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The Loser Syndrome – universality of the strategy of defense of discriminated groups

Abstract: If one assumes, like Mayer Hacker, that a social minority is a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are not treated as equal to other groups in a given society, then it turns out that many groups meet these criteria. In the prison subculture they are met by „losers," in the macro-social space – by all minority groups such as national, ethnic, racial minorities, but also women and some religious minorities. It is surprising that although these groups often have comparable numerical, physical, or intellectual strength to that of the mainstream group, they are unable to obtain equal treatment, respect, and all the privileges that this entails. This is probably due to a number of factors, including tradition, cultural capital, resources, and culturally established institutions promoting specific social groups. However, an equally important determinant is the own activity of individuals forming a minority group, and their ability to integrate and consolidate with their own group. Among others, the following contribute to this: lack of intra-group solidarity, orientation towards the dominant group, excessive guilt, contempt for one's own group etc.

The article deals with the barriers inherent in the minority groups themselves, which contribute significantly to the consolidation of their unfavorable status. The size and scale of these barriers contribute to the status that I call the *loser syndrome*. It is also important that the factors limiting the expansion of minority groups are similar in most minority groups. They are characterized by a certain universality.

Key words: victims, loser syndrome, oppressive situation, social minority, symptoms of the loser syndrome, humiliation, scapegoat, long-term oppressive situation.

Introduction

Although the term *loser, sucker, gull,* has a fairly well-established position in the public awareness, it is best described in relation to a certain category of prisoners. In the prison subculture, a sucker is usually defined as a man of a lower category in the structure of a second life, deprived of equal rights, someone who can be abused. Being a sucker is the consequence of losing the status of a free man in the dominant group, the so-called *mankind* (humanity) (Kosewski, 1985). What is also important, having a sucker (or mankind) status entails a lot of stigmatization both in terms of the main status and the subordinate statuses (see Becker, 1963). In the case of the sucker, it is all about the loss of subjectivity, the right to respect their decisions, the right to honor, to a rematch, or dignity. What is more, although suckers (losers) constitute quite a large population in the prison community (it is defined as 15-40%), they have not created their internal rules respected by the entire community of at least other losers (suckers). Kosewski (1985, p. 106), describing the features of suckers in the prison subculture, states that „they are a layer of prisoners deprived of common rules, and this serves as the main argument for the thesis of their lack of dignity and the right to be called mankind. Describing intergroup conflicts in the prison subculture, the author gives an example that losers (suckers) can not organize a trap against anyone, but they must have someone behind them, and act with their authority (Kosewski, 1985, p. 116). A typical example of squaring the circle. Because they have no autonomy, they can not have rights. They have no rights, they have no honor. They can not have autonomy without having honor.

The concept of the loser has a second, broader meaning, well-established in the social consciousness. It means a naive, clumsy person, a person with low social competences, who does not understand the rules governing the world, can be easily abused.

Groups that are called suckers in the prison subculture, in the macrosocial system are called **minority groups**, second-class citizens, or marginalized groups. This applies mainly to ethnic, national, religious groups, women, sexual or racial minorities. According to Mayer Hacker, a minority group is „…a group of people who because of their physical or cultural characteristics is distinguished by the fact that it is treated differently in a given society and not on an equal footing with others and which is therefore considered to be subject to collective discrimination…" (Mayer-Hacker 1982, p. 38). The opposite of the minority group is the dominant, majority, or mainstream group. As the basic factor in identifying minority groups, the author indicates the "existence of discrimination" (Mayer-Hacker, 1982, p. 38). Even more accurately this term is described by Witkowski (2005, p. 20), trying to establish different meanings of marginality. The

author states that „…Marginality, in a characteristic association, means above all unrepresentative and requiring counteracting of the deviation from the standard and norm, pushed to the side of some mainstream…".

Using the nomenclature characteristic of symbolic interactionism, it can be said that belonging to these groups is a determinant of the main status of individuals belonging to these groups. Being a loser means having the status of someone worse, incapable of self-determination, needing some rightful representative for themselves. For example, blacks are imputed with lower intelligence, women are believed to have poor leadership skills, Jews are associated with a lack of a sense of honor, homosexuals are believed to make deviant proposals, and prisoners are seen as people who allow themselves to deviations of all sorts, etc. This is the case even when the status of a deviant individual is rendered completely undeserved, for example, as a result of a rapid change in law, or administrative changes (political prisoners).

