

## Support for Harsh Criminal Sanctions and Criminal Justice Beliefs: A Social Dominance Perspective

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*Much of the criminal justice literature indicates that people's support for harsh criminal sanctions such as the death penalty is strongly related to their beliefs about deterrence and their beliefs about retribution. In this paper, using social dominance theory as our organizing framework, we expand upon this literature by showing that social dominance orientation (SDO) is also related to support for harsh criminal sanctions, as well as to deterrence and retribution beliefs. In addition, we show that the relationships between SDO, on the one hand, and support for various forms of severe criminal sanctions, on the other, are mediated by deterrence and retribution beliefs.*

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**KEY WORDS:** death penalty attitudes; deterrence; retribution; social dominance orientation; torture.

### INTRODUCTION

How can we account for individual differences in people's support for harsh criminal sanctions such as the death penalty and torture of prisoners, which has recently re-entered the public debate? The standard criminal justice literature has discussed this issue in terms of at least two theoretical models: (1) the deterrence model, which suggests that people's support

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arises from the belief that harsh sanctions will prevent future crimes, and (2) the retribution model, which instead suggests that people's support arises from the simple motive to have criminals "pay for" their crimes. Notably, in *Atkins versus Virginia*, The United States Supreme Court identified retribution and deterrence as the two most important social purposes served by the death penalty (see Scott and Gerbasi, 2003; see also *Gregg versus Georgia*).

### **The Deterrence Model**

The deterrence model concerns two different types of deterrence beliefs: beliefs about specific deterrence and beliefs about general deterrence (see Vidmar and Miller, 1980). Specific deterrence (also known as incapacitation) refers to the idea that harsh criminal sanctions are useful for ensuring that convicted criminals are unable to commit future crimes, while general deterrence refers to the notion that such sanctions deter *other* potential criminals. Thomas, the major proponent of the deterrence model, has shown strong evidence for the relationship between deterrence beliefs (general and specific) and death penalty support (Thomas, 1977; Thomas and Foster, 1975; Thomas and Howard, 1977). More recent empirical work has also shown that support for the death penalty is strongly associated with a belief in its deterrent effects, even among prison inmates (Steele and Wilcox, 2003).

### **The Retribution Model**

The retribution model, by contrast, maintains that support for harsh criminal sanctions is rooted in moral concerns (Bohm, 1987; Vidmar and Miller, 1980). The retribution motive is captured by the idea of revenge or "an eye for an eye"; the concern here is with extracting "justice" through punishments that are as commensurate as possible with crimes. In the case of murder, then, it is those with strong retribution beliefs who are expected to support capital punishment.

Numerous studies have shown that retribution beliefs are indeed related to death penalty support (Ellsworth and Ross, 1983; Thomas, 1977; Thomas and Howard, 1977; Tyler and Weber, 1982). Nonetheless, Thomas has argued that deterrence beliefs have a stronger net effect (Thomas, 1977; Thomas and Howard, 1977). In support of that view, he found that the relationship between retribution beliefs and death penalty support is attenuated when controlling for deterrence beliefs, but that the relationship between deterrence beliefs and death penalty support remains strong even when controlling for retribution beliefs.

### Social Dominance Theory and Motivated Cognitions

Rather than choosing between the retribution and deterrence perspectives, social dominance theory suggests that both sets of beliefs might be strongly involved in support for harsh criminal sanctions. The theory further suggests that both sets of beliefs can be regarded as “motivated,” “legitimizing” ideologies—ideologies that serve to satisfy and justify a more core desire for group-based social inequality. In this respect, social dominance theorists have much in common with proponents of ideology as motivated social cognition, who have shown, in broad terms, that personal and social motivations can make important contributions to policy-related attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Borowiak and Golec, 2004; Jost *et al.*, 2003; Redlawsk, 2002), and with adherents of critical legal studies, who have suggested that moral, ideological, and political discourses are motivated discourses of power and subordination (e.g., Unger, 1986).

