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Ideological Support for the Indian Caste System: Social Dominance Orientation, Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Karma

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Abstract

This paper extends the social dominance perspective to the Indian context by examining the role of belief in Karma (sanchita) in the justification of the Indian caste system. Using social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and the dual process model (Duckitt, 2001) as guiding theoretical frameworks, we tested four related hypotheses within a sample of 385 Indian university students. In particular we expected that social dominance orientation (SDO) and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) would both make relatively strong and independent contributions to participants' endorsement of Karma (H1), as well as their support for antiegalitarian social policies and conventions (H2). We also predicted that endorsement of Karma, itself, would be strongly related to support for these policies, net of the influence of SDO, RWA, as well as generalized prejudice (H3). Finally, and consistent with the notion that Karma functions as a legitimizing ideology, we hypothesized that it would at least partially mediate, net of generalized prejudice, the relationships between SDO and RWA, on the one hand, and antiegalitarian and conventional social policies, on the other (H4). Results of latent variable structural equation modeling provided support for all four hypotheses. The theoretical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: social dominance orientation, legitimizing ideologies, Karma, right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance theory, dual-process model

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Group-based social hierarchy is a universal feature of modern human societies. Though the degree of inequality varies across societies (Sala-i-Martin, 2002), resources in each are generally distributed on the basis of group status such that power and positive social value (e.g., well-paying jobs, access to good healthcare) tend to be disproportionately allocated to members of dominant groups (Jackman, 1994; Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Maintenance of group-based hierarchy is not simply achieved through physical force and intimidation, but also through the use of relatively stable ideological beliefs that make inequality seem morally just and fair (e.g., Jackman, 1994; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Sidanius, 1993; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

In this paper, we empirically examine the role of one ideology, belief in Karma, in the justification of the Indian caste system. In doing so, we adopt both a social dominance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and dual-process (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Duckitt, Wagner, du Plessis, & Birum, 2002) approach. Below we outline the social dominance perspective on ideology and also briefly review relevant aspects of caste politics in India, prior to delineating and theoretically motivating our hypotheses.

Social Dominance Theory and Legitimizing Ideologies

Social dominance theory (SDT) offers a comprehensive perspective for understanding the mechanisms that sustain group-based hierarchies. It proposes that among the multifaceted and multileveled factors responsible for the production, maintenance and reproduction of social hierarchy are individual differences in the preference for group-based social dominance and inequality, or *social dominance orientation* (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Important for the present work, this basic orientation robustly predicts the use of *legitimizing ideologies*, or cultural beliefs and values consensually held by members of both dominant and subordinate groups (Pratto et al., 1994). SDT proposes that these myths may be hierarchy-enhancing (HE) or hierarchy-attenuating (HA) in nature. While HE beliefs provide moral and intellectual support for the maintenance of social hierarchies, HA beliefs challenge the legitimacy of group-based differences (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Because HE beliefs provide intellectual justification for systems of group-based dominance, they should be particularly attractive to those individuals who prefer these systems (i.e., individuals high in SDO). Indeed, within the United States' social context SDO has been found to be positively correlated with a number of HE ideologies, including various forms of racism (Pratto et al., 1994), sexism (Pratto et al., 1994), and homophobia (Whitley, 2001; Whitley & Aegisdottir, 2000). For example, by suggesting that Blacks are inferior to Whites, various forms of racism also make Blacks' subordinate status in society seem *fair*. Social dominance theorists have also shown that SDO is related to endorsement of HE-legitimizing myths in non-Western societies. For example, with participants from Taiwan, Israel and the People's Republic of China, Pratto et al. (2000) found, among other results, correlations between SDO and nationalistic beliefs and endorsement of traditional gender roles. Thus, while the contents of these myths may differ across cultural contexts, in each case they have been associated with group-based antiegalitarianism.

The Legitimation of Indian Caste-Based Hierarchy

Notably, although social dominance theorists have speculated about caste maintenance ideologies (see Pratto et al., 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1993), they have never before empirically demonstrated their existence (in India or elsewhere). This is the case despite the fact that the Indian caste system is perhaps the most formalized social hierarchy in the world (Dumont, 1966/1980). The present work represents an initial step in addressing this lacuna.

Indeed, the nature of the Indian caste system provides an ideal setting for the development of HE beliefs. This relatively complex social hierarchy has been remarkably stable over the millennia. Although it affords some opportunities for social mobility, the basic structure of the Indian caste system has remained largely intact since its inception approximately 3,000 years ago (Srinivas, 1966). The system is a graded hierarchy such that the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas (descendants of the religious, warrior/military, and mercantile elite, respectively), comprise high-status groups, while the "Untouchables" occupy the lowest rung of the social ladder (see Ambedkar, 1925/1989a, 1925/1989b; Pick & Dayaram, 2006). This latter caste received its name because its members were historically seen as impure and unclean (Dumont, 1966/1980; Shah, Mander, Thorat, Deshpande, & Baviskar,

2006; Srinivas, 2009). Although Untouchability was ruled unconstitutional in 1949, it still plays an important de facto social role in the stigmatization of subordinate groups (e.g., Gupta, 2005; Kumar, 2001; Pick & Dayaram, 2006).

