británico en el 2003 en Irak. Estos efectos se analizaron en la semana previa al ataque. El autoritarismo y la dominancia social intensificaron el apoyo al ataque aumentando un patriotismo ciego (es decir, acrítico). Siguiendo la teoría de Duckitt, también contribuyeron por separado de forma específica: el autoritarismo reforzó el apoyo al resaltar la percepción de que América estaba amenazada por Saddam Hussein. La dominancia social aumentó el apoyo reduciendo la preocupación por el coste humano de la guerra. El patriotismo ciego reafirmó también la creencia de que Irak era una amenaza y redujo la preocupación por el coste humano de la guerra.

**ABSTRACT**

In the week before the 2003 American and British attack upon Iraq, the effects of authoritarianism and social dominance upon support for the attack were examined using Duckitt's (2001, 2002) dual process theory as a framework. Both authoritarianism and social dominance intensified support for the attack by increasing blind (i.e., uncritical) patriotism, and, in keeping with Duckitt's theory, each contributed to support in a unique way as well: Authoritarianism strengthened support for the attack by intensifying the perception that Iraq, under Saddam Hussein, threatened America. Social dominance increased support by reducing concern for the human costs of the war. Blind patriotism also strengthened belief that Iraq posed a threat and reduced concern for the war's human costs.

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**Key words:** authoritarianism, social dominance, patriotism, war

It must be perplexing to Europeans that American public opinion strongly supported the attack upon Iraq. But public polls from before the war (launched on March 20, 2003) through May 2003 consistently found that more than 70% of Americans supported the war and fewer than 30% opposed it. Even the majority of Democrats, self-rated liberals, and women—groups who generally oppose President Bush's domestic policies—supported the war. Support stayed near that level until June, when polls began to show that more Americans were starting to doubt the benefits of

the war. The Bush administration's distortions of intelligence, the failure to find Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (which was the administration's strongest argument for the attack), and the almost daily losses of American servicemen all contributed to these growing doubts (The Century Foundation, 2003). By late June, public support for the war had slipped to 56% believing the war was justified with 42% opposed (The Gallup Organization, 2003).

Those who strongly supported the attack seemed swayed by the Bush administration's insistence that Iraq threatened the United States by possessing weapons of mass destruction and by supporting the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks upon the World Trade Center. When the war seemed inevitable, calls for uncritical patriotic support (often expressed as support for *the troops*) grew rapidly. As the American music group Dixie Chicks painfully discovered, those who publicly criticized President Bush over his plans for the war were literally hated. The Dixie Chicks's CDs were destroyed, hundreds of radio stations banned their music, and the group received death threats. Apart from a small number of human rights advocates, Saddam Hussein's genocide of the Kurds, aggression against Kuwait, and mass killings of Shiites were not major factors in the minds of most of Americans leading to support for the war. President Bush occasionally mentioned Saddam's cruelty to *his own people*, but only to further convince the American public that he was the kind of tyrant who would support terrorism against America.

Some Americans did oppose the war, of course. The opposition tried to emphasize doubts about the existence of weapons of mass destruction and about Iraqi links with Al Qaeda, and it tried to raise concern about the likely human costs of the war. The war would produce an uncertain number of American deaths, but it was clear that thousands of Iraqi military and many Iraqi civilians would die. War opponents argued, albeit with little effect, that a strong U. N. inspection program could well disarm the Iraqi regime without the high death toll and destruction that a war seemed certain to produce.