Negative self-stigmatization

The problem that I would like to focus on is not the phenomenon of discrimination of minority groups as such, but the **solidification of these inequalities by the minority groups themselves.** When analyzing the behavior of groups discriminated in society, it often seems that members of these groups (despite the awareness of inequality) are the most rigorous enforcers of adherence to these norms of inequality established by dominating groups and the most fervent promoters of their low status. Social minorities not only seem to be the hottest guardians of the norms of the dominant group, but also seem to take over the criticism from these groups and contempt for their own group. This applies to Jews, national minorities, women, prisoners etc. There are cases of a contemptuous attitude towards Jews, the great Jews who changed the world, such as Freud, Weininger, or Reich. Lewin (1941), in his study devoted to Jewish self-hatred, states that this is a frequent reaction of social minorities expressing, among others, the tendency to denigrate one's own group, uncritically take over the views of the dominating group on the subject of a minority group, accuse its own group of servile attitudes and dishonorable behavior. Sociologists notice that the most severe critics of Poles abroad are Poles themselves. Blacks against blacks.

Also Mayer-Hacker (1982), describing women as a minority group, comes to a similar conclusion: „women were hardly resistant to 'femininity,' which has been applied to them for ages […], they still display introjections universally prevailing settings. Autorepression of a minority group is often more severe than the contempt of the dominant group; women tend to be much more violent than male accusers of their own sex" (Mayer-Hacker, 1982, p. 40). Confirmation of this opinion is also found in the Polish studies of Siemieńska (1990) concerning women's leadership competences. Women managers assessed such competences

in other women as the lowest. Blafer Hrda concludes his research on the cooperation between men and women by stating that "women all over the world are less cooperative than men, they are rarely in solidarity with each other and generally fail to create lasting ties with the same gender. Even in the Western world, feminism did not strengthen the bonds between women too much" (vide: Ghiglieri 2001, p. 120).

This tendency seems to be universal. Kosewski also writes about the lack of internal solidarity among members of lower groups in the prison community in his book *Ludzie w sytuacji pokusy i upokorzenia* (People in a situation of temptation and humiliation – 1985). He provides examples of mutual harassments by suckers. The contemptuous attitude of suckers to other suckers has been repeatedly described in criminological publications by other authors. A similar opinion about discriminated groups was held by Bettelheim (1943), who described the practice of prisoners of concentration camps in relations between each other.

Although the above descriptions concern various discriminated groups, and comparisons between them may seem a bit shocking, all of them they indicate the universality of certain characteristics of behavior of members of these groups in intra and intergroup relations.

The question is, why groups that create quite a significant power in their mass not only can not fight for the equality of rights in the community in which they live, for respect for their own subjectivity, but it seems that they work earnestly to keep the existing inequalities. The simplest answer to this question lies in the defensive behaviors used by members of these groups. The absence of inner-group solidarity among subjugated groups, the victims of a long-term oppressive situation, minority groups and scapegoats is one of those social phenomena which are most difficult to accept. Meanwhile, much seems to indicate that it comprises a regularity in all types of relations based on a domination-subjugation configuration of forces. By way of example, the greatest critics of women are women themselves, as has been widely discussed by Riesman (1971). This pertains especially to a situation in which women undermine the stereotype of the female gender role. Most women insist that they have nothing in common with feminist movements, even those who owe their careers precisely to the accomplishments of, i.a. such movements (cf. Chiglieri 2001). In the prison sub-culture, the so-called „suckers", whose position is inferior to the „men" and who are consistently humiliated by the latter, more willingly identify themselves with the world of the „men" than their own (see: Kosewski 1985). Younger pupils, often repressed and ridiculed by older ones, feel more appreciated when they are accepted by the latter and without any special encouragement on their part embark upon assorted forms of tormenting their peers (Dymek-Balcerek 2000).

