



# Blatant domination and subtle exclusion: The mediation of moral inclusion on the relationship between social dominance orientation and prejudice



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## ABSTRACT

In this research, we focus on the effects of the individual's social dominance orientation (SDO) on the expression of prejudicial attitudes. Furthermore, we examine the mediational effect of moral exclusion on this relationship. The literature has shown a strong correlation between SDO and prejudice. However, we hypothesize that the processes of moral exclusion (i.e., covert and institutionalized forms of excluding social groups from the community to which the rules of justice apply) should mediate the effect of SDO on the expression of prejudice, particularly with regard to subtle forms of prejudice. The results from 276 Italian participants support this hypothesis. The effects of SDO are mediated by the inclusive level of the moral community, and this effect is stronger for subtle prejudice than for blatant prejudice. The results suggest that modern prejudice is hidden by subtle forms of moral exclusion.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, Western countries have experienced a large new wave of immigration; thus, multiculturalism has become a political agenda and a central issue in people's everyday lives. According to the International Migration Report of the United Nations (2013), between 2000 and 2013, the number of international migrants worldwide increased by 50%. The report also stated that industrialized countries hosted the majority of these migrants. Now more than ever, these societies are characterized by a high level of contact between different ethno-cultural groups. The effects of such intergroup contact on intolerance and discrimination have been a classic topic in social psychology for many years (e.g., Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory, 1954). From a psychosocial perspective, research has indeed focused on how the coexistence of different cultures, traditions, and customs affects intergroup dynamics, particularly the processes that are related to tolerant versus prejudicial attitudes and behavior toward "the other" social groups (see Davies et al., 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Prejudice has been classically defined as "an aversive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he (sic) belongs to that group" (Allport, 1954, p. 7). More recently, research interest has shifted from blatant to more subtle forms of prejudice. Although explicit expressions of prejudice have been reduced by the

promotion of egalitarian values, intergroup conflicts and discrimination against minorities have not diminished correspondingly (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). In Western democratic societies, prejudicial attitudes and behaviors as well as political discourses are considered to be in open conflict with the founding principles of democracy and thus are no longer acceptable. However, prejudice has been translated into more covert, subtle, difficult to detect, and socially acceptable forms (Hodson, Hooper, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2005). Some resistance to policies that attempt to reduce intergroup division is present even among individuals who espouse egalitarian beliefs (Sritharan & Gawronski, 2010).

With regard to socio-psychological variables explaining prejudice, scholars have shown that social dominance orientation (SDO) is one of the strongest predictors of generalized prejudice (e.g., Asbrock, Sibley, & Duckitt, 2010; Kteily, Sidanius, & Levin, 2011). SDO identifies an individual's attitudinal orientation and preference for hierarchical (versus egalitarian) intergroup relationships within a society (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). That is, such an orientation sustains the superiority of one's ingroup over outgroups and legitimizes discrimination and domination over those outgroups. SDO supports the ideologies and hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths that promote the perpetration of group-based dominance hierarchies (Kteily et al., 2011).

In the current research, we focus on the effects of SDO on the expression of prejudicial attitudes. Past research has shown a strong correlation between SDO and prejudice (e.g., Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). However, based on previous research (see Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2002) we expect

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a stronger relationship between SDO and blatant prejudice than between SDO and subtle prejudice. SDO reflects “an individual’s tendency to classify social groups along a superiority–inferiority dimension and to favor policies that maintain social inequality” (Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2005, p. 2324). Thus, dominance orientation reflects a conscious choice of expression of superiority toward outgroup members and reveals a blatant expression of dominance and therefore of intolerance toward an outgroup. Instead, other psychological processes, such as moral exclusion, may explain more subtle forms of prejudice. These processes are indeed defined as covert and institutionalized ways of excluding social groups from the community to which the rules of justice apply (Fine, 1990; Opatow, 1990a). As Opatow (1990b) suggested, people may use moral exclusion processes to discriminate against outgroup members without feeling prejudice. They utilize “trivial criteria to justify harm and implicitly assert that particular moral boundaries are correct” (Opatow, 1990b, p. 8). Moral exclusion may therefore be severe (e.g., violations of human rights), but it more frequently assumes a milder form (e.g., pay no attention to outgroup members, see Opatow, 1990b). Moral exclusion processes could thus have an effect on both forms of prejudice, particularly the subtle forms of its expression.

Starting from this distinction between blatant and latent forms of prejudice, the present article investigates moral exclusion processes as a mediator of the effects of SDO on both forms of prejudice, particularly the expression of more subtle and veiled forms of prejudice. In the next paragraph, the relationship between SDO and prejudice is examined. Then, moral exclusion theory is introduced.