But prowar and antiwar attitudes often express our personal dispositions as well as realistic concerns. In this connection, authoritarianism and the social dominance orientation, two constructs labeled as the *lethal union* (Altemeyer, 1998), seemed particularly likely to influence attitudes toward the approaching war<sup>1</sup>. These two constructs correlate with one another only modestly in America, but both strongly enhance ethnocentrism-related attitudes (McFarland & Adelson, 1996; Altemeyer, 1998). Earlier studies have found that both influence attitudes toward particular wars and toward when

war is justified. Authoritarianism strongly predicted support for the 1990 Gulf War, both prior to and after that war (Doty, Winter, Peterson, & Kimmelmeier, 1997). Those high in authoritarianism were most likely to engage in pro-Gulf War activism, while those low in authoritarianism were most likely to be antiwar activists (Duncan and Stewart, 1995). Among German students, authoritarianism increased support for NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia (Cohrs & Moschner, 2002). Social dominance also substantially enhanced support for American actions in the Gulf War. When asked abstractly, social dominance also intensifies support in general for wars that promote national interests and dominance, but weakens support for wars with humanitarian goals such as ending genocide or protecting human rights (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994).

How might these two members of the lethal union influence support for the immanent attack upon Iraq in March 2003? While previous studies have shown that both increase war-mindedness, these studies did not differentiate the ways that they do so. In Duckitt's (2001) dual-process analysis, authoritarianism and social dominance have quasi-independent roots and dynamics, and this dual-process model appeared relevant. In this analysis, authoritarianism begins with harsh and punitive child rearing, which begets a heightened sense that the world is threatening. This sense of threat in turn induces authoritarianism and remains associated with it. While a number of studies have found that increased threat induces greater authoritarianism (e.g., Doty, Peterson, & Winter, 1991; Duckitt & Fisher, 2003; Rickert, 1998; Sales, 1973), Schatz, Staub, and Levine (1999) found that authoritarianism intensifies the perception of threat, strengthening the belief that America lives under threat from foreign aggressors. This analysis suggests that authoritarianism would engender support for the war by intensifying the belief that Saddam's Iraqi regime posed a strong threat to the United States (by possessing weapons of mass destruction and by aiding Al Qaeda terrorists).

In Duckitt's (2001) model, the social dominance orientation is created by an absence of childhood affection. This absence engenders a lack of empathy, cold-heartedness, and striving for superiority. These serve as the source and remain as permanent correlates of social dominance. Previous studies have often found that social dominance correlates negatively with dispositional empathy (e.g., Pratto, et al., 1994). Because social dominance is associated with callousness toward others' suffering rather than with feelings of threat, it should reduce concern about the suffering that the war might cause, the innocent lives that the war might end—particularly so because most of this suffering would be borne by non-Americans. This low-

ered concern for human suffering should in turn increase support for the war.

Previous research indicates that both authoritarianism and social dominance should also influence support for the war by strengthening blind patriotism. *Blind* patriotism is “an attachment to country characterized by unquestioning positive evaluation, staunch allegiance, and intolerance of criticism” (Schatz, et al., 1999, p. 151). Schatz et al. found that authoritarianism predicted blind patriotism, and Duckitt (2002) found that both authoritarianism and social dominance correlated with Kosterman’s and Feshbach’s (1989) measure of nationalism, a measure quite similar in content to blind patriotism measures. In turn, because blind patriotism means that one follows one’s country without criticism, it seemed likely to lead directly to greater war support.