Similar regularities occur among national and racial minorities. Ambitious Afro-Americans do not want to live in black neighborhoods. Polish emigres avoid Polish districts, which they treat as *sui generis* ghettos testifying to their failure to

assimilate in the new homeland. Bettelheim (1943), the author of one of the most poignant studies on the adaptation of inmates to concentration camp conditions (Bettelheim was a prisoner in Dachau), wrote that the best adapted to the camp conditions were those prisoners who changed their personalities in such a way so that the world of the values accepted by the Gestapo functionaries became their own. He declared outright that the inmates "were proud" of becoming as „tough" as the Gestapo (p. 447)

Apparently, the absence of inner-group solidarity among the socially weaker groups, individuals with limited opportunities for the realization of their rights, and those yearning to turn towards the dominating group or even making persistent efforts to be accepted by their oppressors, went unnoticed for decades, mainly due to the fact that it was connected with certain (gender or racial) features and interpreted in deterministic categories. This purpose was served by, i.a. the theory of female masochism or assorted conceptions relating to minority groups. Consequently, nothing was explained, and only intuitional interpretations claimed that such features comprise a natural, i.e. inborn disposition of individuals, ascribed to a certain gender, race or species. By way of example, the excessive criticism of women by other women was explained by the fact that they are dominated by instincts oriented at winning the best possible father for their children (see: Mayer-Hacker 1982), the expansive nature of men was explained by their hormonal makeup, the inferior organizational abilities of the blacks – by the lower level of the development of this particular race (see: Riesman 1970), and the managerial skills of the Jews – by a specific natural selection channeled by certain social conditions. Only when the 1970s witnessed the development of research concerning the victims of terrorism, a phenomenon particularly disturbing at the time for Western societies and the Middle East, and when attention was drawn to the behavior of the victims of terrorism (as a rule men), were the first timid suggestions made that perhaps models of adaptation, specific for the victims, are the resultant of the given social situation in which they found themselves, its interpretation, and the duration of the oppressive conditions rather than of the biological predispositions of the victims. The first researcher whose pertinent reflections resounded widely was Symonds (1982), who launched the conception of the *Stockholm syndrome*. Symonds noticed an astonishing similarity in the conduct of the hostages of assorted terrorist acts, regardless whether they were men or women. His example was subsequently followed by successive authors who, in turn, perceived similarities between the reactions of the victims of terrorist attacks and the behavior of the victims of domestic violence (see: Pospiszyl 2003).

The behavior of victims in an oppressive situation, especially one which lasts for a longer time and in which the possibility of the functioning of the victims and often their life depend on the oppressor, is sufficiently similar to enable us to speak about a certain set of symptoms – the *loser syndrome*. This syndrome not

only possesses established and identifiable definition traits, but is a permanent and predictable phenomenon, with a rather high degree of probability. Naturally, the victim syndrome does not have to develop in the case of every person remaining under the strong pressure of the domination of others, but I claim that in the presence of certain conditions its presence is more likely than its absence.

High risk factors of the development of the loser syndrome

A number of objective conditions favor the development of the *loser syndrome*. The larger their number, the greater the likelihood of the occurrence of this set of features.

1. Distinctly different chances for the realization of the social needs of the dominating group and the subjugated group.
2. Considerable permeation of interpersonal contacts between the two groups and their actual coexistence.
3. Specific social „ghettoization" of the subjugated group, disclosed in three dimensions:
   — customs – own rites de passage, a clear-cut division of social roles, difficulties with contracting mixed marriages;
   — institutional – hostility towards integrated schools, a limited opportunity for benefitting from public institutions, offices, education and medical services, the impossibility of working in certain professions, a restriction of such civic rights as participation in representative bodies, etc.;
   — social – dependence of the possibility of the subjugated group's participation in social life upon the dominating group. In this case, the dominating group plays the role of a moderator of social contacts. Hampered access to social roles that are the source of prestige, a clan mentality.
4. The absence of institutionalized opportunities, or essential limitations, of modifying own status by the subjugated groups (hampered transition from one group to another, functioning within closed enclaves sustained by numerous stereotypes about other groups. By way of example: women are not objective, Jews are excessively ethnocentric, blacks are aggressive, etc.).
5. Unequal chances for the projection of own rights due to the absence of legal guarantees, social stereotypes, official tactics, or simply financial opportunities.
6. Actual dependence on a dominating group (legal, economic, social, and sometimes physical).
7. Greater social tolerance of the victimization of the subjugated group. If an individual from the latter group is harmed, then the reasons for this state of things are sought predominantly in provocation or neglect on the part of the

victim. Whenever such an interpretation is not taken into account then the victim is ascribed greater resilience to the incurred wrongs.