In making the argument that deterrence and retribution beliefs function as “legitimizing” ideologies, social dominance theorists begin by pointing out that, within societies that are structured as group-based social hierarchies, the criminal justice system is much more likely to apply harsh criminal sanctions against members of subordinate social groups (e.g., the poor, stigmatized ethnic/racial minorities) than against members of dominant social groups (e.g., the wealthy, majority ethnic/racial groups), *everything else being equal* (for extensive evidence supporting this claim, see Baldus *et al.*, 1990; Gross and Mauro 1989; Sidanius and Pratto 1999; Sweeny and Haney 1992). Indeed, under normal circumstances, and when hierarchical social systems are relatively stable (e.g., during non-revolutionary periods), the relationship between social status and the likelihood of being targeted for harsh criminal sanctions is so strong that one can easily identify which social groups are subordinate within a social system by simply noting which groups are overrepresented in that society’s prisons, dungeons, or execution chambers.

Social dominance theory further suggests that conflicts between dominant and subordinate groups are kept in check, in part, as a result of the widespread acceptance of “legitimizing beliefs”—values, attitudes, causal attributions, and ideologies that provide moral and intellectual justification for existing hierarchical social orders, unequal distributions of social value, and social policies that promote hierarchy (see also Gramsci, 1971). Indeed, in line with this view, research suggests that the more widespread or “consensual” these beliefs are, the easier it is for a society to peacefully maintain social inequality without resorting to physical coercion (see Jackman, 1994; Jost *et al.*, 2001, 2004; Sidanius *et al.*, 2001).

Now, given the intimate relationship between the social hierarchy and the meting out of harsh criminal sanctions, it is reasonable to infer that people's attitudes about social hierarchy will be related to their attitudes about the death penalty and other severe criminal punishments. Notably, this is exactly what a broad motivated social cognitive perspective would suggest as well. The wealth of empirical research on motivated social cognition has demonstrated that people's attitudes are dictated not just by their values, beliefs, and powers of logical reasoning, but also by a more complicated set of conscious and unconscious personal motivations (e.g., self-enhancement) and social motivations (e.g., group dominance; e.g., see Duckitt, 2001; Dunning, 1999; Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Greenwald, 1980; Kunda, 2000). As applied to political and policy attitudes, this perspective posits—in the most general terms—that personal and social motivations can make meaningful contributions to the way people think and behave politically (e.g., see Borowiak and Golec, 2004; Jost *et al.*, 2003; Redlawsk, 2002). For example, in a recent meta-analysis examining 88 studies from a total of 12 different countries, Jost *et al.* (2003) demonstrated that politically conservative worldviews are, at least in part, shaped by three large clusters of motivations: (a) epistemic motivations (e.g., the motivation for cognitive closure); (b) existential motivations (e.g., the motivation for positive self-esteem); and (c) ideological motivations (e.g., the motivation for group dominance). Similarly, Borowiak and Golec (2004) recently reported that the need for cognitive closure is associated with people's endorsement of “traditional” and “modern” (as opposed to “postmodern”) worldviews. Importantly, though, it should be observed that all of these researchers also emphasize that people *do* often behave rationally—by attempting to gather trustworthy information about political issues, for example—and *do* often rely on beliefs, values, and logical reasoning when forming their views. They are simply calling attention to the fact that motivational factors can *also* play extremely important roles.

From a general group dominance perspective, the use of harsh criminal sanctions, including the death penalty and severe torture, is not only a means of maintaining social order, but also a means of maintaining the *hierarchical* nature of this social order. As a result of the hierarchical implications of these harsh criminal sanctions, there is good reason to expect that support of these sanctions will be closely related to the desire to establish and maintain group-based social inequality (a desire indexed by one's level of social dominance orientation (SDO, see, e.g., Pratto *et al.*, 1994; Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). In addition, because of the need to rationalize and justify hierarchy-enhancing social policies, social dominance theorists have suggested that the effects of SDO on support for harsh punitive policies will tend to be mediated by various “legitimizing” social ideologies and beliefs. These legitimizing ideologies should

include, among other things, “motivated” beliefs in both retribution and deterrence. In other words, from the perspective of social dominance theory, beliefs in retribution and deterrence can be thought of as part of a more general model in which criminal justice beliefs (e.g., beliefs in retribution and deterrence) function to mediate individuals’ desires for group-based social inequality and dominance, on one hand, and their support for severe and even ferocious forms of criminal sanctions, on the other hand.

