



# How people higher on social dominance orientation deal with hierarchy-attenuating institutions: the person-environment (mis)fit perspective in the grammar of hierarchies

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## Abstract

Interweaving Social Dominance theory with Person-Environment (P-E) fit theory, the present study examines how people higher on social dominance orientation (SDO, i.e., those who generally favor group hierarchies and inequalities) can deal with belonging to institutions that culturally sustain group equality (i.e., hierarchy-attenuating institutions). We enrolled two cohorts of first year students majoring in social work (Sample 1, N=296; Sample 2, N=117), a typical hierarchy-attenuating setting. Participants' belonging to a hierarchy-attenuating institution was primed before administering a self-report questionnaire for measuring the study's variables. Results of mediation analyses showed that people higher in SDO experienced higher P-E misfit with the institution in both samples. In turn, P-E misfit was positively associated with the intention to leave the social work faculty and with a higher pro-self hierarchy-enhancing motivation (i.e., agreeing that "I am enrolled in a Social work faculty primarily to have more chances to gain money and success in the future"). These results show that people higher in SDO can deal with the dissonant condition of P-E misfit with a hierarchy-attenuating institution by leaving such institution (i.e., differential attrition process) and/or by adopting a framework for their presence in a hierarchy-attenuating institution that aligns with their own's socially dominant beliefs (i.e., motivational shaping process). Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

**Keywords** Legitimizing myths · Person-environment fit · Social dominance · Social work

The question of how the psychological self and the culture of different settings mesh and change both individuals and their settings has captivated scholars and scientists from many disciplines. In social psychology, the literature on

person-environment fit (P-E fit) focuses on processes that result in congruence between people's psychological features (e.g., personality, personal orientations) and the values embodied within the culture of specific contexts (e.g., institutions, Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011). For instance, a series of studies by Sidanius and colleagues (Sidanius et al., 1996, Sidanius et al., 2003) highlighted that people are attracted by institutions that mirror their own egalitarian or anti-egalitarian beliefs. On the other side, institutions attract, socialize, and reward people whose values are aligned with the respective institutional egalitarian or anti-egalitarian function (see Haley & Sidanius, 2005 for a review). In such ways, over time, people and institutions tend to reach an equilibrium through reflecting P-E fit in terms of the person and institution's support of egalitarianism or anti-egalitarianism. According to social dominance theory (SDT, Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), the mutual compatibility between an individual institution member's orientation towards equality (or inequality) and the institution's functioning vis-à-vis

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*"The self does not lie passively in wait for us to discover it. Selfhood is made in the active, ongoing process ... The enduring nature of being human is to turn into something else"* (Kaag, 2018, p. 220).

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equality (or inequality) tends to allow the institution to operate smoothly (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

However, less is known about what happens when individual and institutional mutual attraction processes fail to result in good person-environment matches (Deng et al., 2016). In particular, as underlined by Sidanius et al. (2016), the question remains open as to the possible outcomes of the condition of person-environment misfit (P-E misfit): A personal-institutional incongruence (Cooper-Thomas & Wright, 2013) toward the support for egalitarianism vs. anti-egalitarianism. Following SDT (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), the present study began to fill this research gap by considering possible psychological means for dealing with P-E misfit. In particular, we studied the situation of when people report relatively high levels of social dominance orientation (SDO; support for group-based hierarchies and inequalities) but inhabit cultural institutional settings that are hierarchy-attenuating (Pratto et al., 2006).

Although prior studies (e.g., Sidanius et al., 2003; van Laar et al., 1999) have shown circumstantial evidence concerning how people with different levels of SDO deal with the P-E misfit, no prior studies have directly measured people's subjective experience of this incongruence (Williamson & Perumal, 2021). We attempted to fill this research gap testing whether people would use two different strategies to reduce the P-E misfit discomfort. First, we sought to confirm the preliminary but not exhaustive evidence that people high in SDO within a hierarchy-attenuating organization express a willingness to leave the institution as a mean to resolve the perceived incongruence with the environment (Haley & Sidanius, 2005). However, not all people are prone to leave institutions when they perceive P-E misfit because leaving the institution may be costly. As such, the second process we examined is a new one for SDT in considering P-E misfit and is based on self-regulatory theories (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). In particular, we considered how people might bring various internal states into alignment to reduce perceived P-E misfit. Drawing on self-regulation approaches, which hold that "people are motivated to reach a condition in which their self-concept matches their personally relevant self-guides" (Higgins, 1989, p. 95), and cognitive dissonance theory, which affirms that people tend to synchronize internal states (e.g., Cooper, 2019), we postulate a second motivational shaping process by which high-SDO people can self-regulate the motivation that sustains their "staying" in misfitting context (a hierarchy-attenuating organization), namely, by aligning their motivation to stay with their beliefs about group dominance (i.e., "I would stay here to gain more money and success in the future."). Through this motivational shaping process, people can deal with the P-E misfit, reaching a sort of intrapersonal fit regulating different

aspects of the self, specifically their SDO and their goals for belonging to a hierarchy-attenuating institution.

## Social dominance theory

SDT is a theoretical framework which explains how group-based hierarchies and inequalities are produced and maintained in societies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). The theory describes processes occurring at many levels of social relationships and how those processes intersect across levels to stabilize societies as group-dominance hierarchies, wherein one social group has more power than at least one other group. A personal psychological orientation, called SDO, assesses people's willingness to support hierarchical asymmetrical power relationships. Overall, the higher people are in SDO, the more they have a worldview in which dominant and subordinate groups deserve their respective positions in social hierarchies, and anti-egalitarian policies are correct (Aiello et al., 2019; Ho et al., 2015; Pratto et al., 2006). People higher in SDO overtly support hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths – sets of culturally-grounded rationales for the social practices and policies that tend to support and promote group inequality (e.g., karma, the Protestant Work Ethic, meritocracy, racism, as appropriate to the cultural setting). Such legitimizing myths guide people's actions in maintenance of group dominance, and they justify and guide the practices of social institutions like the military, schools, tax policy, that maintain and recreate group-based dominance (Ho et al., 2015; Kteily et al., 2012; Tesi, Aiello, Pratto et al., 2019b). People higher on SDO also oppose hierarchy-attenuating legitimizing myths such as support for egalitarian social policies, social welfare programs or public education (Pratto et al., 2006).