This „ghettoization" of social space, which occurs rather frequently in so-called minority groups, ultimately causes more losses than benefits, even if only because it hinders assimilation with other social groups, especially those that enjoy better access to social privileges. True, it offers a temporary feeling of security and some sort of social identity, but at the price of consolidating the status of a „second category citizen" and, as a rule, an internalization of convictions and behavior that make it difficult for the individual to transcend their own group.

This topic has been the object of considerable attention and has been described as an outright permanent phenomenon, comprising a specific quality within the social structure. By way of example, Riesman (1970) wrote about the *Negroism* of poor neighborhoods by indicating the specific forms of the adaptation of their inhabitants, which make genuine social promotion impossible. While analyzing the unique traits of women as a social group, Mayer-Hacker (1982) compared them to a *minority group*, treating it also as a certain syndrome of a second-class citizen. In Polish writings this problem has been tackled by Mirosława Gawęcka (2007), who introduced the concept of the *victimological woman* in order to describe the social status of women, which appears to include an inscribed worse access to privileges (or a greater threat of victimization) and a specific complex of inner features molded due to social adaptation to that status. In turn, the prison subculture contains a functioning concept of the „sucker'" in reference to an individual possessing a lower position in the structure of the „second life". „Being turned into a sucker", „becoming a sucker" are synonyms of social degradation and a *sui generis* transition to the role of a scapegoat[1].

Symptoms of the loser syndrome

The functioning of individuals with the „loser syndrome" in inner-group and inter-group relations is characterized by a number of specific traits.

1. **Overzealousness in observing the norms of the dominating group** with a simultaneous inclination to apply so-called double standards in relation to one's group. This overzealousness is observed in all permanently socially marginalized groups. Individuals who belong to ethnic minorities want to be a part of privileged groups, and dream about the social promotion characteristic for the latter. Prisoners who occupy a lower position in the

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[1] The problem consists of the fact that authors embarking upon the question of the self-perception of the social status of individuals as a rule focus on a certain selected social group. More general reflection on the regularities of adaptation and the consolidation of the status of a victim in a community is missing.

subculture (the „suckers") are more loyal towards inmates holding a higher position than towards their own group. Women are the harshest judges of the fulfilment of social gender roles by other women (not without reason where they assigned the role of chaperones). This overzealous observance of the norms of the dominating group is disclosed in, i.a. hostility towards feminists. The latter are often accused of violating norms pertaining to gender roles, of being unfeminine, of attempting to seize space that belongs to men, of abandoning their roles, etc., despite the fact that the objectives pursued by the feminists actually concern expanding the possibilities of realization of social rights for women. The behavior of many female members of the Polish Parliament is particularly symptomatic. In their struggle for power they outright emulate the conduct of the most bellicose feminists, but at the same time they take every opportunity to announce that they are not feminists and that they appreciate the family and traditional values.

2. **Imitation of the behavior of the dominating group in social contacts**. We come across multiple examples of this sort of behavior, both in the past and at present and in all age groups. There is no need to look far: women holding top positions are often the objects of gross epithets stressing their masculinity, not always simply connected with the fact that women are playing typically male roles. Very often the epithets are „the fault" of the women themselves who, as bosses, decide to be more masculine than the men: harsher, more ruthless, and more devoid of empathy towards their subordinates than the most pitiless man. Similar behavior is discernible in children's groups. In inner-group relations the younger children often emulate the behavior of their older schoolmates who victimize them, without special encouragement by the latter. In his extraordinary publication about behavior in extreme situations, Bettelheim (1943) wrote that concentration camp inmates who fulfilled any sort of more important function willingly imitated the facial grimaces, gestures and even the outfit of the Gestapo, despite the fact that they were punished for the latter conduct. This universal nature of copying groups that have at their disposal social power expresses longing for social promotion or a *sui generis* compensation of own weakness. Often, it is also a form of ingratiation *vis a vis* the dominating group.

3. **Contempt for one's group** is demonstrated in, i.a. ascribing to its members' lower competence in comparison with the dominating group, distrusting them, an unwillingness to assign to them more important tasks, and, finally, isolation from the group the moment social promotion has been achieved. For instance, women trust women drivers less than they do men, are less willing to go to a woman doctor, and to not appreciate female bosses despite the fact that, as Siemieńska (1990) put it, the latter are just as effective and take leave of absence just as often. The most interesting findings show that women holding top positions have the worst opinions about other

women with the same status (ibidem). The above-mentioned tendency occurs also within minority groups. Those Poles who had decided to stay abroad permanently and attain professional and social success, tend to steer clear of Polish neighborhoods and are rather unwilling to admit that they reside in districts dominated by other émigrés.