Officially, former Untouchables are now considered members of the “Scheduled Castes (SCs)” and “Scheduled Tribes” (certain indigenous groups), designations that emerged from the Schedule to the Constitution in India. These groups qualify for aid, often in the form of affirmative action and government-provided job opportunities (Dreze & Khera, 2009; Gupta, 2005; Kumar, 2001; Sheth, 1987). Finally, the ‘Other Backward Castes’ (OBCs) occupy a middle position between high-caste groups and the SCs and STs. The OBCs have traditionally enjoyed more economic and political power than the SCs and STs, but are often still eligible for government support (Gupta, 2005; Varshney, 2000). It stands to reason that a society with a history of formalized social hierarchy should provide fertile ground for HE ideologies to flourish.

We propose that the Hindu conceptualization of Karma, also called *sanchita*, functions as a HE legitimizing ideology in Indian society, and should therefore be positively related to SDO.¹ Sanchita invokes a principle of causality to explain an individual's life circumstances, dictating that the degree of privilege a person enjoys in her present life directly derives from vestiges of her conduct in former lives (Dumont, 1966/1980; Kalghatgi, 1965; Potter, 1980; Reichenbach, 1988, 1989). Thus, broadly speaking, Karma may legitimize inequality by suggesting that the beneficiaries of positive social value (e.g., well-paying jobs, health care) are merely reaping rewards for good deeds in previous lives and, conversely, that recipients of negative social value (e.g., limited access to health care, unemployment) are justly paying for past wrongdoing.

Right-Wing Authoritarianism and the Dual Process Model

Inspired by the dual process model (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Duckitt et al., 2002), the present research also examines the relationship between right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and endorsement of Karmic beliefs. Like SDO, RWA is an individual difference variable developed to explain expressions of outgroup prejudice and discrimination. According to Altemeyer (1988), RWA is comprised of three, related subdimensions: authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism. These factors are thought to contribute to a general orientation emphasizing deference to authorities and hostility towards those who violate traditional societal norms (Altemeyer, 1988). Just as Karma may provide a conduit for individuals high in SDO to legitimize their preference for group-based inequality, it might also act as a mechanism for individuals high in RWA to justify their preference for the status quo and the conventional. Put another way, if an individual high in RWA prefers the existing and traditional social arrangement, he or she should also be likely to endorse beliefs that make that arrangement seem the product of supernatural will.

It is worthwhile to note that while RWA and SDO are often only modestly correlated (Altemeyer, 1998; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010), each is able to make relatively strong and independent contributions to the prediction of prejudicial attitudes and behaviors (Duckitt et al., 2002; Duckitt & Sibley, 2009b; Roccato & Ricolfi, 2005). In fact, the dual process approach explains these findings by proposing that RWA and SDO originate from different personality dispositions and worldviews. Whereas RWA is understood as stemming from the perception of the world as a dangerous place, and a “good versus evil” mentality, SDO derives from a competitive, “dog-eat-dog” worldview (Duckitt & Sibley, 2009a; Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007). Accordingly, RWA is thought to predict resistance to HA policies that jeopardize in-group homogeneity and the status quo, while SDO predicts opposition to policies that blur status boundaries between groups (e.g., Sidanius, Levin, Federico, & Pratto, 2001; Thomsen, Green, &

Sidanius, 2008). However, in practice, this means that RWA and SDO often explain the same attitudes and policy positions, as hierarchy *is* the status quo (for exceptions to these predictive patterns, see Henry, Sidanius, Levin, & Pratto, 2005; Thomsen et al., 2008). Indeed, we anticipate that RWA and SDO should both be positively and independently predictive of belief in Karma.

Karma and Hierarchy-Enhancing Policies

While we expect that both SDO and RWA will make positive and independent contributions to the prediction of Karma, we also expect that endorsement of Karmic beliefs will itself predict relevant sociopolitical constructs. In particular, we anticipate that these beliefs should be positively associated with support for a host of HE policies. As we have argued, if one believes that caste status in the present life is determined on the basis of deeds or misdeeds in past lives (Kalghatgi, 1965; Reichenbach, 1988, 1989), then one might also infer that current caste status is deserved and *legitimate*. Thus, efforts to reduce differences between caste groups should be seen as illegitimate. Indeed, research has consistently demonstrated an association between HE legitimizing ideologies and HE social policies in both Western (Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Pratto et al., 2006; Sidanius, Mitchell, Haley, & Navarrete, 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and non-Western contexts (Sibley, Liu, Duckitt, & Khan, 2008).

In the present work, we assessed the predictive relationship between Karmic beliefs and a number of HE social policies that are relevant to the Indian sociopolitical context. These include opposition to aid for low-caste groups, opposition to government intervention on behalf of these groups, and also opposition to the reservations policy (a form of affirmative action that relies on a quota system to ensure the representation of the SCs and STs in the public sector and education system). Additionally, we measure the relationship between Karmic beliefs and attitudes towards inter-caste marriage and dating. As caste endogamy reinforces the hierarchical status quo, opposition to inter-caste relationships is an important vehicle for maintaining group-based inequality in Indian society (Katti & Saroja, 1989) and other caste-like societies (e.g., Fang, Sidanius, & Pratto, 1998).

Karmic Beliefs as a Mediator of the Effects of SDO and RWA on Hierarchy Enhancing Policies

In addition to the expected relationships outlined above, a substantial body of literature suggests that both SDO and RWA have direct effects on hierarchy-enhancing policy outcomes (Altemeyer, 1988; Duckitt, 2006; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Because individuals high in SDO demonstrate a general preference for hierarchical social relations (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), they should oppose efforts to attenuate group-based differences in power and status. Individuals high in RWA, on the other hand, tend to exhibit deference to established authorities and a strong preference for the status quo and the conventional (Altemeyer, 1988, 1996). Thus, these individuals should be generally opposed to efforts to redistribute economic and political resources – that is, to alter the status quo.