SDT argues that societies are stabilized in group dominance by the counter-balancing opposition of two different types of institutional functions. According to SDT, institutions can be differentiated by whether their functioning differentially supports, or tries to attenuate, group-based dominance and social inequalities (e.g., Haley & Sidanius, 2005): the hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating institutions. By definition, hierarchy-enhancing institutions support group-based dominance through a differential allocation of social, political, and economic power in favor of dominant groups. Examples of hierarchy-enhancing institutions are military and profit-maximizing organizations (e.g., Aiello et al., 2018; Nicol & Rounding, 2014; Nicol et al., 2011). Hierarchy-enhancing institutions may also promote hierarchical asymmetrical structured relationships through culturally endorsing and disseminating hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths that spread a disproportionate positive social value to dominant (vs. subordinate) groups. In

contrast, hierarchy-attenuating institutions allocate value in favor of subordinate groups rather than dominant groups, or try to open positive opportunities to people in subordinate groups (e.g., social work). Hierarchy-attenuating institutions include social welfare programs, public programs (e.g., schools, libraries), public defenders, and organizations that promote social welfare, human rights, women's rights, racial equality, and so forth.

## The P-E fit within SDT's framework

P-E fit theory (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011 for a review; Su et al., 2014) concerns the experienced congruence between individual's psychological orientation, values, attitudes and beliefs with the orientation, values, attitudes and beliefs endorsed and promoted within the culture of a specific context (e.g., institution, organization, community). The P-E fit theory has been embedded within SDT. Considerable research demonstrates SDT's P-E fit principle that individuals and institutions tend to assort people into different institutional and organizational settings such that their SDO, their values and ideologies tend to align with the hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating function of the institution (e.g., Aiello et al., 2018; Pratto, et al., 1997; Tesi, Aiello, Morselli et al 2019a; Umphress et al., 2007). Such hierarchy role assortment can begin, for instance, when people are selecting their course of study and likely future career. A series of studies highlighted that some academic careers could be considered as hierarchy-enhancing environments and include faculty of business, economic, management and marketing. These hierarchy-enhancing faculties prepare people for careers that disproportionately serve "wealthy people" (Pratto et al., 1997; Sidanius et al., 1996, 2003). In contrast, hierarchy-attenuating faculties (e.g., social science, psychology, and social work; Damburn et al., 2009; Pratto et al., 1997; Sidanius et al., 1996; Sidanius et al., 2003) prepare people to serve persons in need, and in helping get resources for subordinated or needy people, they prepare students for careers in which they will attenuate social inequalities amongst groups. Students who have chosen hierarchy-attenuating faculties are more likely to be low on SDO and to hold hierarchy-attenuating, anti-dominant beliefs.

A series of processes converge in driving people and institutions to reach P-E fit in terms of support for hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating legitimizing myths (see Haley & Sidanius 2005, for a review). The self-selection process provides that people tend to select environments that fit their set of socio-political beliefs. In fact, surveys and experiments in several countries show that students are more interested in hierarchy-attenuating careers

(including social work) and in hierarchy-attenuating job descriptions to the extent they are lower on SDO (Pratto et al., 1997; Sidanius et al., 1996, 2003). Another process is institutional selection, wherein hierarchy-enhancing institutions tend to select higher SDO people or those who hold hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths and hierarchy-attenuating institutions tend to select lower SDO people or those who hold hierarchy-attenuating legitimizing myths (Pratto et al., 1997). A third P-E fit process is institutional socialization, in which role playing and exposure to others who hold hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating legitimizing myths change the beliefs and SDO of those in each institution to be compatible with the institution's hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating function (Pratto et al., 1999). A fourth process that contributes to P-E fit is differential reward and punishment. For example, students whose SDO levels deviate from the norm of their hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating major receive lower grades in their courses than do students whose SDO levels match those of their fellow majors (van Laar et al., 1999), and employees whose SDO levels do not match that of their work organization can be subjected to harsher punishment (e.g., Tesi, Aiello, Pratto et al., 2019b, Tesi et al., 2020). In line with these processes, a series of studies (e.g., Nicol & Rounding, 2014; Nicol et al., 2011) found that high SDO people tend to show a greater P-E fit when they work in a hierarchy-enhancing institution.

Despite students choosing careers, and institutions choosing and socializing people such that the SDO and ideologies of individuals are compatible with their institutional hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating missions (Pratto et al., 1997), it must sometimes be the case that individuals find themselves in settings and institutions that poorly match their own orientation (Seelman & Walls, 2010; Tesi et al., 2020), especially in the early phase of their career. This is a condition characterized by P-E misfit.

## P-E misfit between SDO and hierarchy-enhancing and attenuating institutions: The differential attrition process hypothesis

P-E misfit has been defined "as a perceived mismatch between the individual and the environment on a dimension that was salient to one or both parties" (Cooper-Thomas & Wright, 2013, p. 31). Although the literature on P-E fit within SDT is substantial, very little is known about the processes driving P-E misfit and its consequences in SDT (Sidanius et al., 2016). In the present study, we focused on the P-E misfit when high SDO people become part of a hierarchy-attenuating institution that principally endorses hierarchy-attenuating legitimizing myths and exists for the

purpose of serving vulnerable others (Tesi et al., 2020). In particular, we explored how high-SDO students of a social work faculty (i.e., a typical hierarchy-attenuating institution) “react” toward the hierarchy-attenuating socialization process (e.g., Dambrun et al., 2009) they encounter in this setting (Seelman & Walls, 2010). As part of their training, social work students meet end-users who are disadvantaged in terms of wealth, and/or are dominated or exploited, and they do internships in which their job is to promote the well-being of people belonging to disadvantaged groups (Seelman & Walls, 2010). Given that people higher on SDO feel more comfortable with inequality and believe that those in superior groups are indeed better people than those in inferior groups, students in social work faculties who are relatively high on SDO must experience psychological P-E misfit toward their work setting.