4. **Absence of inner-group solidarity.** This feature is as if a natural consequence of the above-mentioned distrust of one's group, but also of a lack of faith in the effectiveness of investing personal life objectives in a group with an inferior social position. The absence of group solidarity becomes most vivid in those communities in which the position of particular groups distinctly varies as regards access to widely comprehended social privileges, with a simultaneous small distance in mutual relations. To put it simply, such groups live close together but have different rights and opportunities. As is known, groups of this sort are described as *second-class citizens* (Mayer-Hacker 1982). This holds true also for women. In his book entitled *The Dark Side of Man*, Ghiglierii (1999; 2001 – Polish edition) noticed that the majority of women is oriented predominantly at the world of men and renders relations between women dependent upon men's attitudes. By referring to studies conducted by Blafer-Hrdy, the author asserted outright that women all over the world cooperate less than men, they rarely opt for solidarity and, as a rule, are incapable of creating permanent ties with representatives of the same gender. Even in the Western world, feminism has not enforced the bonds between women (p. 120).

5. **The absence of inner-group norms of assistance and rehabilitation for victims in subjugated groups**. It is rather characteristic that minority groups appear to be weakly integrated for the sake of the protection of the victims and insufficiently organized as regards the latter's rehabilitation.

6. **Excessive feeling of guilt -** especially towards other members of one's own group. Disadvantaged groups show a particular tendency to self-flagellation for their own failures. They see faults above all in their own and their fellow-brothers' mistakes. Feelings of guilt do not have to be destructive. They can be an important element of self-improvement, reflection on one's own weaknesses in order to eliminate them. However, this is not the case with people with the *loser syndrome*. In their case, the feeling of guilt serves to confirm their inferiority. It serves as proof that they deservedly hold their worse position. It is overwhelming, disheartening, and it proves that you cannot rely on your own group, that you will always lose against it, and at your own will.

Adaptation strategies of the individual with the loser syndrome

Apparently, the inevitable consequence of functioning in an environment of unequal chances, in an oppressive situation, and possessing the status of a subjugated individual or group, with a simultaneous strong dependence upon a dominating individual or group, is the development of a complex of individual features that make it easier for the individual to adapt to the current situation, but at the same time preserve and even strengthen the status of the subjugated person more permanent; it is also the reason why releasing oneself from an oppressive situation becomes a heroic undertaking. The most relevant features comprising this complex include:

1. **Concentration on the current situation**, the absence of far-reaching plans, an unwillingness to plan for the future, life spent according to the „here and now" principle. Consequently, persons displaying the victim syndrome devote most attention to small pleasures, the fulfilment of basic needs, conflicts concerning unimportant issues, such as whether someone has taken their usual place, used their possessions without permission, called them a name which they dislike, forgot about their habits, etc. Such persons try to grant daily habits the nature of rituals and to render them inviolable. Behavior of this sort helps them to achieve a feeling of stability and permanence.

2. **Limitation or severance of contacts with groups or persons who could become a point of reference** but who would also comprise a painful contrast with the individual's current situation. Examples include women who had failed in family life and women happy in their families, inmates and people enjoying freedom, immigrants and people who had attained success in the new environment, etc.

3. **Acceptance of the current, often degrading or outright traumatic lifestyle**. A scrupulous observance of the principles in force in the environment in which the given person functions – frequently difficult, incomprehensible, or even absurd. This conscientious observance of rules possesses a more profound meaning – it is a *sui generis* attempt at assuming control over one's life, an illusion of self-steering, an attempt at convincing oneself that as long as one acts correctly and follows the principles then the person upon whom one depends will not incur harm and also act appropriately.

4. **Search for sources of satisfaction in the conditions of a given situation**, for example, in praise bestowed by the person on which the individual is dependent, reduced pressure or the feeling of a threat, a peaceful night, some sort of a small gift, etc. From the viewpoint of the individual's life opportunities such sources of satisfaction are completely unimportant. Nor do they offer chances for development, improve their situation or alter it,

but they provide a moment's respite. They resemble a breath of fresh air in a stifling interior, or a break in the course of an endless uphill climb.