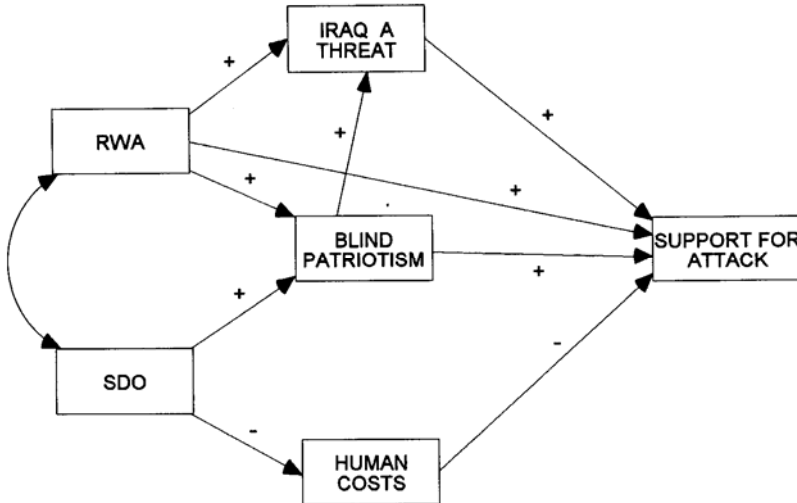
Authoritarianism was also expected to directly enhance support for the attack beyond its influences upon perceived threat and blind patriotism. Authoritarian aggression, a desire to punish *evildoers* and enemies of the established authority, has long been regarded as a central feature of authoritarianism (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Altemeyer, 1988). Previous studies have found that authoritarianism intensifies punitiveness toward many socially sanctioned targets (e.g., Carroll, Perkowski, Lurigio, & Weaver, 1987; Peterson, Doty, & Winter, 1993). For that reason, authoritarianism seemed likely to strengthen support for attacking Iraq beyond its intensifying of feelings of threat.

One other path was hypothesized. Schatz, et al. also hypothesized and found that blind patriotism was correlated,  $r = .52$ , with a heightened sense of threat to the nation, or “national vulnerability . . . manifested in heightened distrust of foreign nations and exaggerated vigilance and preparedness” (p. 155). Following Schatz et al., blind patriotism was also expected to strengthen the perception that Iraq posed a threat to America.

These characteristics of authoritarianism, social dominance, and blind patriotism indicate the structural model presented in Figure 1. Because authoritarianism and social dominance are dispositions that predate attitudes toward the war, they were posited as the exogenous variables. Because of its characteristics described above, authoritarianism was predicted to strengthen support for the war indirectly through intensifying the perception that Iraq posed a threat and through blind patriotism, and directly as an expression of authoritarian aggression. Social dominance was expected to indirectly bolster support for the attack by reducing concern for the war’s human costs and by increasing blind patriotism. Blind patriotism was hy-

pothesized to both lead directly to support for the war and indirectly by intensifying the perception that Iraq was a threat.

Figure 1. Hypothesized Model of Support for Attacking Iraq



## Method

In the week immediately preceding the March 20, 2003 attack upon Iraq, 371 American students (238 females and 128 males, with 5 not recording gender) at an upper south university completed a questionnaire that assessed their perceptions of Iraq as a threat to America, their worries about the human costs of the war, and their support for that attack. Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) was assessed by Altemeyer's (1998) scale, the social dominance orientation by the SDO<sub>6</sub> (SDO, Sidanius and Pratto, 1999), and blind patriotism with McFarland and Adelson's (1996) balanced 10-item measure (e.g., "I'm for my country, right or wrong."). This scale is virtually identical in content to the blind patriotism scale written by Schatz, et al. (1999). RWA, SDO, and blind patriotism were assessed before the attitudes toward Iraq<sup>2</sup>.

Four questions assessed the students' perception that Iraq posed a threat, with two on the threat posed by Saddam's weapons of mass destruction and two on Saddam's aiding the Al Qaeda attack upon America. One question in each domain was positively worded (e.g., "It is clear that Saddam Hussein is a threat to America with weapons of mass destruction, etc.") and one was negatively worded (e.g., "There is no proof that Saddam

Hussein aided Al Qaeda in attacking America.”). Worry about the war’s human costs was measured by two statements, one positively worded (“I fear very much that a war with Iraq will kill thousands of innocent people.”) and one negatively worded (“Innocent lives are lost in any war, but that is a necessary cost of getting rid of Saddam Hussein.”). Four statements, two positively worded (e.g., “President Bush is right in planning to start the war against Saddam Hussein *very soon!*”) and two negatively worded (e.g., “President Bush is rushing the U. S. into war with Iraq much too fast.”) were used to assess support for the attack.