Relevant to social work, several studies have shown that SDO can influence pro-social attitudes toward others. People higher on SDO tend to be lower in empathy (Sidanius et al., 2013) and less interested in the welfare of others, especially disadvantaged groups (Ho et al., 2015; Meadows et al., 2017; Sidanius et al., 2013). In other words, the more one’s supports social hierarchies in society, the lower one’s pro-social attitudes and behaviors toward group considered at the bottom of the hierarchies are expected to be (e.g., Aiello et al., 2019; Ho et al., 2015; Navarro-Mateu et al., 2019). Therefore, higher levels of SDO were found to be negatively related to emotional closeness and to the support for the well-being of subordinated groups (e.g., death penalty support, violence and aggression directed against subordinated groups; Sidanius et al., 2013). In this framework, we expected that students higher in SDO struggle with an institutional culture that promotes hierarchy-attenuating legitimizing myths (i.e., social work faculty) favoring disadvantaged people (e.g., help others, reduce inequalities). An organizational environment could seem harsher or not as friendly if it does not match one’s SDO level (Tesi et al., 2020). On this research line, van Laar et al., (1999) found that in freshmen (first-year) college students the number of those who expressed a racial prejudice score “incongruent” with the hierarchy-enhancing or -attenuating function of their academic major outnumbered those who were “congruent.” When students progressed to their junior (third) year the number of “congruent” students outnumbered the number who were “incongruent.” Thus, a specific differential attrition process (Haley & Sidanius, 2005) could have been responsible for the progressive acquisition of congruency between personal values and institutional culture alongside students’ career progression. Hence, those students who perceived an incongruence between their personal values and the environmental values could have left the institution over time, while those who felt congruence could have remained.

Another study (Seelman & Walls, 2010) found preliminary support that high SDO was associated with a high person-incongruence in a hierarchy-attenuating context. However, these studies (Seelman & Walls, 2010; van Laar et al. 1999) did not directly measure possible outcomes of perceiving P-E misfit (i.e., exiting the institutional context), so it remains unknown whether subjective P-E misfit could drive specific behaviors such as an intention to leave the organization. Therefore, we attempted to address this research gap by empirically studying the differential attrition processes (Sidanius et al., 2016) through directly measuring both the perceived P-E misfit and intention to drop out among students high in SDO within a typical hierarchy-attenuating institution (i.e., social work faculty).

For studying the differential attrition process, we specifically involved students in the beginning of their academic career (i.e., first semester of the first year of study in social work), before they had been deeply socialized into the culture of social work. This choice was driven by evidence that students of social work can be exposed to a process of socialization that pushes them to adhere to the institutional set of hierarchy-attenuating legitimizing myths, potentially lessening their SDO levels (Dambrun et al., 2009; Seelman & Walls, 2010). Thus, the more people stay in a hierarchy-attenuating institution, the more they could be influenced by the socialization and differential reward processes of such an institution, resulting in more congruence (i.e., P-E fit); that is, low SDO levels in students that persist longer within the hierarchy-attenuating institution (see Haley & Sidanius, 2005 for a review). Conversely, those who had just started their study career would be more likely than those longer in their careers to have high P-E misfit. Potentially this is because the selection process did not sort novice students to produce perfect P-E fit. For example, novice students may not be fully aware of the hierarchy-attenuating nature of social work and have not spent enough time in the institution to be substantially socialized by hierarchy-attenuating legitimizing myths (Haley & Sidanius, 2005). For such reasons, we expected a greater chance to find a P-E misfit between the students’ SDO levels and the hierarchy-attenuating function of the institution for students early in their careers.

In line with the analyzed literature, we answered the call for testing the differential attrition process of SDT (Sidanius et al., 2003; 2016). We hypothesized that social work students in their first year who had relatively high SDO would report a high P-E misfit with the hierarchy-attenuating institution they attended. Further, we hypothesized that the P-E misfit increased higher SDO students’ willingness to drop out of the hierarchy-attenuating institution, compared to lower SDO students.

**Hypothesis 1** *Social work students higher on SDO will express higher intention to leave the social work major, mediated by the degree that they experience P-E misfit.*

### **The dynamic of P-E misfit between SDO and hierarchy-attenuating institutions: The motivational shaping hypothesis**

We also tested, for the first time, an alternative way of coping with P-E misfit other than differential attrition. Since leaving a context could be very expensive for people (e.g., need to find a new position, disconfirmation of own choices and actions), we hypothesized that a high SDO student in a social work faculty could adopt a different strategy to deal with P-E misfit. For instance, socially dominant individuals in a hierarchy-attenuating setting could embrace a hierarchy-enhancing psychological meaning of their presence in that context (i.e., Aiello et al., 2018). In line with this reasoning, studies revealed that subordinate workers with higher SDO levels working in hierarchy-attenuating institutions (i.e., welfare organizations), were more willing to comply with their supervisors' harsh, punitive and coercive power tactics (Tesi et al., 2019b, 2020). Harsh power tactics are preferred by those higher in SDO, because these tactics are aligned with subordinates' underlying beliefs about the "appropriateness" of dominant-submissive form relationships, where the supervisor manages the "top" and the subordinates serve the "bottom" of the hierarchies. Indeed, if a subordinate endorses a socially dominant worldview, he feels he must acquiesce to his/her supervisor's harsh requests, because the supervisor has an upper position in organizational hierarchies (Aiello et al., 2018; Tesi et al., 2019a). It is worth nothing that these studies suggest that when people higher in SDO encounter a hierarchy-attenuating environment, they could look for a psychological meaning of their presence in this environment that is coherent with their beliefs on group dominance (e.g., harsh power tactics) as their way of adapting to the environment (Tesi et al., 2020).