5. **Infantilization of behavior**. Existence for a longer time in a situation of dependence, especially extreme dependence, almost inevitably results in the infantilization of behavior, if only because nothing of importance in the life of a given individual depends upon them. Moreover, contrary to appearances, the infantilization of behavior becomes an important form of defense, since it favors a perception of the dependent person as not dangerous and weak, and thus eliminates the risk of intervention by the stronger party. Infantilization reveals itself in a highly emotional approach to petty issues, efforts to win the approval of the dominating persons, a demonstration of attachment to that person, submission, conflicts with members of one's group concerning irrelevant matters, complaints about discomfort, demands of small pleasures, etc.

6. **Resignation from references to the past**, especially if the latter vividly contrasts with the current situation. An unwillingness to apply comparisons with a former better life is understandable when the individual's present situation is undefined in time. Such comparisons only hamper adaptation to the current situation and cause a permanent inner conflict.

7. **Unrealistic dreams**, at times excessive and resembling child's fantasies, concern, e.g. incredible journeys in the case of a prisoner, sophisticated food during hunger/famine, great investment plans in the case of an incarcerated inmate, or romantic affairs in the case of brutal relationships. Such dreams are fairytales about a better life, totally at odds with reality, and based on the „what I would do if I could" principle.

Why are they doomed to failure?

The question is, why minority groups are so willing to switch to the proverbial features of the sucker, which are a trap for their specific location. Why do they identify with their persecutor, weaken their position with a lack of intra-group solidarity and adopt stereotypes about their oppressors. Why do they behave in a way that only strengthens their inferior position and defers the prospect of achieving equal rights. At least four explanatory hypotheses can be found here, a phenomenon that seems to elude rational reasoning, which will be presented below.

The principle of cognitive compliance

According to the principle of cognitive compliance, acceptance of one's inferior position results from the belief that the majority is right. the majority cannot be wrong. Aronson and Carlsmith (1963) revealed that a person prefers to behave in accordance with social expectations, even when these expectations

relate to their failure, or compromise self-esteem in a different way than those that behave contrary to expectations. What is more, although later replicas of these studies undertaken by various authors did not always confirm Aronson's and Carlsmith's conclusions, in the case of people with low self-esteem they were almost always confirmed (see: Kozielecki 1986; Zaborowski 1994). This manner was explained among others via mechanism of self-fulfilling prophecy. This hypothesis is derived from Festinger's *cognitive dissonance theory*, according to which information reaching a person that is incompatible with what they already know about a given subject causes psychological discomfort, causes an increase in internal tension and motivates the individual to reduce this tension, striving to compliance of both types of information. As the researches mentioned above show, this compliance can be achieved even at the expense of self-assessment. What is more, it seems that this is quite a universal regularity, because both women and minority groups more often assess their social competences, their professional skills and even their character traits as worse despite the fact that they commit less crimes and are generally perceived as more empathic and better adapted to social rules. If lower self-esteem makes us trust others' opinions more about us, then turning towards the group that has a higher self-esteem becomes almost inevitable

The principle of rationality of choices

The second hypothesis is based on the assumption of rationality of human choices. In this case, man is guided by the belief that it makes no sense to identify with a group that has no causative force. It is better to stick to a group that has greater driving force, decision-making, possibilities, power, and privileges. If opportunities for social advancement depend on the members of a privileged group, then stay with members of that group. Weakness can only weaken. This second hypothesis is also backed by numerous empirical evidence, which in general terms is based on the assumption that the weakness of a minority group can contribute to an increase in the sense of personal threat, which is why the individual tries to minimize their similarity to this group, or more generally, minimize their relationships with a group which they perceive as a threat to personal goals (Arroyo, Ziegler 1995; Tajfel, Turner 1986; Blascovich et al. 2001. The thing is that in the long run this choice is not rational, if only because the same fears may be shared by members of the privileged group. Especially when it is easy to move from one group to another. And besides, why would they do this when they can profit from their own advantage over others.

Social Dominance Theory

A slightly different explanation for understanding the phenomenon of the *loser syndrome* is provided by the *Social Dominance Theory* (SDT), formulated

by Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto. Although the theory is relatively new, it has gained great popularity in the last two decades (Sidanius, Pratto, Martin & Stallworth 1991; Sidanius, Pratto, Rabinowitz 1994; Pratto, Liu, Levin, Sidanius, Shih, Bachrach 2000; Haley & Sidanius 2005).