In the context of the present work, we expect that Karmic beliefs will partially account for these relationships between SDO and RWA, on the one hand, and HE policy outcomes, on the other. That is, we expect that SDO and RWA will predict Karmic beliefs, and that Karmic beliefs will in turn predict endorsement of HE policies; in other words, that Karmic beliefs will (at least partially) *mediate* the effects of SDO and RWA on the policy variables. This prediction emphasizes our belief that Karmic beliefs function as a *conduit* by which antiegalitarians and right-wing authoritarians rationalize their support for policies that reify caste boundaries and the hierarchical status quo. That is, belief in Karma is one ideology that individuals high in SDO and individuals high in RWA recruit when

they rationalize differences between caste groups and traditional, hierarchical caste relations. This prediction also reflects the empirical definition of legitimizing ideologies as mediators of the relationship between SDO and support for HE policies (e.g., reduced aid to the poor, tax cuts for the wealthy; Pratto et al., 2006; Sidanius et al., 2001; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).ⁱⁱ

It should be noted that we expect that Karmic beliefs will function as a *unique* legitimizing ideology, mediating the effects of SDO and RWA on the policy variables, *net of* the mediating effects of other legitimizing ideologies. In particular, we expect that Karmic beliefs' effects should hold net of the mediating effects of generalized prejudice, which has long been shown to legitimize differences between high- and low- status groups (James, Brief, Dietz, & Cohen, 2001; Kinder & Sanders, 1990; Krysan, 2000; Pratto et al., 1994; Sears & Henry, 2003; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996). Rather than simply legitimizing inequality through its relationship with generalized prejudice, we expect that Karmic beliefs will provide a distinct mechanism for those high in SDO and RWA to justify their opposition to policies that attenuate inequality and violate conventional social norms and relations.

In making this prediction, we hope to couch the present work within the psychology of *legitimation*, or the processes by which group-based differences in life-outcome are made to seem fair, natural, and divinely willed (see Glick & Fiske, 2001; Jost & Major, 2001; Sidanius et al., 2001; Zelditch, 2001). That is, we attempt to show that Karmic beliefs not only predict, but also *justify* support for group-based differences.

Hypotheses

The reasoning above was distilled into four hypotheses. First, both SDO and RWA should be related to the endorsement of Karmic beliefs (H_1), and to HE policies (H_2). Karmic beliefs should also be strongly related to endorsement of HE policies, *over and above* the direct effects of SDO, RWA, and prejudice (H_3). Finally, net of the mediating effects of prejudice, Karmic beliefs will function as a (partial) mediator between SDO and RWA, on the one hand, and support for the HE policies on the other hand (H_4).

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data used in the present work were part of a broader survey of 396 students at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi. This survey was an adaptation of a large-scale survey employed in the United States, and many of the items used in the U.S. were adapted for use in the Indian sociopolitical context. Any new items were developed by the third and four authors, who are both experts in caste politics in India. The survey was administered in English, as English is the medium of instruction at the University. Respondents were undergraduate and graduate students at the University.

All non-Indian citizens were excluded from the analysis. This left a final sample of 385 participants (236 male, 149 female). The disproportionate number of males in the sample reflects the fact that there are more male than female students at the university. Of these 385 respondents, 62 percent of respondents identified as members of the middle class. Also relevant for the present work, 33.5% of respondents reported being members of low caste groups (defined here as the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes), 22.5% reported being members of middle

caste groups (the Other Backward Castes), and 28.1% reported being high caste group members (defined as the Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya castes). Approximately 16% of participants either declined to report their caste status or listed their status as “Other.” We provide frequencies for self-reported social class, caste group membership, and religious identification in [Tables A1, A2, and A3](#), respectively, in the Appendix.

Measures

Predicting Variables

Social Dominance Orientation — SDO was indexed by use of the balanced 16-item SDO6 Scale (see [Ho et al., 2012](#); [Pratto et al., 1994](#)). Examples of items include, “Some groups of people are just more worthy than others,” and “All groups should be given an equal chance in life” (reverse coded). Participants indicated their responses using a 7-point Likert scale, where “1” means “Strongly disagree/disapprove” and “7” means “Strongly agree/favor” ($\alpha = .80$).

Right-Wing Authoritarianism — We used 17 randomly selected and slightly abridged items from Altemeyer’s 34 item, 1996 right-wing authoritarian scale ([Altemeyer, 1996](#)). Examples of items include, “The established authorities generally turn out to be right about things, while the radicals and protestors are usually just ‘loud mouths’ showing off their ignorance,” “Women should have to promise to obey their husbands when they get married,” and “Atheists and others who have rebelled against the established religions are no doubt every bit as good and virtuous as those who attend religious ceremony regularly” (reverse-coded; $\alpha = .80$). Participants responded to these items using a 7-point scale, where “1” means “Strongly disagree” and “7” means “Strongly agree.”