## Results

Alphas for the RWA, SDO, and blind patriotism scales were all between .75 and .86. The 4-item scale assessing Iraq as a threat had an alpha of .77; that for the 4-item scale measuring support for the attack was .87. The two items assessing human costs correlated .30 (with the negatively worded item reverse scored) for the two samples and were summed as the index of that measure. Table 1 presents the correlations for all measures.

The sample strongly mirrored the attitudes of the American public in that about 70% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that Saddam Hussein threatened America, while about 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed. However, the participants were more cautious than the general public in supporting the attack upon Iraq. This sample was almost equally divided in thirds: those who supported an immediate attack, those who believed the attack was being rushed, and those who were *undecided*.

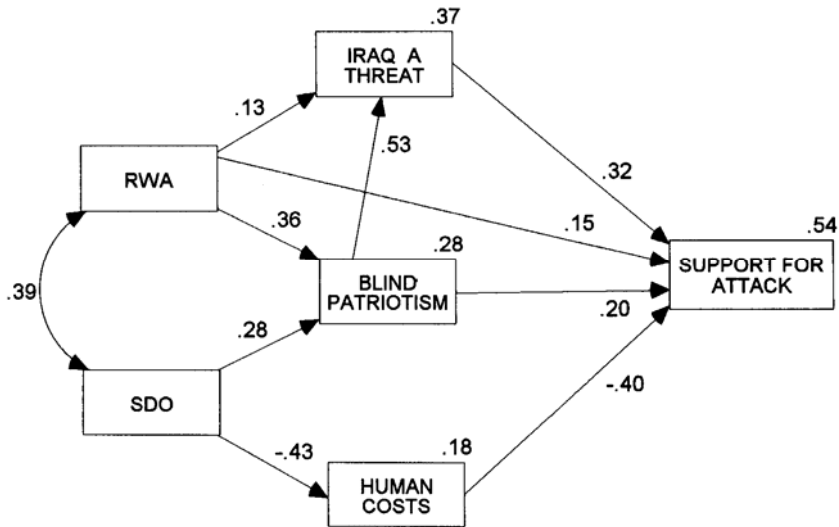
Table 1. *Correlations of Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), Blind Patriotism, Perceptions of Iraq as a Threat, Concern about Human Costs, and Support for Attacking Iraq in the Days Immediately Preceding the Attack on March 20, 2003.*

	RWA	SDO	Patriot	Threa	Costs	Attack
RWA	1.0					
SDO	.39	1.0				
Patriotism	.47	.42	1.0			
Iraq a Threat	.38	.27	.60	1.0		
Human Costs	-.31	-.43	-.46	-.29	1.0	
Support attack	.46	.37	.61	.58	-.58	1.0

Note: All correlations are significant at  $p < .01$  or higher.

The test of the model is presented in Figure 2. All hypothesized paths were highly significant. Authoritarianism strengthened both blind patriotism and the belief that Iraq posed a threat. Authoritarianism also directly enhanced support for attacking Iraq beyond its impact upon threat and patriotism. Social dominance increased blind patriotism and reduced concern about the human costs of the war, and these, in turn, bolstered support for the war. Blind patriotism also boosted belief that Iraq posed a threat. Authoritarianism, the sense of threat, blind patriotism, and a lack of concern for the human toll of the war all directly contributed to support for the attack.

Figure 2. Test of Model of Support for Attacking Iraq



Standardized regression weights are presented as the path coefficients and squared multiple correlations are presented for the endogenous variables. Chi Square (5, N = 371) = 48.3, p = .00; REMSA = .153; CFI = .99; Hoelter = 115, p < .01. Numbers at the top right of the endogenous and dependent variables represent the total proportion of variance explained by the paths leading to each variable.