Given the reasoning above, we will test two simple hypotheses. First, we will test the idea, implied by the logic of social dominance theory, that people’s desire for group-based social inequality and hierarchy is positively correlated with their support for harsh criminal sanctions, as well as with their endorsement of the dominant criminal justice beliefs that currently serve to justify such criminal sanctions (i.e., deterrence and retribution beliefs). Second, we will additionally test the idea that the relationship between support for group-based social hierarchy and endorsement of harsh criminal sanctions is significantly *mediated* by the dominant criminal justice beliefs (i.e., beliefs in deterrence and retribution).

## METHOD

### Respondents

The respondents were 401 UCLA undergraduate students who participated in this research in partial fulfillment of course requirements. Fifty-four percent of the respondents were female, and the ethnic composition of the sample was: Asian, 136 (33.9%); Black, 32 (8.0%); Hispanic, 55 (13.7%); and White, 178 (44.4%).

### Measures

The survey consisted of seven individual attitude measures, all of which used a 7-point scale ranging from “1-Strongly disagree” to “7-Strongly agree.” Where possible, items from previous research were used.

### Criminal Justice Beliefs

Three criminal justice beliefs were measured: (a) a belief in general deterrence; (b) a belief in specific deterrence (i.e., incapacitation); and (c) a belief in retribution. In each case, the greater one’s score, the greater one’s endorsement of the given belief (see specific descriptions of each scale below).

### *Belief in General Deterrence Scale*

This scale was composed of items drawn from Ellsworth and Ross (1983), Fagan (1986), and Tyler and Weber (1982), as well as items created for this research. The eight items making up this scale were: (a) "The death penalty deters crime"; (b) "The death penalty does nothing to solve the crime problem" (reverse-coded); (c) "Criminals think twice before committing a crime which carries the death penalty"; (d) "There is no evidence that the death penalty reduces crime" (reverse-coded); (e) "Capital punishment has never been effective in preventing crime" (reverse-coded); (f) "Crime would decrease if we used the death penalty more often"; (g) "There are fewer murders right after an execution"; and (h) "If the death penalty were abolished, the crime rate would not change" (reverse-coded;  $\alpha = 0.83$ ).

### *Belief in Specific Deterrence (Incapacitation) Scale*

This scale was created using items from Fagan (1986) and items created by the authors. The four items comprising this scale were: (a) "If not executed, murderers will commit more crimes in the future"; (b) "Those given life sentences for murder will probably kill again in prison"; (c) "We do not need the death penalty to insure that a murderer never repeats his crime" (reverse-coded); and (d) "If not executed, a murderer will be on the street in a few years" ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ).

### *Belief in Retribution Scale*

This scale was used to measure a belief in the value of revenge, and was indexed by items drawn from Fagan (1986), Seltzer and McCormick (1987), and Tyler and Weber (1982), as well as by items created by the authors for this survey. The four items making up this scale were: (a) "Those who hurt others deserve to be hurt in return"; (b) "Society does not have the right to get revenge for a murder" (reverse-coded); (c) "For a terrible crime, there should be a terrible penalty"; and (d) "Punishment should fit the crime" ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ).

### **Harsh Criminal Sanctions**

In measuring support for harsh criminal sanctions, we examined a cluster of 17 items dealing with support for the death penalty, desire for harsh treatment of criminals, and desire for painful executions. Exploratory factor analysis revealed that these items clustered into three primary and

correlated factors, which we descriptively named as follows: (a) Support for the Death Penalty; (b) General Punitiveness; and (c) Support for Lethal Torture.

#### *Support for the Death Penalty*

This factor was assessed with eight items: (a) “I support the use of capital punishment”; (b) “I favor the death penalty”; (c) “I favor a law which permits the execution of convicted murderers”; (d) “We must have capital punishment for some crimes”; (e) “Capital punishment should be used more often than it is”; (f) “No offense is so serious that it deserves to be punished by death” (reverse-coded); (g) “I do not believe in capital punishment in any circumstances” (reverse-coded); and (h) “Capital punishment is never justified (reverse-coded;  $\alpha = 0.97$ ).

#### *General Punitiveness*

This second factor was defined by the following three items: (a) “I support harsher police measures”; (b) “If we let the police get tough, the crime problem in this country will be solved”; and (c) “Harsher treatment of criminals is not the solution to the crime problem” (reverse-coded;  $\alpha = 0.67$ ).