## 2. Dominance orientation and prejudice

Research has shown that people with high levels of SDO seek to maintain the superiority of their ingroup and to legitimize unequal social hierarchies by using prejudicial attitudes and behaviors against socially subordinate groups (Asbrock et al., 2010) and by contrasting equality-enhancing social programs (Whitley, 1999). According to Asbrock and colleagues (2010), many studies (e.g., Ekehammar, Akrami, Gylje, & Zakrisson, 2004) have shown that the two facets of antidemocratic and authoritarian attitudes – namely, authoritarianism and SDO – predict up to 50% of the variance in prejudice. Some studies (e.g., Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2005; Villano & Zani, 2007) have addressed the relationship between SDO and prejudice, considering the distinction between blatant and subtle forms of prejudice as theoretically and empirically proposed by Pettigrew and Meertens (1995). These studies showed that SDO might be more related to variables measuring overt racist behaviors (e.g., xenophobia and segregation of races) than to subtle forms of prejudice (Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2002). In those studies, SDO was indeed only a marginal predictor or was not related at all to subtle prejudice.

Furthermore, some more recent studies have shown that the effect of SDO on prejudice is mediated by several variables. McFarland (2010) revealed that empathy and principled moral reasoning emerged as significant mediators of generalized prejudice, although authoritarianism and SDO remain robust determinants, with the mediation being only partial. In addition, Roets, Van Hiel, and Cornelis (2006) found that materialism (i.e., the importance that people ascribe to possessions and their acquisition) increased the predicted variance in racism beyond SDO. In another study, Levin and colleagues (2012) found that support for assimilation, multiculturalism, and colorblindness mediated the relationship between SDO and prejudice. Similarly, Hindriks, Verkuyten & Coenders (2014) showed that the relationship between SDO and prejudice was fully mediated by hierarchy-enhancing (e.g., assimilation) and hierarchy-attenuating (e.g., multiculturalism) myths.

Social Dominance Theory indeed distinguishes between two types of legitimizing myths on which SDO is based (see Pratto et al., 1994): “hierarchy-enhancing” and “hierarchy-attenuating” myths. The first type of myth (e.g., meritocratic ideology) provides justifications for

group-based social inequality. The second type of myth (e.g., beliefs that group equality is morally just) instead promotes greater social equality. In this sense, as the relationship between SDO and prejudice is maintained by hierarchy-enhancing myths, favorable attitudes toward group equality should counteract the effects of SDO (Pratto et al., 1994). However, beliefs about group equality alone may not be sufficient to overcome social dominance attitudes. Dixon, Tropp, Durrheim, and Tredoux (2010) argued that group equality could be used as a political agenda to hide prejudice without resolving it. Critics of multiculturalism have advanced this issue (Citrin, Sears, Muste, & Wong, 2001), arguing that pro-equality discourses can hide a greater justification for inequality and social dominance. For instance, discourses on gender equality may hide the reality of gender-related specific needs, de facto reinforcing women’s disadvantaged position in the job market (Hebl et al., 2007). To better understand the effects of SDO on prejudice and particularly on its more subtle forms of expression, the research focus should shift from the analysis of beliefs about group equality to the scope of this equality. Deutsch (1975) defines the scope of justice as the psychological boundary of one’s moral community, i.e., the group to which the rules of justice and equality apply (Opatow, 1990a). In this sense, people may support social equality for just a restricted part of social groups and thus exclude some outgroups from justice without feeling prejudicial. Social equality should instead be achieved when all coexisting social groups are evaluated as equally legitimate components of the same moral community. That is, group members are not treated equally a priori but rather because of the recognition of their moral legitimacy and inclusion within the same scope of justice. For these reasons, it is relevant to take into account the “moral community” and the “scope of justice” considered by people, particularly with respect to the detection of more subtle forms of prejudice.

## 3. The effect of moral exclusion processes

As Opatow (1990a) noted, one’s moral values, beliefs, and norms apply to those individuals and social groups who are included within the moral community. The moral community may be narrow (e.g., ingroup members) or as wide as the whole world community. In this sense, moral exclusion processes refer to attitudes and behaviors that exclude other individuals or groups from one’s moral community (Opatow, 1990b). By contrast, moral inclusion processes involve the extension of social justice to several social groups (Passini, 2010). The processes of moral exclusion are ubiquitous in everyday life and negatively affect intergroup relationships (Opatow, 1990b). They are not easy to detect due to the rationalizations and justifications that support them (Opatow, 1990b). These justifications are institutionalized, often hidden and accepted as being inescapable (Fine, 1990).

Recently, Morselli and Passini (2012) validated a scale that measures moral inclusion/exclusion processes: the moral inclusion/exclusion of other groups (MIEG) scale. The MIEG scale was designed as a reliable measure that detects everyday processes of moral exclusion and inclusion, as previously noted by Opatow (1990a). Morselli and Passini (2012) showed that MIEG was significantly and robustly correlated with both blatant and subtle prejudice as well as with SDO. Moreover, the partial correlation between MIEG and both forms of prejudice did not decrease after controlling for SDO. This result suggests that MIEG is a robust predictor of prejudice beyond the effects of SDO.

## 4. Hypotheses

The aim of the current study was to analyze the effects of both SDO and the inclusion/exclusion of “other” social groups from the moral community on blatant and subtle forms of prejudice. Although we expected to find a direct effect of SDO on both forms of prejudice (see Sibley & Duckitt, 2008), we expected that moral inclusion/exclusion would explain this prediction, particularly with regard to subtle forms of prejudice. That is, we analyzed the mediational effect

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