Mediating Variables

Karmic Beliefs — Karmic Beliefs were operationalized by use of the following three items: 1) “My current caste group position reflects my actions or deeds in my past life,” 2) “If I do good deeds in my current life they will positively influence my caste status in my future life,” and 3) “The caste group position I was born into reflects the Karma of my past life.” Participants indicated their responses to these items using a 7-point Likert scale, where “1” means “strongly disagree” and “7” means “strongly agree.” The reliability of this scale was satisfactory ($\alpha = .76$).

Generalized Prejudice — Generalized Prejudice was measured via six items, 1) “SCs are less intellectually able than other groups,” 2) “SCs are less hard-working than other groups,” 3) “STs are less intellectually able than other groups,” 4) “STs are less hard-working than other groups,” 5) “OBCs are less intellectually able than other groups,” and 6) “OBCs are less hard-working than other groups” ($\alpha = .86$).

Criterion Variables

We examined the effects of the predictor and mediating variables on generalized support for HE policies and social conventions. To define this generalized HE construct, we measured support for five specific HE social policies, outlined below. The composite scores for these five variables were then used as manifest indicators of the latent HE construct. Participants responded to each of the items in these composites using a 7-point Likert scale, where “1” represents “strongly disagree” and “7” represents “strongly agree.”

1. Opposition to Reservations — was operationalized by use of the following three items: 1) “Reservations are necessary until SCs, STs, and OBCs achieve social and economic status similar to the forward castes” (reverse-

coded), 2) "Reservations should only be provided to those who score within 10% of the general cutoff marks in the entrance/selection exams," and 3) "Reservations are bad for the overall progress of our society and they have created a vested interest in backwardness among caste groups" (reverse-coded; $\alpha = .74$).

2. Antimiscegenation — was assessed by asking respondents' opposition to: 1) "Inter-caste marriage," and 2) "Inter-caste dating" ($\alpha = .83$).

3. Support for Caste Discrimination — was operationalized by a single item: "Higher castes have a right to exclude lower castes from their neighborhoods if they want to."

4. Reduced Aid to the Poor — was operationalized by use of three items concerning endorsement of government assistance to poor and low-status groups: 1) "Government provided health care" (reverse coded), 2) "Reduced public support for the slum-dwellers/homeless," and 3) "Reduced benefits for the unemployed" ($\alpha = .64$).

5. Opposition to Government Aid to Lower Castes — on behalf of low-caste groups was assessed through four items: 1) "Government has no business trying to ensure social integration in schools," 2) "Government has no business influencing individual choice by prohibiting caste-based matrimonial advertising in newspapers," 3) "Government should do what it can to improve the economic conditions of lower castes," (reverse-coded) and 4) "Government has no business trying to improve the economic condition of lower castes" ($\alpha = .51$).

6. Generalized Support for HE Policies — In order to examine the zero-order relationships between the predicting and mediating variables, on the one hand, and support for Generalized HE Policy, on the other, we also generated a Generalized HE composite variable, which was simply defined as the arithmetic average of the first five HE-policies above ($\alpha = .57$).

Results

The zero-order product-moment correlations between the predictor, mediating, and composite policy variables (as well as their descriptive statistics) are shown in [Table 1](#). The correlations between SDO and RWA, on the one hand, and, belief in Karma, on the other hand, were consistent with H_1 . Thus, the greater participants' SDO and RWA, the stronger their Belief in Karma.

Likewise, and consistent with H_2 , both SDO and RWA were positively and reliably related to all six of the criterion variables (i.e., HE social policies). The greater participants' level of SDO and RWA, the greater their: 1) Opposition to Reservations, 2) Support for Antimiscegenation, 3) Support for Caste Discrimination, 4) Support for Reduced Aid to the poor, 5) Opposition to Government Aid to Lower castes, and 6) Generalized HE-policy.

To more rigorously test the first two hypotheses, along with H_3 and H_4 , we used the program Mplus and Full Information Maximum Likelihood Estimation to analyze a latent variable structural equation model, in which Prejudice and Karmic Beliefs were modeled as mediators of the relationships between SDO and RWA, on the one hand, and support for Generalized HE Policy, on the other. In accounting for missing values, Full Information Maximum Likelihood estimation produces more reliable parameter estimates than listwise deletion (see [Enders & Bandalos](#),

2001). We allowed the residual variances of latent Karmic Beliefs and latent Prejudice to covary, reflecting the possibility that they might be related, beyond the common influences of SDO and RWA.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations Among the Raw Composite Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. SDO	2.41	.88									
2. RWA	3.51	.92	.45**								
3. Karma	2.46	1.69	.48**	.45**							
4. Generalized prejudice	2.30	1.34	.49**	.36**	.29**						
5. Opposition to Reservations	3.35	1.51	.23**	.32**	.12*	.39**					
6. Antimiscegenation	2.00	1.46	.34**	.29**	.32**	.30**	.16*				
7. Support for Caste Discrimination	2.17	2.09	.30**	.16*	.32**	.23**	-.01	.17*			
8. Reduced Aid to the Poor	2.41	1.41	.39**	.31**	.35**	.27**	.16*	.23**	.25**		
9. Opposition to government aid	2.89	1.28	.47**	.35**	.38**	.39**	.23**	.28**	.25**	.34**	
10. Generalized HE policies	2.56	.94	.56**	.46**	.49**	.51**	.49**	.59**	.65**	.63**	.65**

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$, two-tailed tests. Listwise deletion, $N = 344$.