We therefore hypothesized that a high SDO person in a hierarchy-attenuating institutional culture could cope with the P-E misfit by self-regulating their motivation for being in that culture. Prior research shows that the condition of P-E misfit is demanding and depletes of personal resources, which in turn activates self-regulatory processes (Deng et al., 2016). Based on this, we grounded our second hypothesis in self-regulation (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004) and cognitive dissonance theories (Cooper, 2019). Self-regulation theory posits that individuals tend to actively regulate their selfhood (Baumeister & Vohs, 2005) in order to bring the self into alignment with specific standards, with the aim

of avoiding negative states (e.g., stress, anxiety) through reaching an internal psychological coherence (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). Self-regulation implies exercising control over one's own functions, states and inner processes; this could be done by "synchronizing" a variety of internal states (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, orientations), a process also postulated by cognitive dissonance theory. Indeed, the literature on self-construal highlights that greater self-discrepancies are associated with greater psychological discomfort, and that discomfort provides the motivation for psychologically resolving self-incongruence in favor of a congruence (Higgins, 1989). Based on self-regulation and dissonance-reduction processes, then, we hypothesize that P-E misfit significantly threatens self-congruence for higher SDO people in hierarchy-attenuating contexts because the context will tend to push high SDO people to adopt hierarchy-attenuating attitudes that are inconsistent with the structure of the self which embodies hierarchy-enhancing attitudes. P-E misfit is therefore expected to provoke the self-regulation of internal aspects of people experiencing misfit (Baumeister & Vohs, 2005) that allows them to feel a better intrapersonal fit within their inner experience (i.e., selfhood). Since organizational cultures (i.e., hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating) are extremely difficult for individuals working alone to modify, rather than changing the context to align with own personal socially dominant beliefs to bring about P-E congruence, people higher in SDO who are experiencing a P-E misfit in a hierarchy-attenuating do not have many choices but to regulate aspects of the self (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004) to increase internal psychological coherence.

To consider how self-regulation might be done, we considered that social psychology has broadly analyzed two different orientations to the social world: there is a pro-social (see Thielman et al., 2020), other-prioritizing strategy such as one would expect of those in hierarchy-attenuating institutions, but there is also a self-prioritizing strategy (Peeters & Czapinski, 1990). In our context, we hypothesized that a high SDO person experiencing P-E misfit could focus on a pro-self hierarchy-enhancing motivation (rather than on the social work default pro-social hierarchy-attenuating motivation) as a psychological means for dealing with the incongruent condition of P-E misfit. Endorsing a pro-self hierarchy-enhancing motivation acts as a psychological device to reach an intrapersonal fit between people's personal desire for group dominance (i.e., high SDO) with a personal pursued motivation. A pro-self hierarchy-enhancing motivation is focused on the pursuing of self-advantage and personal goals, and hence this is aligned with a socially dominant worldview (i.e., gain more money and success to be at the top of the social hierarchies, reinforcing supremacy against subordinate groups; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

This line of reasoning leads us to suggest that a second strategy for dealing with P-E misfit for high SDO social work students, or others in a similar incongruous situation, is to endorse a pro-self hierarchy-enhancing motivation for belonging to a hierarchy-attenuating institutional setting or culture. As such, what might seem to be a means of doing hierarchy-attenuation could become, rather, a means of ascending a social hierarchy. Through this motivational shaping process, social work students can synchronize their internal perceptions (i.e., SDO and personal motivation) fueling a “self-congruence” (i.e., intrapersonal fit), and in this way deal with the condition of P-E misfit experienced in the hierarchy-attenuating institution.

**Hypothesis 2** *Social work students higher on SDO will express higher pro-self hierarchy-enhancing (vs. pro-social hierarchy-attenuating) motivations for their future profession, mediated by the degree that they experience P-E misfit.*

## Method

### Procedure

We tested the study hypotheses in two different convenience samples of Italian social work students who were attending their first year of a social work graduation course. We opted to test our hypotheses in two samples of social work students in order to account for possible representativeness bias due to the use of a convenience sample (i.e., a non-probability sampling technique where the sample is not chosen at random). Testing the study’s model in two different samples, replicated on two different time occasions, strengthens the robustness of findings by reducing the chance that results could be due to chance. The data collection in the first sample (Sample 1) was made in October, 2020 while the data collection in the second sample (Sample 2) was performed in October, 2021. As highlighted in several studies (e.g., Haley & Sidanius, 2005; Seelman & Walls, 2010; Sidanius et al., 1996; Sidanius et al., 2003), the social work faculty is considered a hierarchy-attenuating institution. Social work pursues social change for improving the well-being of oppressed and disadvantaged individuals. Not surprisingly the 11th general principle of the Deontological Code of Social Workers (Ed. 2020) in Italy affirms (p. 11, adapted from Italian): “The social worker promotes opportunities for improving the living conditions of the person, families, groups, communities and their various social aggregations; enhances their autonomy, subjectivity and ability to assume responsibility, helps them draw on their own resources and those made available to them by society, to prevent and deal

with situations of need or hardship and encourage social inclusion processes.”

All the participants involved in the study voluntarily agreed to complete an anonymous on-line self-report questionnaire with several measurement scales. Participants were invited to scan a QR code or go to a specific weblink with their devices where they were able to start completing the questionnaire. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Italian Association of Psychology (AIP). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time.

Before answering the P-E misfit scale (see “Measures” paragraph) participants read a text (Appendix A) in which we primed students concerning their belonging to a hierarchy-attenuating institution that embodies strong anti-dominance values which aim at improving the position and the well-being of disadvantaged people. As outlined by Cooper-Thomas and Wright (2013, p.25) “norms relate to people’s social behavior when such norms are focal”. Indeed, this prime had the function to make clear and accessible the culture of the hierarchy-attenuating institution they inhabited and thus make eventually salient the P-E misfit (especially among those higher in SDO).

### Participants’ characteristics

*Sample 1.* We initially invited 329 social work students to participate; 296 accepted involvement in the study (89.97% response rate). The Sample 1 comprised 272 females and 24 males. Two hundred and seventy-five were between 18 and 30 years old, 9 were between 31 and 40 years old, 7 were between 41 and 50 years old, and five were between 51 and 60 years old.