#### *Support for Lethal Torture*

This third factor was indexed using six items: (a) “Murderers should suffer when they are executed”; (b) “If people have to be executed, they should be executed in the most painless way possible” (reverse-coded); (c) “When using the electric chair for executions, the voltage should be applied slowly so the criminal suffers before dying”; (d) “Executions should be as bloodless as possible” (reverse-coded); (e) “We should use more graphic forms of executions (such as a firing squad);” (f) “I might support the use of burning [people] alive to execute those who commit the most heinous crimes” ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ).

### **Social Dominance Orientation**

#### *The Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) Scale*

Support for group-based dominance and social hierarchy was operationalized by use of the SDO Scale (i.e., SDO<sub>2b</sub> Scale; Sidanius and

**Table I.** Attenuated Correlations Among Variables (Lower Diagonal), and Variable Means and Standard Deviations (Rightmost Columns)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	Means	SDs
1. SDO							2.37	0.776
2. General deterrence	0.324**						3.96	1.161
3. Specific deterrence	0.275**	0.477**					4.12	1.298
4. Retribution	0.279**	0.425**	0.547**				4.96	1.235
5. Death penalty support	0.312**	0.605**	0.647**	0.695**			4.71	1.717
6. General punitiveness	0.351**	0.390**	0.309**	0.347**	0.375**		3.30	1.245
7. Support for torture	0.273**	0.288**	0.495**	0.434**	0.465**	0.340**	2.43	1.232

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Pratto, 1999). This scale has been used extensively in social psychological research, and has been found to have very high-construct validity as a measure of generalized anti-egalitarianism, generalized prejudice, and support of group-based social hierarchy (see Pratto *et al.*, 1994; Sidanius and Pratto, 1999; see also Altemeyer, 1998; Ekehammar *et al.*, 2004; Heaven and St. Quintin, 2003; Van Hiel and Mervielde, 2002). The reliability of the SDO scale in this sample was quite satisfactory ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ).

## RESULTS

In exploring the questions before us, we first computed the product-moment correlations among all of the variables. In addressing our first hypothesis, the correlations of primary interest were those between SDO, on one hand, and all of the remaining variables (all of the variables concerning criminal justice beliefs and policy attitudes), on the other (see Table I). As can be seen in Table I, SDO was indeed found to be positively and significantly correlated with all three criminal justice beliefs: belief in general deterrence ( $r = 0.32$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ); belief in specific deterrence ( $r = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ); and belief in retribution ( $r = 0.28$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In addition, the SDO scale was positively and significantly correlated with all three criminal justice sanctions: support of the death penalty ( $r = 0.31$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ); support of general punitiveness ( $r = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ); and support of lethal torture ( $r = 0.27$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Consistent with the view of political conservatism as motivated social cognition (see Jost *et al.*, 2003), we also found that a composite measure of political conservatism was significantly correlated with both SDO ( $r = 0.38$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and the three deterrence and retribution beliefs (correlations varying between  $r = 0.14$ ,  $p < 0.01$  and  $r = 0.20$ ). In addition, political conservatism was found to be correlated with support for the death penalty ( $r = 0.21$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), support for general punitiveness ( $r = 0.26$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and support for torture ( $r = 0.14$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

The next general question we addressed concerned whether or not the relationships between SDO and support for harsh criminal justice sanctions (i.e., support for the death penalty, general punitiveness, and lethal torture) were significantly mediated by criminal justice beliefs (i.e., beliefs regarding general deterrence, specific deterrence, and retribution). To explore this broad question we estimated a series of structural equation models (using LISREL 8.54), in which we examined whether support for harsh criminal justice sanctions is driven directly by criminal justice beliefs and indirectly by SDO.

All of our SEM analyses used maximum likelihood parameter estimates, and employed variance–covariance matrices as input. We also inserted the square-roots of the estimated reliability coefficients (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients) into the  $\lambda_x$  and  $\lambda_y$  matrices, and the estimated error terms into the  $\theta_\delta$  and  $\theta_\epsilon$  matrices. These steps allowed us to simplify model estimation yet also take account of the imperfect reliabilities of our variables by estimating the unattenuated relationships among them.<sup>2</sup> It should also be noted that the covariances among the error terms for the three criminal justice beliefs (i.e., general deterrence, specific deterrence and retribution—elements of the  $\psi$ -matrix) were estimated but are not shown in the figures in order to simplify our presentation of the results.