Because of the large number of items defining the predicting variables, we used parcels of items as manifest indicators of latent SDO and RWA. Likewise, we used parceling to define the latent construct of Prejudice.ⁱⁱⁱ Latent Karmic Beliefs, on the other hand, were simply defined by the three manifest indicators described above. Finally, to define our criterion variable, we used the five composite policy variables as manifest indicators of a single latent construct, which we termed Generalized HE Policy. We ran this model, controlling for the effects of gender, formal education (in this case, year in schooling), and socioeconomic status.^{iv}

We used the single model described above to test our hypotheses.^v This SEM analysis provided more robust evidence for H_1 . That is, latent SDO and RWA were each able to make a strong, statistically reliable, and independent contributions to the prediction of latent Karmic Beliefs (see Figure 1). Not surprisingly, and consistent with a large body of research, SDO and RWA also made unique contributions to the prediction of Prejudice. Likewise, the SEM analyses also confirmed H_2 , in that SDO and RWA had total effects on Generalized HE Policy.

More critical for the present work, H_3 referred to the question of whether Karmic Beliefs were able to make significant contributions to the prediction of HE policy attitudes *over and above* what SDO, RWA, and generalized Prejudice could already jointly account for. Consistent with expectations, Table 2 shows this was the case. Karmic Beliefs made a strong *net* contribution to the prediction of the HE policy ($\beta_{21} = .33$, $p < .001$). In fact, together, SDO, RWA, Karmic Beliefs, and Prejudice were jointly able to account for 86% of the variance of Generalized HE Policy Support.

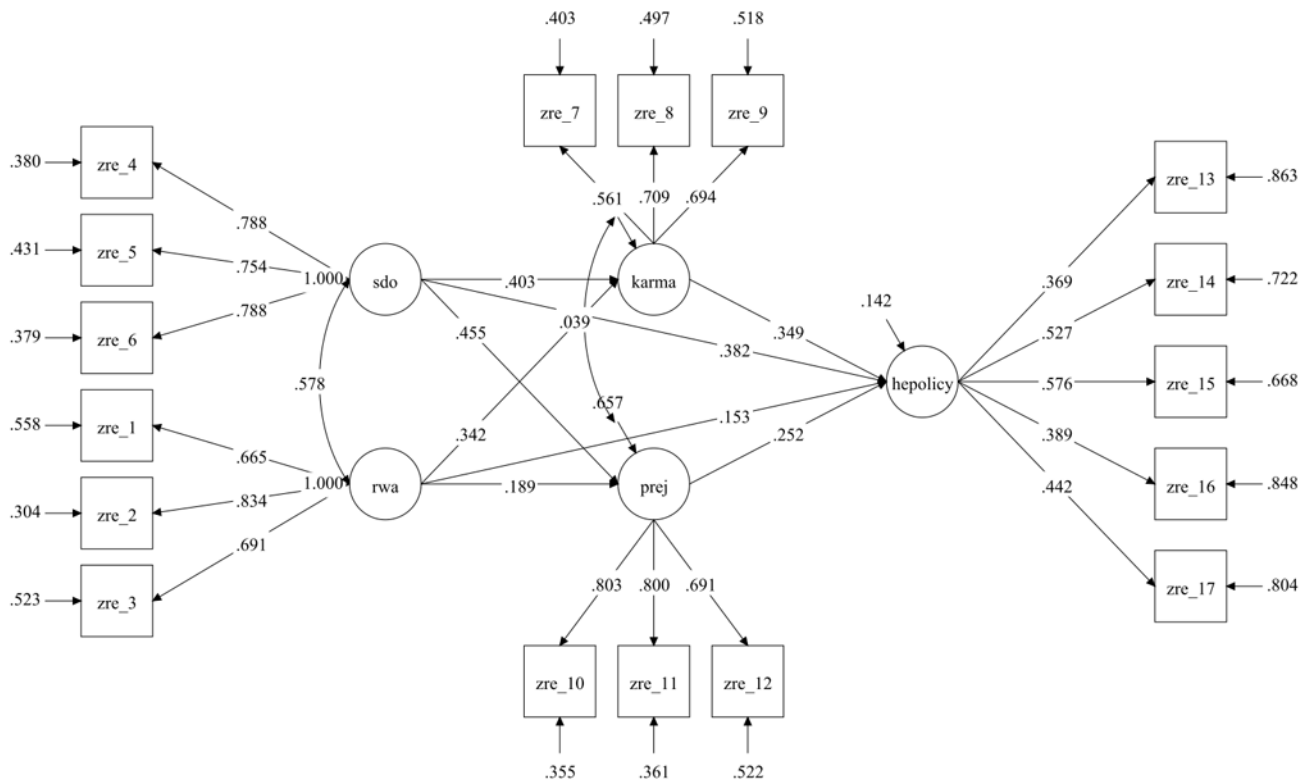


Figure 1. Generalized Hierarchy-Enhancing (HE) Policy Support as a Function of Latent Social Dominance Orientation (SDO), Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), Karmic Beliefs, and Generalized Prejudice (see text).

Note. All coefficients are standardized. Please note the following: zre_1, zre_2, and zre_3 refer to the manifest parcels used to define latent RWA; zre_4, zre_4, and zre_6 refer to the manifest parcels used to define latent SDO; zre_7, zre_8, and zre_9 refer to the manifest items used to define latent Karmic Beliefs; zre_10, zre_11, and zre_12 refer to the manifest items used to define latent Prejudice; zre_13, zre_14, zre_15, zre_16, and zre_17 refer to the composite variables used to define latent HE Policy; specifically, zre_13 refers to Opposition to Reservations, zre_14 refers to Reduced Aid to the Poor, zre_15 refers to Opposition to Government Aid, zre_16 refers to Support for Caste Discrimination, and zre_17 refers to Antimiscegenation.