Nevertheless, the goodness-of-fit indices (presented with Figure 2) were not good, indicating that the model was either poorly constructed or incomplete. Exploratory paths from SDO to perceiving Iraq as a threat and from RWA to concern for the human costs of the war did not approach significance. If either had been significant, the hypotheses about the unique ways that authoritarianism and social dominance influenced attitudes to-

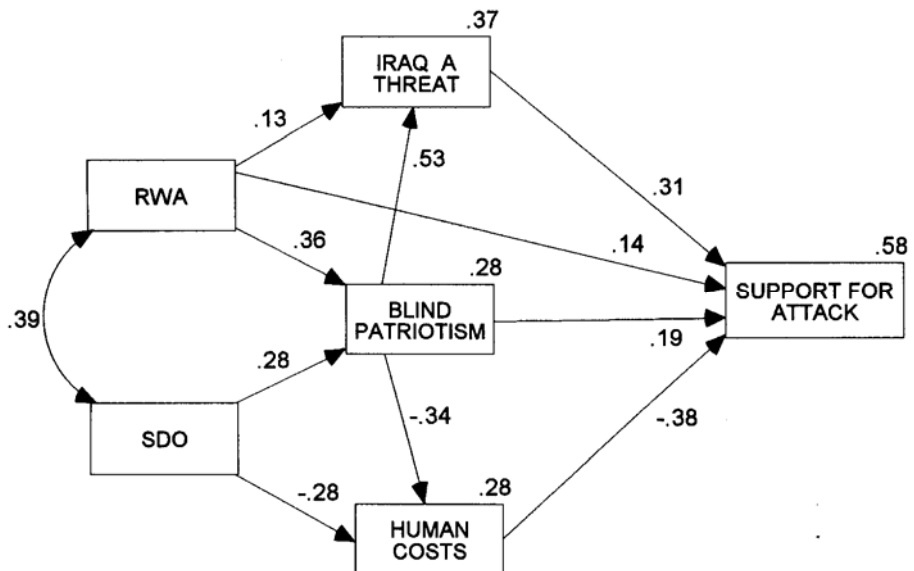
ward the attack would have been disconfirmed. Also, SDO did not directly lead to support for attacking Iraq; its impact upon support for the war was fully mediated through blind patriotism and reduced concern for the human costs of the war.

In retrospect, because the human costs of the war seemed destined to be borne primarily by non-Americans, blind patriotism might well reduce concern for these human costs. Figure 3 presents the test of the model with this added path. The goodness-of-fit tests all indicate that the data fit this revised model superbly.

This added path was not considered until the initial model was found incomplete.

The wisdom of post-hoc model modification has been widely discussed (e.g., Byrne, 2001). Byrne concludes that, barring replication, it is vital to recognize the tentativeness of such revised models. Nevertheless, the added path created such an excellent fit that it seems highly unlikely that a replication could have disconfirmed it.

Figure 3. Final model of support for attacking Iraq.



Chi Square (4, N = 371) = .873, p = .87; REMSA = .000; CF = 1.00; Hoelter = 3992, p < .01.



## **Discussion**

In conducting the study, this author did not intend to argue for or against the merits of the attack upon Iraq, and it is hoped that readers will not use these results as an antiwar argument. Because authoritarianism and social dominance are associated with many ethnocentric and anti-humane attitudes, they are viewed as negative dispositions by most psychologists. Nevertheless, their intensification of support for the attack does not necessarily mean that the attack was wrong. Many psychological dispositions may influence preferences concerning political and military options, but their influence upon these preferences does not in itself make the options right or wrong, wise or unwise.

The first purpose for this study was to see if authoritarianism and social dominance led to greater support for the recent attack upon Iraq, just as they previously strengthened support for the 1990 Gulf War. Given that they did so, a second purpose was to test whether authoritarianism and social dominance influenced support for the attack in the unique ways that Duckitt's (2001, 2002) theory suggests. Confirming the first purpose, both did increase support for the attack upon Iraq. They did so partially through the common path of strengthening blind patriotism. But confirming the hypotheses derived from Duckitt, their influences upon support for the attack were also different. Authoritarianism did so by strengthening the perception that Iraq posed a threat to the United States through its possession of weapons of mass destruction and through its support for Al Qaeda's attacks upon America, but social dominance did not affect support in this way. Social dominance bolstered support for the war by reducing concern for its likely human costs—the loss of innocent lives— but authoritarianism did not.