This theory assumes that persistence of group inequalities is only possible in the long-term perspective if the majority of entities belonging to a particular structure accepts the existing order, even if it is based on social inequalities. Each social system is made up of groups shaped in a hierarchical way and if we want to understand both inter-group processes and individual behavior in a group, we must take into account this hierarchy of structure. The hierarchical position of groups in the social system means, of course, that some have a higher position in society, others lower, and that the groups that create it recognize that this is the nature of the community. Higher-ranking groups have more privileges and better access to social resources. In particular to:

— civil rights and protection of personal rights;
— economic resources and wealth;
— education options and level;
— access to prestigious professions;
— participation in decision-making and representative bodies;
— health protection;
— protection of personal rights;
— positive reinforcements resulting from belonging to a privileged group;
— more likely avoidance of criminal liability for violation of the law.

All the above-mentioned privileges significantly consolidate group inequalities within one structure. The social system based on a specific set of norms, laws, customs, ideology, institutions works to maintain and legitimize the hierarchy of the social structure, allowing inequality. The consequence of these complex factors is *social dominance orientation* (SDO), expressed in the attitudes of the individual. It is, in fact, a generalized attitude of acceptance for social inequalities (Sidanius, Pratto, Brie 1995). It can be described on a continuum, where at one end there are people with extreme acceptance of social inequalities (e.g. fundamentalists, fascists, sexists, racists, etc.), and at the other, people with egalitarian attitudes. It is important to emphasize that *social dominance orientation* is a learned and lasting attitude. Initially, the authors thought that it was associated with the personality of the individual (e.g., authoritarian personality), but over time it was recognized that it was formed as a result of a combination of environmental, cultural, situational factors and individual characteristics.

People with a higher social position, colloquially speaking, have an interest in protecting their status. At the same time, because of the distance that shapes the entire system, between them and the so-called lower social strata, they have less knowledge about disadvantaged groups, so they more often use myths about the features and capabilities of lower-ranking groups.

Social dominance orientation means not only acceptance of inequality. It is linked to many other spheres of social activity (Haley, Sidanius 2005). For example, if someone has nationalist beliefs, it is very likely that they will also express sexist attitudes, recognizing that women are typically less predisposed to govern, black people are less intelligent, and infidels are inherently immoral, and losers are devoid of character. In addition, it was revealed that acceptance of the hierarchical system of social structure correlates positively with a number of other attitudes, including:

— promoting forceful solutions;
— acceptance of the death penalty;
— legal limitation of public rights to certain social groups;
— assigning members of disadvantaged groups personal responsibility for one's predicament;
— favoring the dominant group in accessing privileges;
— assigning members of the privileged group higher intelligence, better character, fortitude, and talents;
— belief in an intrinsic predisposition to perform social roles;
— ethnocentric attitudes and racial discrimination.

The occurring relationships are also confirmed by negative relationships. A high level of negative correlation was established between dominance orientation and empathy level. Research confirming the aforementioned dependencies can be found both in the theory of social domination (e.g. Sidanius, Pratto, Brie 1995) and in other studies on the acceptance of inequality in general (Williams, Best 1982; Sedlak, Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, Howard 1997; Heatherton, Kleck, Hebl, Hull 2008, cf. Scott 2013; Sedlak 2017).

As has already been pointed out, disadvantaged groups who are victims of these inequalities also contribute to the consolidation of the hierarchical, inequality-based social system to a large extent. They passively accept the narrative and mode of action of groups with greater power. Most often, they use stereotypes and myths similar to those formulated by members of the dominant groups towards discriminated groups. This mainly occurs in a situation that mobilizes members of its group to make inter-group comparisons. This reluctance of members of discriminated groups towards their own group is explained, among others, by poor internal integration of these groups. Members of disadvantaged groups are even extremely prone to external control (Sedlak, Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, Howard 1997). The more so, as it has already been pointed out, the perception of one's own group is relatively easily modified by situational factors, and the circumstances in which an individual has to face the status of their own group. So if these situations are created and controlled by the dominant group, it is hard to expect that groups with less power of social influence could resist, expectations of the stronger. What is more, having expectations different from the parent group that sets the standard can be a source of personal frustration at best

and of a serious personal threat at the worst. Acceptance of one's fate seems an easier solution.