Finally, we examined H_4 , positing that Karmic Beliefs would not only make independent contributions to attitudes supporting Generalized HE Policy, but also serve as a mediator between SDO and RWA, on the one hand, and Generalized HE Policy, on the other (see Table 2). Importantly, we expected that Karmic Beliefs should mediate these relationships, over and above the mediating effects of Prejudice. In order to address this question, we bootstrapped estimates of the mediated effects of latent SDO and RWA on Generalized HE Policy via latent Karmic Beliefs and latent Prejudice using Mplus and employing 1000 bootstrap samples.

The results of these analyses are found in Table 2. H_4 was also confirmed. Karmic Beliefs significantly mediated effects of SDO and RWA on Generalized HE Policy. Karmic Beliefs mediated these relationships net of the mediating role of Prejudice. Together, Karmic Beliefs and Prejudice fully mediated the effects of RWA, and partially mediated the effects of SDO, on Generalized HE Policy.^{vi vii}

Table 2

Model Fit Indices and Structural Equation Coefficients

		<i>p</i>
Chi-square (df)	203.92 (109)	<.001
RMSEA	.05	
CFI	.96	
R² for HE Policy	.86	
Direct effects		
SDO on Karma	.40	<.001
RWA on Karma	.34	<.001
SDO on Prejudice	.46	<.001
RWA on Prejudice	.19	.015
SDO on HE Policy	.38	<.001
RWA on HE Policy	.15	.140
Karma on HE Policy	.35	.004
Prejudice on HE Policy	.25	.012
Indirect effects on HE Policy		
SDO through Karma	.14	.010
RWA through Karma	.12	.017
SDO through Prejudice	.12	.004
RWA through Prejudice	.05	.065
Total effects on HE Policy		
SDO	.64	<.001
RWA	.32	<.001

Note. *N* = 385. All coefficients are standardized. Two-tailed tests.

Discussion

Although social dominance theorists have long speculated about the ideological justification of the Indian caste system (Pratto et al., 2006; Sidanius & Pratto, 1993), to date there has been no empirical work actually addressing this issue of which we are aware. The present study begins to fill this void, having found evidence for each of four hypotheses. First, and congruent with the expectations of social dominance theory and the dual process model, we demonstrated that both SDO and RWA exerted significant, positive and powerful effects on endorsement of Karma, or the belief that the degree of privilege a person enjoys in her present life directly derives from vestiges of her conduct in former lives (Dumont, 1966/1980; Kalghatgi, 1965; Potter, 1980; Reichenbach, 1988, 1989). We argue that this reflects the fundamental compatibility between the desire for antiegalitarian and conventional social relations, on the one hand, and an ideology that makes hierarchical social arrangements seem morally justified and even divinely inspired, on the other. Likewise, consistent with a large body of research (Altemeyer, 1988; Duckitt, 2006; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). SDO and RWA also predicted generalized HE social policy, which works to bolster antiegalitarianism and conventionalism.

Consistent with the third hypothesis, our results showed that Karmic beliefs were also directly related to support for generalized HE policy. The data in this study showed that Karmic beliefs exerted effects on the endorsement

of generalized HE policy *net* of the significant effects of SDO, RWA, and prejudice. That is, despite the fact that SDO, RWA, and prejudice have long been shown to account for a substantial portion of the variability in HE attitudes and social policies with group distributional social implications (see [Altemeyer, 1988](#); [McFarland, 2010](#); [McFarland & Adelson, 1996](#); [Pratto et al., 1994](#); [Sidanius & Pratto, 1999](#)), Karmic beliefs were still able to uniquely explain support for this construct. Our results are notable because they suggest that abstract beliefs about the supernatural origins of caste-based hierarchy have real implications for efforts to attenuate caste differences.

That Karmic beliefs were predicted by both SDO and RWA, and in turn, predicted support for generalized HE policy, suggests that they are consistent with the desire to maintain hierarchical social relations (see [Pratto et al., 1994](#); [Sidanius & Pratto, 1999](#)). Additionally, however, we found evidence that belief in Karma functioned as a HE ideology, in the classical sense of the term. By this we mean that, controlling for the mediating effects of prejudice, belief in Karma mediated the relationships between SDO and RWA, on the one hand, and endorsement of generalized HE policy, on the other. That Karmic beliefs mediated these relationships on their own, and not simply due to their relationship with prejudice, is notable. It suggests that Karmic beliefs provided a unique mechanism for those possessing stable, pre-existing preferences for the conventional and unequal to legitimize their opposition to policies that would counter these preferences.

It is also noteworthy that the effect sizes we found for Karmic beliefs are consistent with previous effect sizes for other legitimizing ideologies (see [Sidanius et al., 2001](#)), and also approximately equivalent to those of prejudice (if not slightly larger than prejudice, in the case of RWA). This is significant in that it suggests that Karmic beliefs legitimize caste-based inequality to the same extent as does generalized prejudice, a quintessential and often cited example of a legitimizing ideology (see [James et al., 2001](#); [Kinder & Sanders, 1990](#); [Krysan, 2000](#); [Pratto et al., 1994](#); [Sears & Henry, 2003](#); [Sidanius & Pratto, 1999](#); [Sidanius et al., 1996](#)).