*Sample 2.* We invited a total of 157 students to take part in the study; 117 accepted (74.52% response rate). Sample 2 consisted of 108 female and 9 males. The majority (N = 114) were between 18 and 30 years old, 3 participants were between 31 and 40 years old.

### Measures

*SDO.* The SDO was measured with the Italian adaptation (Aiello et al., 2019) of Social Dominance Orientation<sub>7</sub> (Ho et al., 2015). The SDO<sub>7</sub> scale includes two dimensions of SDO, the dominance dimension (e.g., “An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on the bottom”) and the anti-egalitarianism dimension (e.g., “It is unjust to try to make groups equal”). The scale was composed by a total of 16 items with a 7-point Likert scale answer format ranging from “1 = strongly oppose”

to “7 = strongly favor.” Cronbach’s alpha in this study was 0.75 (Sample 1) and 0.83 (Sample 2).

*P-E misfit.* The P-E misfit scale (Deng et al., 2016) was adapted from Cable and DeRue (2002) and Nicol et al. (2011). The scale specifically measured the incongruence between students’ and institution (i.e., social work major) values and beliefs. It was composed of three items with a 7-point Likert scale response format ranging from “1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree.” The items were, “The things that I value in life are NOT similar to the things that the Social Work major values”, “My personal values do NOT match the Social Work major culture”, “The Social Work major values and culture do NOT provide a good fit with the things that I value in life.” Cronbach’s alpha in this study was 0.73 (Sample 1) and 0.76 (Sample 2).

*Drop out intention.* The drop out intention was measured with a single-item scale with a 7-point Likert response format ranging from “1 = completely disagree to 7 = completely agree.” The item was the following, “I would leave the Social Work major for another one.”

*Self-other motivation.* Students’ motivation for attending social work major was measured with a single item semantic differential scale that provided answered the following question “I am enrolled in a Social Work faculty primarily for...” The response format ranged from “1 = Improving the position and the life conditions of disadvantaged people in future” to 7 = “Having more chances to gain money and success in future.”

## Data analysis

Preliminary analysis (e.g., descriptive statistics, common method bias check, Pearson’s  $r$  correlation) were made using SPSS. For testing the study’s mediation hypotheses, we used PROCESS macro (model 4; Hayes, 2018) for SPSS with a bootstrapping method. In bootstrap samples, we do not assume a normal distribution of sampling. Thus, bootstrapping tests are preferred over other methods (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Specifically, we ran two mediational models for each of the two sample of students. In the first model we tested the indirect association between SDO and drop out intention through P-E misfit (i.e., Hypothesis 1), and in the second model we tested the indirect association between SDO and students’ pro-self hierarchy-enhancing motivation through P-E misfit (i.e., Hypothesis 2). To verify if a mediation effect occurs one must find an association between the independent variable (i.e., SDO) and mediator (i.e., P-E fit) and an association between the mediator and outcomes (i.e., drop out intention and student motivation) (MacKinnon, 2008). The indirect effects were tested using a 95% bias corrected confidence interval based on 5000 bootstrap samples

(Hayes, 2018). We employed two independent samples to provide independent replications of the effects.

Moreover, given the natural gender imbalance of our samples, we opted to use participant gender as a control variable (dichotomized, male = 0; female = 1). SDT’s studies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) revealed that in the interplay of social hierarchies, men usually hold and pursue dominant positions in society. Research on US college students has shown gender differences not only in desire for hierarchy-attenuating versus hierarchy-enhancing careers and SDO, but also in how important gaining status and money are to their career goals, with men valuing these things more than women even controlling for their SDO levels (Pratto et al., 1997). Controlling for participant gender allows us to test our hypotheses that perceived P-E misfit mediates the relationship of SDO on both ways of coping with P-E misfit (desire to drop out and motivation to enhance one’s own status) regardless of other unmeasured constructs that might be associated with participant gender.

## Results

### Preliminary analyses

Descriptive statistics, skewness, kurtosis and Pearson’s  $r$  correlation of study’s variables are reported in Table 1 for the two samples. For each sample, the common method bias was preliminarily explored using Harman’s single-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003). A principal component analysis with a non-rotated factor solution was run inserting all scales’ observed variables (i.e., scales’ items). In Sample 1, the first component extracted explained the 31.63% of observed variables total variance; in Sample 2 the first component extracted explained the 28.86% of observed total variance. The results showed that in both cohorts the observed variables in their totality shared less than 50% of their variance, hence suggesting no common method bias issue (Rodríguez-Ardura & Meseguer-Artola, 2020).

### Mediation analyses

#### Sample 1

In the first sample we found that the requirements for configuring the mediational models were met (Table 2). We found a positive association between SDO and P-E misfit ( $b = 0.54$ ,  $CI = 0.40, 0.68$ ), between P-E misfit and drop out intention ( $b = 0.56$ ,  $CI = 0.39, 0.74$ ) and also between P-E misfit and pro-self HE motivation ( $b = 0.22$ ,  $CI = 0.10, 0.34$ ). Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported in Sample 1. Indeed, the bootstrap analysis revealed a positive indirect association

**Table 1** Means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis and correlations

Variable	Sample 1 (M=296)				Sample 2 (N=117)									
	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	1	2	3
1.SDO	1.15	0.82	1.33	2.62				0.96	0.70	1.1	1.01			
2.P-E misfit	1.52	1.11	0.72	0.30	0.40***			1.38	1.05	0.62	-0.29	0.43***		
3.Drop out	1.72	1.71	0.66	-0.58	0.20***	0.39***		2.12	1.85	0.57	-0.60	0.16†	0.33***	
4.Student motivation (prosocial HA vs. proself HE)	1.92	1.13	1.13	0.58	0.30***	0.30***	0.35***	2.05	1.17	0.73	-0.74	0.24**	0.31***	0.27**