In short, the results support Duckitt's analysis that high authoritarians are especially prone to perceive the world as threatening; here, authoritarianism increased the belief that Saddam posed a threat to America. And in keeping with Duckitt's analysis that the social dominance orientation is grounded in callousness and a lack of empathy, social dominance enhanced support for the attack by reducing concern for its costs in innocent lives. In keeping with Altemeyer's (1988) analysis, authoritarian aggression reflects a desire to aggress against evil-doers, and authoritarianism here directly influenced support for aggression against Iraq.

These results also enlarge our knowledge of the effects of blind patriotism. Earlier studies had found that blind patriotism is associated with a sense that the world is threatening, and it is not surprising that blind patrio-

tism led to support for the war. However, the fact that blind patriotism increased callousness toward the human suffering the war would produce was not anticipated. It would seem that, to blind patriots, the suffering of non-citizens is not a consequence to be weighed in considering whether or not to go to war. This effect has not been shown previously.

Might the data fit an alternate model as well as the one tested here? While that was possible, logic appeared to dictate the sequencing and direction of effects proposed by this model. Because authoritarianism and social dominance reflect prestanding personal dispositions held by the participants before the issue of an attack upon Iraq emerged, they needed to be treated as exogenous variables. Because support for the war was the dependent measure of interest, it was essential to structure the model with it as the dependent variable. It is conceivable, of course, that those who wanted to attack Iraq emphasized the threat posed by Iraq and de-emphasized the human costs retroactively to justify the attack. Critics often charged that the Bush administration had unspoken reasons for the attack and was doing just that. But it is unlikely that the students used in this study had such unspoken motives and that they exaggerated the threat and diminished their concern for human costs to rationalize their support for the attack. In all likelihood, their support for the attack was actually based upon their belief that Iraq posed a threat, limited concern for the innocent lives that would be lost, and blind patriotic loyalty, the reasons assumed by this model. However, to test this alternate rationalization interpretation, a model was tested with the paths running from support for the war to perception of Iraq as a threat and from support for the attack to concern for human costs. Goodness-of-fit indices to this alternate model were poor, Chi Square (4,  $N = 371$ ) = 14.7,  $p = .00$ ; REMSA = .085; CFI = .986 Hoelter = 335,  $p < .01$ . And, in truth, the goodness-of-fit to the hypothesized model –with the added path– was so strong that it seems highly unlikely that an alternative model could be constructed that would fit the data as well.

Authoritarianism and social dominance were not as powerful correlates of support for the attack as were the more proximate predictors, but their joint effects upon support for the attack were nonetheless substantial. The multiple correlation of authoritarianism and social dominance with support for the attack was .51; this multiple correlation became .60 when corrected for unreliability. Their effects upon support for the war do not logically mean that the war was unjustified, but it is nonetheless clear that these two dispositions predispose individuals who hold them to support war, and that they do so for both distinct and overlapping reasons.

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Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>The issue of whether authoritarianism should be regarded as a personality trait or as a broad social ideological perspective is ongoing (cf., Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Duckitt & Fisher, 2003; Martin, 2001) and not discussed here. Pratto, et al. (1994) defined the social dominance orientation as a “general attitudinal orientation.” Whatever their exact nature, however, their range of effects is very broad. Generations of research have now shown that both authoritarianism and social dominance predict innumerable social attitudes.

<sup>2</sup>All scales used in this study are available from the author.

Author Note: Portions of this study were presented at the annual scientific conference of the International Society of Political Psychology, Boston, MA, July 2003.

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