To the best of our knowledge, the present work also presents initial empirical evidence for the legitimation of the caste system in general. That is, not only is this the first evidence that Karmic beliefs may legitimize caste-based inequality, but it is also the first time *any* ideology has been shown to function in such a manner in India (indeed, although it was essentially included in the model as a control variable, the present work also provides the first empirical evidence that prejudice legitimizes the caste system in the same way it has been shown to legitimize inequality in Western contexts). Given the longevity of the caste system, the fact that these considerations have never before been addressed with data-driven approaches presents a lacuna for social inequality research (please note, however, that candidate caste maintenance ideologies, for example, Just-World Beliefs, have been suggested; see [Furnham & Rajamanickam, 1992](#); [Mahar, 1958](#); [Sidanius & Pratto, 1999](#)). The present paper marks an initial step forward in filling this broader void.

To this end, the results also have some practical implications. Efforts to attenuate inequality might benefit from increasing awareness about the psychology of legitimacy, and in particular, the ways in which legitimizing ideologies cause inequality to seem fair, natural, and, as the present work suggests, divinely-willed ([Levin et al., 1998](#); [Pratto et al., 1994](#); [Sidanius & Pratto, 1999](#); [Sidanius et al., 2001](#)). Just as it might not be immediately apparent how racism legitimizes race-based hierarchy in the U.S., it may not be immediately apparent how beliefs such as Karma contribute to the subjugation of lower-castes. In fact, by suggesting that Blacks are inferior to Whites, racism makes differences in life outcomes between Blacks and Whites seem fair. Likewise, by suggesting that caste status is determined by good or bad deeds in past lives, Karmic beliefs make caste-based differences seem legit-

imate. Raising awareness about these processes might help efforts to attenuate inequality, in that it would explain how inequity can actually come to be seen as equitable.

Our results are also consistent with Duckitt's dual-process theory (Duckitt, 2001, 2004; Duckitt & Sibley, 2009a, 2009b); both SDO and RWA had significant and independent net effects on belief in Karma and prejudice, as well as endorsement of generalized HE policy. The fact that RWA and SDO can explain unique and substantial portions of the variance of these constructs supports the notion that, although SDO and RWA are strongly correlated, they are in fact distinct orientations. Thus, the present work lends credence to the dual process account that these individual difference variables might indeed originate from different worldviews and can uniquely predict intergroup attitudes and behaviors (see Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt & Fisher, 2003; Duckitt & Sibley, 2010).

Limitations

Despite the theoretically coherent nature of our results, this work is not without its weaknesses. One of these weaknesses concerns the relatively low reliability of some of our manifest constructs (i.e., Opposition to Government Aid to Low Castes). On the other hand, the use of latent SEM helps allay some of these concerns due to the fact that this technique is designed to assess the relationship between "true scores" while controlling for the imperfect reliability of measurement.

However, there are also some concerns related to validity. Despite the fact that the sample we use in the present paper is unique, we acknowledge that it is certainly not representative of the Indian population. For example, by virtue of the fact that all participants were students at a university, the sample is disproportionately young and relatively high in socioeconomic status. Because of this, the demographic controls are potentially less useful than they might have been had the sample been more heterogeneous. The unrepresentativeness of the sample also raises the possibility that the results we report may not generalize to the broader Indian population.

Likewise, we examined the construct of Karma within the Indian context only, and we also only considered the Hindu conceptualization of Karma (known as *sanchita*). In fact, Karma refers to different belief systems in the Sikh, Jain, and Buddhist religions, and quite possibly has different social-political connotations within other Asian cultures. Moreover, since the present work is concerned with the legitimization of the caste system, we were especially interested in that aspect of Karmic beliefs that has to do with caste determination. We thus explicitly mention "caste" in our operationalization of Karmic beliefs. In doing so, however, it is possible that we artificially inflated the relationships between this construct and the criterion measures (which also often explicitly mention caste). While it is clear that our measures of Karmic beliefs and the criterion variables are not tautological, future work might nonetheless look at whether the present conclusions hold when there is no explicit mention of caste determination in the measure of belief in Karma. It is also important to note that the mean of Karmic beliefs was relatively low, raising potential concerns about restricted range of measurement. However, these concerns are somewhat allayed by the relatively large standard deviation seen for this construct (note also that plotting the distribution of scores revealed that this relatively large standard deviation was not driven by the presence of outliers at the high end of the scale).

It might be the case, however, that Karmic beliefs in general are characterized by a certain amount of empirical intractability, as it is inherently difficult to operationalize supernatural and abstract belief systems. While the measure employed in the present work is face valid, future research should better address its construct validity

(for example, it would be important to establish the discriminant validity of the measure employed in the present work versus other legitimizing ideologies).