Note. \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ , † $p < .10$

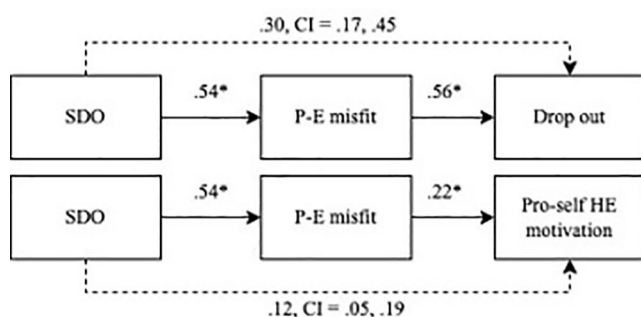
**Table 2** Results of the steps of mediation analysis (Sample 1, N=296)

Predictors	Outcomes											
	P-E misfit				Drop out				Pro-self HE motivation			
	B	SE	p	CI	B	SE	p	CI	B	SE	p	CI
SDO	0.54	0.07	0.00	0.40, 0.68	0.11	0.12	0.36	-0.13, 0.35	0.27	0.08	0.00	0.11, 0.43
P-E misfit	-	-	-	-	0.56	0.09	0.00	0.39, 0.74	0.22	0.06	0.00	0.10, 0.34
Gender (covariate; male=0, female=1)	0.05	0.22	0.82	-0.38, 0.48	-0.16	0.34	0.63	-0.83, 0.50	-0.57	0.22	0.01	-1.01, -0.13

between SDO and drop out intention through P-E misfit ( $b=0.30$ ,  $SE=0.07$ ,  $CI=0.17$ ,  $0.45$ ) and a positive indirect association between SDO and pro-self HE motivation through P-E misfit ( $b=0.12$ ,  $SE=0.04$ ,  $CI=0.05$ ,  $0.19$ ). Being male was found positively associated with a pro-self HE motivation ( $b=-0.57$ ,  $CI=-1.01$ ,  $-0.13$ ). Results of mediation analyses for Sample 1 were graphically summarized in Fig. 1. Observing Fig. 1 we should note that the coefficient of association between P-E misfit and drop out was higher than the coefficient between P-E misfit and pro-self HE motivation, suggesting that the P-E misfit would trigger the willingness to drop out.

## Sample 2

In the second sample we also found that the requirements for configuring the mediational models were met (Table 3).



**Fig. 1** Graphical summary of mediation analyses (Sample 1, N=296)  
 Note. Unstandardized coefficients are shown; continuous lines = direct effects; discontinuous line = indirect effect; \* $p < .001$

We found a positive association between SDO and P-E misfit ( $b=0.63$ ,  $CI=0.38$ ,  $0.88$ ), between P-E misfit and drop out intention ( $b=0.61$ ,  $CI=0.26$ ,  $0.96$ ) and also between P-E misfit and pro-self HE motivation ( $b=0.23$ ,  $CI=0.01$ ,  $0.45$ ). Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported in Sample 2. Indeed, the bootstrap analysis revealed a positive indirect association between SDO and drop out intention through P-E misfit ( $b=0.38$ ,  $SE=0.15$ ,  $CI=0.12$ ,  $0.69$ ) and a positive indirect association between SDO and pro-self HE motivation through P-E misfit ( $b=0.15$ ,  $SE=0.08$ ,  $CI=0.01$ ,  $0.33$ ). All analyses were controlled for gender. Being male was found associated with an increased perception of P-E misfit ( $b=-0.77$ ,  $CI=-1.41$ ,  $-0.13$ ) and almost significantly ( $p=.05$ ) associated with an increased pro-self HE motivation. Results of mediation analyses for Sample 2 are graphically summarized in Fig. 2. Observing Fig. 2 we confirmed what we found in Sample 1, that is that the coefficient of association between P-E misfit and drop out was higher than the coefficient between P-E misfit and pro-self HE motivation.

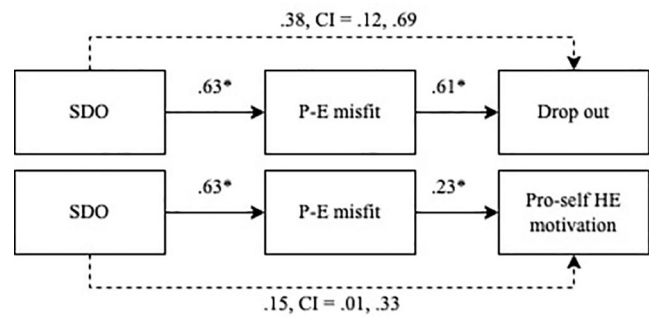
## Discussion

### Dealing with P-E misfit

A series of studies (Dambrun et al., 2009; Haley & Sidanius, 2005; Nicol, et al., 2011; Nicol & Rounding, 2014; Sidanius et al., 2003) explicate the role of P-E fit (e.g., Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011) within SDT (Sidanius &

**Table 3** Results of the steps of mediation analysis (Sample 2, N = 117)

Predictors	Outcomes															
	P-E misfit					Drop out					Pro-self HE motivation					
	B	SE	P	CI	B	SE	P	CI	B	SE	P	CI	B	SE	P	CI
SDO	0.63	0.13	0.00	0.38, 0.88	0.04	0.26	0.89	-0.48, 0.56	0.22	0.16	0.17	-0.10, 0.55	0.23	0.11	0.04	0.01, 0.45
P-E misfit	-	-	-	-	0.61	0.18	0.00	0.26, 0.96	0.23	0.11	0.04	0.01, 0.45	-0.77	0.39	0.05	-1.54, 0.01
Gender (covariate; male = 0, female = 1)	-0.77	0.32	0.02	-1.41, -0.13	0.45	0.63	0.48	-0.80, 1.69	-0.77	0.39	0.05	-1.54, 0.01	-	-	-	-



**Fig. 2** Graphical summary of mediation analyses (Sample 2, N = 117)  
*Note.* Unstandardized coefficients are shown; continuous lines = direct effects; discontinuous line = indirect effect; \*p < .001

Pratto, 1999) revealing that people with high SDO usually fit in institutions that support hierarchy-enhancing attitudes (e.g., military organizations, police forces, extremely profit-oriented institution, business and economic majors), while people low in SDO fit with hierarchy-attenuating ones (e.g., humanitarian aid organizations).