The first model we estimated examines support of the death penalty as a direct function of the three criminal justice beliefs and as an indirect function of SDO (see Fig. 1). Inspection of the standardized coefficients in Fig. 1 shows that all three criminal justice beliefs made independent and statistically significant contributions to people's support of the death penalty. However, belief in retribution was found to make a stronger unique contribution to the prediction of death penalty support than either belief in general deterrence or belief in specific deterrence (i.e.,  $\beta = 0.49$  versus  $\beta = 0.26$  and  $\beta = 0.25$ , respectively).<sup>3</sup> More importantly, though, inspection of the LISREL results revealed that the *entire* relationship between SDO and support for the death penalty was accounted for by the indirect, or mediated, effects [indirect effects (IE) = 0.35,  $p < 0.01$ ].<sup>4</sup> Inspection of the individual mediational paths indicated that most of the mediational “work” was being done by retribution (IE = 0.17), followed by general deterrence (IE = 0.10), and then specific deterrence (IE = 0.08).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the model in Fig. 1

<sup>2</sup>For a justification of this procedure, see Hertig (1985).

<sup>3</sup>Note that only standardized coefficients are shown in the figure. Within LISREL notation,  $\beta$ -coefficients refer to direct causal relationships among endogenous variables.

<sup>4</sup>Note that these indirect effect analyses are essentially equivalent to the results that one would obtain by use of the Sobel Test.

<sup>5</sup>The mediational role of retribution between SDO and death penalty support is simply calculated by multiplying the connecting path coefficients (IE =  $0.34 \times 0.49 = 0.17$ ). Thus, the total indirect effect of SDO on death penalty support is merely:  $(0.34 \times 0.49) + (0.34 \times 0.25) + (0.38 \times 0.26) = 0.35$ .

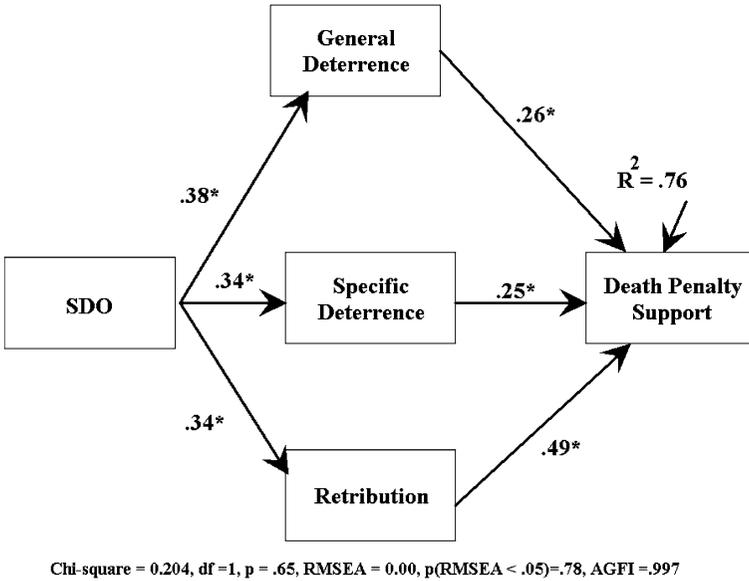


Fig. 1. Support for the death penalty as a function beliefs in general deterrence, specific deterrence, retribution, and SDO.

was found to have an excellent fit overall (i.e.,  $\chi^2 [1] = 0.20, p = 0.65, RMSEA = 0.00, p [RMSEA < 0.05] = 0.78, AGFI = 1.00$ ).

While we have strong theoretical reason to expect deterrence and retribution beliefs to be proximal determinants of death penalty support, one can also imagine the reverse causal sequence. That is, it is possible that, once people have established (for whatever reason) a position on the death penalty, deterrence and retribution beliefs are simply adopted to give a rational patina to their policy positions. To explore this possibility we estimated a model in which death penalty support was regressed upon SDO and the three deterrence and retribution beliefs were each modeled to be *determined by* support for the death penalty. As expected, the results here showed that this model did not provide a good fit to the empirical data (i.e.,  $\chi^2 [3] = 15.86, p = 0.001, RMSEA = 0.10, p [RMSEA < 0.05] = 0.03, AGFI = 0.92$ ).