In the same vein, it is important to acknowledge that legitimizing ideologies other than Karmic beliefs and prejudice might also mediate the relationships in question. Candidate ideologies in this regard include just-world beliefs, which commonly circulate in Western sociopolitical contexts and religions (for example, the Protestant Work Ethic might be considered a religious instantiation of the just-world phenomenon; [Furnham & Procter, 1989](#); [Hunt, 2000](#); [Lerner, 1980](#)), and might functionally mirror the effects of belief in Karma. Just as Karmic beliefs suggest that caste status is determined by deeds or misdeeds in one's past life (and is, therefore, *fair*; [Reichenbach, 1988, 1989](#)), just world beliefs suggest that life outcomes are the result of fair processes whereby people "get what they deserve" ([Lerner, 1980](#); [Furnham & Procter, 1989](#)). Indeed, [Furnham and Rajamanickam \(1992\)](#) demonstrated relatively strong endorsement of just-world beliefs amongst Indian participants, as compared to British participants. Likewise, Karmic beliefs are reminiscent of essentialism, which suggests that groups are imbued with "essences" that contribute to their unique and unalterable traits (in this case, caste status; [Chao, Chen, Roisman, & Hong, 2007](#); [Tadmor, Chao, Hong, & Polzer, 2013](#)). [Mahalingam \(2003\)](#) showed that Brahmins are significantly more likely to endorse essentialist ideologies relative to Dalits (members of Scheduled Castes).

Future work, then, might not only continue to identify legitimizing ideologies operating within other entrenched social hierarchies, but also examine the common features of these ideological beliefs across cultures. That is, it is important to begin to develop our understanding of the "anatomy" of legitimizing ideologies, or the core functional elements of these similar beliefs. In doing so, we might gain a better sense of their developmental trajectory (that is, how do new legitimizing ideologies form, take hold, and come to circulate within sociopolitical systems; see [Pratto et al., 2006](#)).

Conclusion

The present work provides initial evidence for the legitimation of the Indian caste system. We found evidence supporting four hypotheses: within the Indian sociopolitical context, SDO and RWA predicted both Belief in Karma (H1), and also Generalized HE Policy (H2). Moreover, net of SDO, RWA, and Prejudice, Belief in Karma also predicted Generalized HE Policy (H3). Finally, controlling for Prejudice, Belief in Karma mediated the relationships between SDO and RWA, on the one hand, and HE Policy, on the other (H4), suggesting that Belief in Karma acts as a legitimizing ideology. That is, belief in Karma appears to be one ideology individuals high in SDO and RWA recruit when they attempt to legitimize their HE policy positions.

Notes

i) Indeed, [Pratto et al. \(2006\)](#), and [Sidanius and Pratto \(1993\)](#) speculated that Karma functions as a HE legitimizing ideology. However, these works did not empirically test whether this is the case.

ii) Note that there might be additional, unmodeled mediating variables that link Belief in Karma with the HE policy variables. We would like to emphasize, however, that a critical argument of the paper is to show that belief in Karma functions as a legitimizing ideology. To this end, we argue that Karma is a belief that individuals high in SDO and RWA *recruit* when they attempt to legitimize their desire for hierarchical and conventional arrangements. That is, the desire for group-based dominance and conventionalism already exists in the individual, and they use Karmic beliefs to license their support for policies that bolster

systems of dominance and conventionalism. From this perspective, it is less crucial to identify the precise mechanism that accounts for the relationship between Karmic beliefs and the criterion variables.

iii) In modeling SDO, RWA, and prejudice, we constructed three relatively homogeneous parcels from the residualized 16-item SDO-6 scale, the residualized 17-item RWA scale, and the residualized 6-item prejudice scale, respectively (see Note iv). The items for each parcel were randomly selected. For a discussion of parceling see [Coffman and MacCallum \(2005\)](#) and [Matsunaga \(2008\)](#).

iv) To perform these statistical controls, we regressed the raw manifest indicators of each of the five latent constructs on these demographic variables. For example, in the case of SDO, we regressed the raw scores for each of the three parcels on the demographic variables. We then used the standardized residual scores generated from these procedures as indicators in the SEM analyses.

v) The structural model was fully saturated, and thus the fit indices refer to the measurement part of the model alone.

vi) Results of the SEM analyses relevant to Hypotheses 3 and 4 did not differ when we did not control for the effects of gender, SES, and education. That is, Karmic beliefs still predicted Generalized HE Policy net of SDO, RWA, and prejudice, and the indirect effects of SDO and RWA on Generalized HE Policy through Karmic beliefs still held.

vii) We also inspected the model modification indices. In particular, we were interested in whether these indices suggested direct paths from latent Karmic beliefs to the manifest policy constructs, as this would speak to whether the documented relation between Karmic beliefs and HE policy support generalizes across each of the policy constructs used to define Generalized HE Policy. Paths from latent Karmic beliefs to the manifest policy variables did not appear in the first ten suggested modifications, suggesting that these measures can be seen as interchangeable indicators of the Generalized HE Policy support construct.

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Appendix

Table A1

Self-Reported Social Class of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent
Poor	25	6.5
Working class	58	15.1
Middle class	237	61.6
Upper middle class	58	15.1
Upper class	4	1.0
Did not report	3	0.8
Total	385	100

Table A2

Self-Reported Caste Group Membership

	Frequency	Percent
Brahmin	55	14.3
Kshatriya	33	8.6
Vaishya	20	5.2
Other Backward Castes	87	22.6
Scheduled Castes	88	22.9
Schedule Tribes	41	10.6
Other	49	12.7
Did not report	12	3.1
Total	385	100

Table A3

Self-Reported Religious Identification

	Frequency	Percent
Hindu	277	71.9
Jain	2	.5
Muslim	35	9.1
Christian	31	8.1
Buddhist	14	3.6
Sikh	12	3.1
Other	13	3.4
Did not report	1	.3
Total	384	100