However, little is known about cases of P-E misfit (Sidanius et al., 2016; Tesi et al., 2020). P-E misfit may be perceived by individuals with different levels of SDO encountering an incongruent hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating organization, especially when the hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating values supported by an organization become salient in ways that highlight the incongruency with one’s own psychological orientations and values. Compatible with the cohort studies of van Laar et al. (1999), we suggest that P-E misfit is most likely in the earliest phases in which persons encounter institutions, and perhaps especially for individuals who do not have complete freedom to choose their vocational paths and are “constrained” in a specific environment without having the chance to try others environments with more personal congruency (i.e., lack of study/work opportunities). P-E misfit could also arise when organizations disguise their own hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating values or posture having both values (e.g., a profit-making corporation that claims it cares about the public good), which could lead some people to be unclear as to the hierarchy-enhancing or hierarchy-attenuating nature of the organizational context.

Longitudinal and cohort studies that show more coherence between individuals’ SDO levels and organizational values over tenure in a hierarchy-attenuating or hierarchy-enhancing cultural milieu imply that the P-E misfit would be remedied over time through a series of psycho-social processes (e.g., institutional socialization, differential reward, differential attrition, for a full review see Haley & Sidanius 2005). However, prior studies (Seelman & Walls, 2010; van Laar et al., 1999) have not directly documented that the perceived P-E misfit could have a role for the increasing

coherence over time between individuals' SDO levels and the values of their organizational context. The present study strengthens the claim that P-E misfit could lead to processes that produce greater P-E fit over time by measuring perceived P-E misfit as a mediator of SDO on intention to exit (differential attrition process). In accordance with our expectations (Hypothesis 1), examining two samples of social work students, we found in both studies that higher SDO students also had higher desire to leave the social work major, mediated by perceived P-E misfit. Institutional drop out, also described as differential attrition process, could be the first feasible strategy for dealing with this kind of P-E misfit, allowing an interplay that produce more P-E fit over time because only those with lower levels of SDO would remain in the hierarchy-attenuating environment (Sidanius et al., 2003).

The present work also goes beyond prior theorizing in that we proposed and find evidence for an alternative process that could occur due to P-E misfit, namely a motivational shaping process (Hypothesis 2). Self-regulation (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004) and cognitive dissonance theories (Cooper, 2019) led us to predict that high SDO social work students would try to resolve the incongruity between their SDO levels and the culture of social work in some way even if it were not by exiting but instead focusing on the fundamental question of whether one puts others or self first (Peeters & Czapinski, 1990). Since that the culture of a hierarchy-attenuating environment cannot be shaped by those single persons higher in SDO, they can opt to agentively self-regulate their internal states (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004, 2005) in a way that different parts of the self are aligned. This could be reached by finding a "self-synchronicity" (Higgins, 1989), or intrapersonal fit, between their orientation (i.e., high SDO) and a motivation that sustains it (i.e., pro-self hierarchy enhancing). Indeed, the results confirmed the motivational shaping process (i.e., Hypothesis 2) showing an indirect association between SDO and students' pro-self hierarchy-enhancing (vs. pro-social hierarchy-attenuating) motivation mediated by the P-E misfit. This means that the more people approve of the dominant-submission form of intergroup relations, the more they perceived a P-E misfit with the hierarchy-attenuating environment that, in turn, could lead them to endorse a view aligned with their socially dominant beliefs (i.e., a desire to gain more money and success meant to support political, economic, and social advantages for own's group against others).

### Implications for organizations

Our results have implications for students' careers and for social work as well. It is worth noting that in line with Haley and Sidanius (2005), our results suggest that the differential

attrition process could be the most immediate solution for dealing with P-E misfit (i.e., the magnitude of the coefficient of association between P-E misfit and drop out is higher than the magnitude of the coefficient between P-E misfit and pro-self HE motivation in both studies' samples, see Figs. 1 and 2). Thus, people higher in SDO could, in first instance, consider leaving a hierarchy-attenuating institution, also exposing work environments to turnover related issues.

However, a more focused perspective suggests that leaving a given academic career still requires that one find a new position for oneself, so exiting may be considered relatively high in cost and thus people can be inclined to stay in the organization. According to this notion, some authors (i.e., Williamson & Perumal, 2021) questioned the people's decision to drop out of the institution because of the P-E misfit, especially in contexts of chronically insecure labor market. Therefore, people experiencing P-E misfit could choose to "stay" searching for strategies for dealing with the implied physical, psychological and social costs. Coherent with this argument, our results imply that students whose SDO levels misalign with how they perceive the context can employ psychological means of dealing with a P-E misfit (Tesi et al., 2020). In particular, the motivational shaping process is about to find a way to be committed to the hierarchy-attenuating context for essentially hierarchy-enhancing reasons. Thus, for people high in SDO, construing one's career path as devoted to self-advantage and self-promotion could be a self-regulatory option to reduce perceived P-E misfit – but note that that orientation goes against the objectives of social work. This retention process can lead to detente between the personal hierarchy-enhancing motives and the social work hierarchy-attenuating practices. Hence, high SDO persons could derogate all those aspects that help improve the living conditions of fragile clients but favor their profession for how it provides personal benefits. In order to prevent this outcome, our results suggest that social work students may benefit from career-counseling by professional psychologists to either find aspects of self-construal to identify motivations that could be aligned with a sustainable social work career, or alternatively to orienting them to exiting social work in favor of other faculties. Further, managers of social services should consider possible consequence for the social work practice amongst workers who experience P-E misfit (Deng et al., 2016). In particular, social work organizations should pay particular attention to processes related to personnel selection and personnel evaluation. Our results suggest that both SDO and the personal motives for pursuing a social work career should be considered in career counseling of those intending a career in social work in order to prevent having personnel who might derogate helping professions' mission and perhaps undermine social work good

practices (i.e., the quality of relationships with colleagues and service end-users; Tesi, 2021).