Turning to our second dependent variable, support for general punitiveness, our analysis revealed that while beliefs in general deterrence and retribution were significant independent predictors, belief in specific deterrence was not a significant predictor (see Fig. 2). Thus, belief in specific deterrence did not mediate the relationship between SDO and general punitiveness. However, consistent with expectations, SDO was still found to

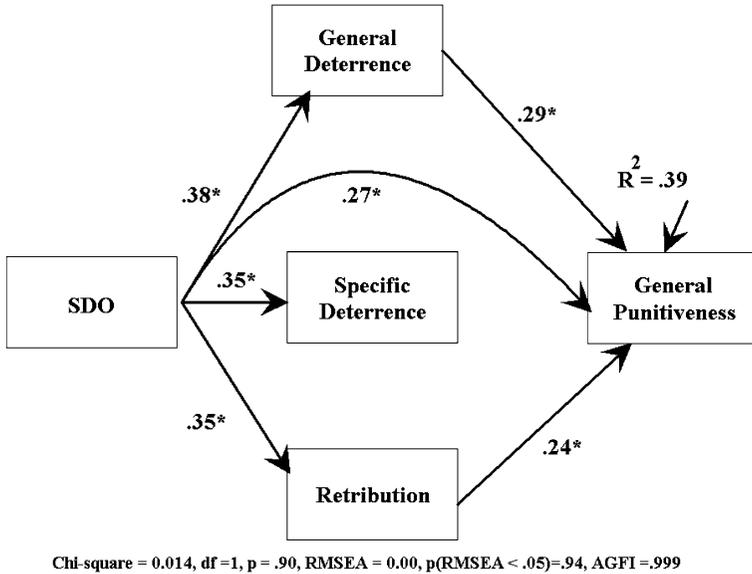


Fig. 2. Support for general punitiveness as a function beliefs in general deterrence, specific deterrence, retribution, and SDO.

have a statistically significant indirect (mediated) effect on support for general punitiveness via beliefs in general deterrence and retribution (IE = 0.19,  $p < 0.01$ ). Belief in general deterrence appears to do slightly more mediational “work” than does belief in criminal retribution (i.e., IE = 0.11 versus IE = 0.08). However, most of the disattenuated relationship between SDO and support for general punitiveness (i.e., total standardized effect = 0.46) was not mediated by the criminal justice beliefs, but was rather found to be a result of the direct effect of SDO (i.e.,  $\gamma = 0.27, p < 0.01$ ).<sup>6</sup> Altogether though, this model was also found to have an excellent overall fit to the empirical data (i.e.,  $\chi^2 [1] = 0.01, p = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.00, p [RMSEA < 0.05] = 0.94, AGFI = 1.00$ ).

Once again, we also explored the possibility that deterrence and retribution beliefs were being driven by general punitiveness rather than the reverse. While the results of this analysis did indeed show that all three deterrence and retribution beliefs were significantly predicted by support of general punitiveness, the alternative model as a whole still did not display a

<sup>6</sup>Note that in LISREL notation,  $\gamma$  is the symbol used to represent the regression of an endogenous variable upon an exogenous variable, or the direct effect of an exogenous variable on an endogenous variable.