System Justification Theory

It was developed around the same time as the *social dominance theory*, but in its assumptions it used many more concepts existing in social sciences explaining the mechanism of consolidating and accepting inequality. The basic assumption of the *System Justification Theory* (SJT) was, as in the above-mentioned theory, an attempt to answer the question of how is it possible that despite the fact that the social system is based on inequalities resulting from a hierarchical structure, it is permanent and stable? Where in this structure is the voice of the huge crowd of disadvantaged groups. This stability cannot be explained simply by reference to the strength of the favored groups, or the weakness of the inferior groups, because all of them make up the system and, in one way or another, show attachment to it. The authors of the *system justification theory* explain the acceptance of inequality by the fact that an immanent feature of every community is the desire for social order and peace, to preserve the existing state of affairs, even at the expense of the interests of its own group (Jost, Mahzarin 1994).

There are at least a few universal reasons for such widespread acceptance of the existing system by the groups that create it.

1. *Conformity.* It is easier in all dimensions and more accessible to all social groups. Compliance with existing rules and pressure groups requires less effort, less self-responsibility and is less dangerous than oppositional behavior. Contestation of a stabilized system, whatever it is, is risky. Rebellion may fail, and requires not only more courage and mobilization, but also consent to even greater losses than those resulting from the established inequalities.

2. *The feeling of being in control of reality.* Believing that one participates in the mainstream of social life makes it easier for an individual to develop a feeling that they understand this system. The strength that one allocates to functioning in a group is also important. The role of an outsider is, after all, more difficult than that of even a second-class citizen. Therefore, this need to control reality occurs even among members of disadvantaged groups. Besides, living in a certain social order is objectively more predictable.

3. *Social validity of the proof.* The power of universality of existing beliefs cannot be underestimated. Feeling the rightness of one's own beliefs, resulting from reference to the beliefs of the majority, greatly facilitates functioning. You do not have to make up your own opinion of reality, you do not have to make any effort to justify them, you do not have to defend them. Since most think the same, it means that it is right.

4. *Reduction or even neutralization of the feeling of anxiety* that would inevitably arise if the individual were convinced that something was wrong with this world and that everyone bears personal responsibility for these inequalities.

5. *Neutralization of moral dissonance*. Shifting the responsibility for the fact that the world is unfair to the system. Removing the obligation to deal with leveling inequalities. It allows the privileged groups to reap the benefits of their privileged position without feeling guilty, and it allows members of disadvantaged groups to neutralize the feeling of their own inferiority or inefficiency.

Apart from these unquestionable benefits that derive from the acceptance of the system, all social groups, both favored and disadvantaged (discriminated against) by the system, have their own reasons for accepting the system. Why members of favored groups accept social inequalities is rather obvious, but why discriminated groups do so, is not so obvious. In the system justification theory, this phenomenon is explained somewhat differently than in the above-mentioned theory. There are, however, several justifications specific to this theory. They are as follows:

1. *The need to reduce internal tension*. Acceptance of the existing order based on inequalities serves to reduce the anxiety that would have to arise in the event of inconsistency with the inequalities existing in the system among members of disadvantaged groups.

2. *Availability*. This was already mentioned earlier. For most, accepting inequality is simply an easier solution, especially for members of groups that cannot rely on their own group's strength. The more so because, similarly to the social dominance theory, here a huge role is assigned to social stereotypes and institutions that have a permanent and significant contribution to the consolidation of the system. Disagreement with inequalities would involve not only real institutional barriers, but also destroying a certain tradition, facing stereotypes and cultures, customs, and values, which many generations have worked for.

3. *Acceptance of the inevitable.* If the social reality is inevitable, it is better to accept it and not waste effort on fighting a losing battle, that is trying to change it.

Moreover, for members of disadvantaged groups, an important argument is also social proof of rightness and the sense of predictability of events.

The loser syndrome is a specific form of adaptation of the individual to a life which they regard as hostile and, simultaneously, insuperable. Nonetheless, this is a self-destructive adaptation since it facilitates mere survival and does not alter the given situation. There exists a certain similarity between the loser syndrome and acquired helplessness (see: Pospiszyl, 2003). In both cases the individual struggles with a feeling of their helplessness, albeit there is an essential difference between the mentioned forms of adaptation. In the case of acquired helplessness, the individual is aware of their defeat. In the loser syndrome, the question of failure is relegated to the margin and appears only as a flash of more profound reflection of persons totally absorbed by the current situation.

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