Our results also have implications for organizational diversity. The numerous processes producing P-E fit tend to make organizations somewhat homogenous in terms of general social outlooks, such as in their members' levels of SDO and their members' favorite ideologies and prejudices. But to the extent that such homogeneity might discourage members of certain groups from entering certain career paths, this produces problems for equity and inclusion (e.g., few men becoming social workers). Recognizing that there is a variety of value systems and motivational paths within any profession may help encourage people who do not feel their values are typical of their profession to nonetheless feel they belong to it. Similarly, recognizing that one may pursue a number of career paths for a variety of motivational reasons can help increase diversity of those in that career. Although it might reduce implicit consensus on SDO-related values, divergent viewpoints might lead in some cases to more creative problem-solving in organizations, especially if organizational processes and such viewpoints heterogeneity are managed by qualified professionals (e.g., social and organizational psychologists, human resources specialists in social work practice). To the extent public and economic support of social work programs is required, then having both hierarchy-enhancing and hierarchy-attenuating frames might be necessary for embedding and broadening the two frames among stakeholders, without derogating the markedly helping nature of this profession.

### Limitations and future perspectives

The present study has some limitations that could be addressed in future research. Since our study aimed to evaluate the P-E misfit for those early in their careers, we opted to use a cross-sectional design that does not allow us to test for change over time. Future longitudinal studies and experimental studies could expand our findings to better test causality of the processes we specified. Moreover, we opted to prime participants about the hierarchy-attenuatingness of the institution to make the institutional norm salient. We therefore do not know whether the effects would be as strong if we had not reminded participants of the hierarchy-attenuating culture they were joining through their professional studies. Further, our samples were unbalanced in terms of gender, although importantly, this is a typical condition of many social work settings mostly populated by women than by men (e.g., Aiello et al., 2018; Seelman & Walls, 2010; Tesi, 2021). We statistically controlled for participants' genders. We did find that male (vs. female) students tend to perceive higher levels of P-E misfit (i.e., Sample 2) and were more prone to adopt a pro-self HE motivation (i.e., Sample

1). Note, though, that statistically controlling for participant gender did not reduce the hypothesized mediation effects. Nonetheless, future research could examine the influences of gender-related variables in a larger range of contexts.

The line of inquiry we have opened here can inspire future research pertaining to how aspects of people and aspects of their local cultures combine to influence the dynamics of workplaces and of institutions that influence how much societies maintain or attenuate group-based dominance. One agenda for future research is to explore possible intervening variables that could help the understanding of when and how people can opt for differential attrition (exit) instead of motivational shaping process or vice versa.

Further, there are any number of other ways that motivational shaping might be expressed than the one we studied here. Whereas we specifically explored the role of self-other motivation, but there may be additional ways to construe oneself in line with being higher on SDO in the face of a hierarchy-attenuating culture that would also be means of motivational shaping. This line of study would be useful for expanding understanding of self-regulation and for career counseling. An alternative way to find self-coherence has been suggested by those studies pointing out that an organization could also attempt to socialize people across the time for adhering to its norms, even through rewarding people's efforts to agree with organizational values (e.g., Dambrun et al., 2009; Haley & Sidanius, 2005). Thus, one might expect that someone higher in SDO in a hierarchy-attenuating context could change his/her socially dominant beliefs with time.

Also, because we examined only a single hierarchy-attenuating context (social work), we also do not know what additional strategies might occur to people experiencing P-E misfit in other hierarchy-attenuating settings (e.g., health and humanitarian organizations). Another interesting line of study could deepen the other form of P-E misfit, that is how people low in SDO deal with a hierarchy-enhancing context. Additional studies should test whether, as in the present studies, the same processes of differential attrition and motivation shaping are ways through which those with an anti-dominant mindset respond to a hierarchy-enhancing environment. However, the literature pertaining how people struggle against oppressive hierarchical systems (Mugny & Pérez, 1991) also suggests that a bottom-up influence from people to environment should be considered in future studies. It is worth noting that literature about the mindset of very low-SDO people is yet very limited, so this is a promising field of study that need to be addressed in future research (Pratto et al., 2012). In the present study, we opted to measure P-E misfit between people's beliefs and the institutional culture; however other kinds of fit/misfit could be measured such as person-supervisor fit, person-job fit, person-group

fit and person-vocation fit (see also Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011.; Su et al., 2014; Tesi, Aiello, Pratto et al., 2019b).

## Conclusion

The present study reveals two methods of coping with P-E misfit for people with relatively high SDO levels who inhabit contexts that culturally and functionally favor hierarchy-attenuating values. Our results suggest that people experiencing this P-E misfit could, (i) leave the institution, resulting in greater P-E fit by differential attrition, (ii) commit to the vocational context by self-regulating their motivation around the idea that their actions in the environments primarily serve personal interests potentially fulfilling their dominant position, instead of serving the pro-egalitarian function of the institution. The present study invites further research on the understudied and potentially important processes by which individuals or organizational cultures may change when confronted with P-E misfit concerning group dominance or group equality.

## APPENDIX A

A series of studies have pointed out that Social Work degree courses are one of those degree course that most of all lessen social hierarchies and promotes social equality among groups as a core value.

Policies and practices that are taught in Social Work degree courses particularly favor the improvement of the position of socially, politically, and economically disadvantaged people (e.g., immigrants, poor people, elderly people, disabled people, psychiatric patients) in an attempt to reduce the disparities gap between these people and those with privileges.

Taking into consideration what you have just read, please write down your disagreement/agreement with the following statements.

**Authors' contributions** Conceptualization: Alessio Tesi, Antonio Aiello and Felicia Pratto; Methodology, formal analysis and investigation: Alessio Tesi; Writing - original draft preparation: Alessio Tesi; Writing - review and editing: Alessio Tesi, Antonio Aiello and Felicia Pratto; Supervision: Antonio Aiello and Felicia Pratto.

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**Data Availability** The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available following local legal and privacy restrictions (Italian Data Protection Code; Legislative Decree No. 196/2003) but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

**Competing interests** The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

**Compliance with ethical standards** The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Italian Association of Psychology (AIP). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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