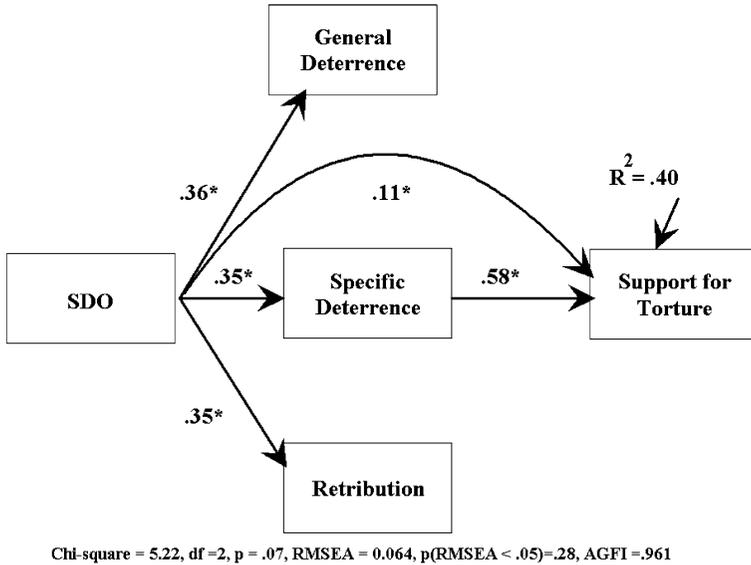


Fig. 3. Support for torture as a function beliefs in general deterrence, specific deterrence, retribution, and SDO.

high level of fit (i.e.,  $\chi^2[3] = 9.95$ ,  $p = 0.90$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.07$ ,  $p [RMSEA < 0.05] = 0.15$ ,  $AGFI = 0.95$ ).

We next examined predictors of support for lethal torture (see Fig. 3). Consistent with the expectations of social dominance theory, the unattenuated relationship between SDO and torture support was found to be quite substantial (i.e., total effect = 0.31,  $p < 0.01$ ). Thus, the greater individuals' support of group-based dominance, the more they favor the practice of torturing people to death. However, unlike the results found for both support of the death penalty (Fig. 1) and support of general punitiveness (Fig. 2), the results here indicated that only one of the three criminal justice beliefs—belief in specific deterrence—mediated the SDO effect (note that non-significant paths are not shown in Fig. 3). The indirect (mediated) effect of SDO on torture support was 0.20 ( $p < 0.01$ ), which accounted for 65% of the total disattenuated relationship between SDO and torture support. However, this mediated relationship was only partial; SDO was found to have a significant direct effect on torture support as well ( $\gamma = 0.11$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Finally, while the overall model fit was adequate, it was not nearly as good a fit as found with the previous two models (i.e.,  $\chi^2[2] = 5.22$ ,  $p = 0.07$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.06$ ,  $p[RMSEA < 0.05] = 0.28$ ,  $AGFI = 0.96$ ).

Finally, we also explored the plausibility of the idea that deterrence and retribution beliefs are driven by support of torture rather than the reverse.

While the results of this analysis did indeed indicate that there was a strong direct relationship between SDO and support for torture, and that support for torture, in turn, was strongly related to all three criminal justice beliefs, the model as a whole showed very poor fit to the empirical data. (i.e.,  $\chi^2[3] = 30.57$ ,  $p = 0.00$ , RMSEA = 0.15.,  $p[\text{RMSEA} < 0.05] = 0.00$ , AGFI = 0.86).

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Standard criminal justice models suggest that support for the death penalty and other harsh criminal justice sanctions is driven by the public's belief in various forms of criminal deterrence and the moral imperative of criminal retribution (e.g., see Darley and Pittman, 2003; Oswald *et al.*, 2002; Payne, 2003; Payne *et al.*, 2003; Scott and Gerbasi, 2003; Steele and Wilcox, 2003; Thomas and Howard, 1977; Vidmar and Miller, 1980). The bulk of the empirical evidence provides little reason to doubt the essential correctness of this view. However, social dominance theorists would argue that these deterrence and criminal retribution beliefs are, in part, driven by more fundamental values (see also Feather and Souter, 2002). These theorists suggest that one set of general values likely to be significantly associated with criminal justice beliefs is encapsulated by the variable of SDO (the desire to establish and maintain systems of group-based social hierarchy). This perspective argues that very severe negative sanctions, such as the death penalty and torture, are more likely to be used as instruments of social control against members of subordinate groups than against members of dominant groups, and to be rationalized in terms of general criminal justice and moral principles. As a result, there is strong theoretical reason to expect not only that SDO will be substantially related to support for these severe negative sanctions, but also that these beliefs and moral arguments will be used to justify these severe sanctions.

The empirical data in this study were quite consistent with these theoretical expectations. Not only was SDO positively correlated with each of the forms of severe negative sanctions examined (i.e., the death penalty, general punitiveness, and even torture), but SDO was also positively associated with endorsement of those criminal justice beliefs which are used to legitimize and justify these criminal justice practices. Furthermore, and consistent with the assumptions of social dominance theory, criminal justice beliefs were found to either partly or completely (in the case of death penalty support) mediate the relationships between SDO and support for severe criminal sanctions. In other words, the empirical data are consistent with the notion that support for severe criminal sanctions is, at least in part, motivated by the desire to establish and maintain group-based social hierarchy,

and is additionally rationalized or justified in terms of moral norms (e.g., retribution) and/or causal beliefs (i.e., belief in deterrence).

Thus, rather than contradicting important assumptions within the standard criminal justice models, we suggest that the social dominance paradigm be seen as a complement to them. Within a social dominance approach, generalized punitiveness, capital punishment, and even torture are seen as special cases of a broader arsenal of state-sponsored violence, which tends to be disproportionately directed against subordinated and stigmatized groups within the social system (see Sidanius *et al.*, 1994; Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). Even though execution combined with torture has not been *officially* practiced in the United States for more than 150 years, it was common during the lynching of Black Americans since the beginning of the republic (see Ginsburg, 1988).<sup>7</sup> It is also worth noting that while the vast majority of US states practicing the death penalty authorize the (relatively painless) execution method of lethal injection as an alternative, there are states that continue to execute inmates via the (somewhat to very painful) methods of electrocution, gas, hanging, and firing squad (e.g., see Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin, 2003). Thus, from a social dominance perspective, attitudes toward lethal torture remain important and interesting objects of study.

Despite the consistency between theoretical expectations and the empirical data found here, there are a number of reasons to treat these findings with a certain amount of caution. First, deterrence and retribution beliefs completely mediated the relationship between SDO and harsh criminal sanctions only in the case of death penalty support. In the other two cases (i.e., regarding general punitiveness and torture), only partial mediation was found. The greater mediational power in the first case may be largely due to the fact that the general public discourse surrounding harsh criminal sanctions is primarily framed in terms of the death penalty rather than in terms of tougher police measures or support for torture. As a matter of fact, until very recently, the issue of torture has not been part of the public discourse in the United States at all. Second, because the methodology used here is correlational rather than experimental, the causal implications suggested here are yet to be confirmed in a definitive manner. Third, even though the alternative models, which assume that deterrence and retribution beliefs are the results rather than the proximal causes of support for harsh criminal sanctions, generally did not have strong empirical support, these alternative models cannot be rejected out of hand. While we did not have the data necessary to test models of reciprocal causation (i.e., so-called non-recursive models), and the recursive models we proposed had strong

<sup>7</sup>For the latest example of this form violence see the details of the James Byrd lynching (<http://www.texasnaacp.org/jasper.htm>).

empirical support, future work should be designed to test such reciprocal models. Fourth, despite the supportive evidence found here, it should also be pointed out that one of the basic assumptions of the social dominance model has yet to be explicitly addressed. Namely, even assuming that SDO motives actually drive criminal justice beliefs in the manner suggested here, and even assuming that members of subordinate groups are more likely to face harsher negative sanctions than members of dominant groups, everything else being equal, there is still no direct empirical evidence for the idea that these forces actually contribute to the production or maintenance of group-based social hierarchy. This is a central issue that social dominance theorists must try to address in future research. Nonetheless, while there is no direct evidence that the disproportionate application of severe negative sanctions actually *contributes* to group-based social hierarchy, there is at least some empirical evidence that the use of such sanctions (e.g., capital punishment) is significantly *associated with* group-based social hierarchy. In the only empirical study of its type of which we are aware, Mitchell and Sidanius (1995) found that, when using the 50 US states and 147 different countries as the units of analysis, the more hierarchically structured these states and nations were, the more likely they were to use capital punishment, even after controlling for other relevant factors (e.g., level of violent crime, education level, income level, etc.).

Finally, we must also caution against carrying the social dominance interpretation of these data too far. While the evidence clearly supports the notion that part of the relationship between criminal justice beliefs and support for harsh sanctions can be accounted for by the desire for group-based social inequality, it is also clear that these relationships cannot be *exclusively* understood in such terms. Thus, there is good reason to assume that beliefs in retribution and deterrence are also related to support for harsh sanctions for reasons having little to do with support for group-based social hierarchy. Exactly what these reasons are, and how they relate to the current findings, remain open questions.

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