



## Social dominance orientation moderates reactions to Black and White discrimination claimants



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### HIGHLIGHTS

- SDO predicts increased *positivity* toward White discrimination claimants.
- SDO predicts increased *negativity* toward Black discrimination claimants.
- These effects are moderated by perceived stability of racial inequality.
- This work suggests that White discrimination claims can be hierarchy enhancing.
- By contrast, Black discrimination claims are potentially hierarchy attenuating.

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### ABSTRACT

We suggest that because racial discrimination claims made by Blacks potentially challenge the legitimacy of racial inequality, whereas racial discrimination claims made by Whites potentially reinforce the legitimacy of racial inequality, social dominance orientation (SDO) may differentially predict reactions to Black and White discrimination claimants. Consistent with this idea, Studies 1 and 2 suggest that negativity toward Blacks who make discrimination claims increases as a function of participants' SDO, while SDO predicts increased positivity toward Whites who make discrimination claims. Moreover, Study 3 demonstrates that differential reactions to White discrimination claimants as a function of SDO are particularly likely to occur when racial inequality is thought to be unstable; when racial inequality is thought to be stable, SDO does not predict positive reactions to White discrimination claimants. In all, the reported studies provide evidence for the idea that reactions to Black and White discrimination claimants may serve a role in respectively challenging or reinforcing racial inequality.

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### Introduction

Recent Supreme Court decisions equate the race-conscious distribution of social resources with discrimination, regardless of the race of the discrimination claimant. Specifically, in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007), the Supreme Court ruled that it was discriminatory against Whites for school districts to monitor the racial composition of public schools in order to prevent de facto racial segregation. Similarly, in *Ricci v. DeStefano* (2009), the Supreme Court ruled that White firefighters in New Haven, Connecticut were the victims of racial discrimination when a test on which they scored better than Black firefighters was discarded as a criterion for promotion. Implicit in the majority opinions of both cases is the assumption that the

use of any racial classification to impact the distribution of social resources constitutes racial discrimination. In other words, the Supreme Court seems to suggest that all forms of discrimination are essentially the same, regardless of whether the claimant is a member of a majority or minority group. This sentiment was succinctly captured by Chief Justice John Roberts who opined in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007) that “the way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.”

In the eyes of the law, discrimination may very well be discrimination regardless of who is claiming it. But is this also the case in the eyes of the public? Do lay perceivers react to *all* discrimination claimants, regardless of the claimants' race, in the same way or do perceivers differentiate between discrimination claims made by minority and majority group members? Admittedly, the question of how people react to White vs. Black discrimination claimants probably does not factor into the Supreme Court's decision-making. After all, their job is to rule on the constitutionality of using race as a criterion for the

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distribution of social resources. However, from a social psychological perspective, this question is ripe for empirical study.

If the public thinks about discrimination in a manner similar to the Supreme Court, then reactions to discrimination claimants should be identical regardless of whether the discrimination claimant is Black or White. Specifically, as suggested by research on reactions to racial minorities who make discrimination claims, individuals should incur interpersonal costs when they claim that they were discriminated against on the basis of race (Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006; Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2003). Moreover, this effect should be particularly pronounced among perceivers who favor anti-egalitarian intergroup relations. Consistent with this claim, research suggests that derogation of Black discrimination claimants increases the more perceivers endorse system-justifying beliefs because such claims threaten the belief “that the United States is a fair society where anyone, regardless of their position in the hierarchy, can get to the top” (Kaiser et al., 2006, p. 1524). In the present paper we assess how individuals' social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) – an individual difference measure assessing people's general desire and support for group-based social hierarchies – relates to reactions to dominant (White) and subordinate (Black) discrimination claimants. If perceivers do, in fact, consider all forms of discrimination to be the same, then reactions to discrimination claimants should be identical regardless of the discrimination claimant's racial group membership.

However, discrimination claims made by Blacks and Whites may differ in important, psychological ways. Since discrimination claims made by minority group members may serve as reminders that intergroup inequality – which continues to favor Whites in the United States (see Lowery, Chow, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2012; Plaut, 2010; Song, 2004) – is maintained (at least in part) by illegitimate reasons like discrimination, such claims may pose a threat to the legitimacy of the existing racial hierarchy. Accordingly, reactions to Black discrimination claimants may become increasingly negative as a function of perceiver's motivation to maintain group-based social hierarchies. In other words, the higher a perceiver's SDO, the more negative their reaction should be toward a Black discrimination claimant.

Conversely, discrimination claims made by Whites may potentially help maintain the racial hierarchy by conveying to perceivers that Whites are as susceptible to discrimination as Blacks. Thus, the fact that Whites are on top of the racial hierarchy despite the existence of so-called “reverse” discrimination may provide evidence that the racial hierarchy is arranged in a legitimate manner. After all, if both Blacks and Whites face discrimination then whatever differences that exist between these groups can be attributed to legitimate reasons like merit or deservingness. For this reason, perceptions of White discrimination claimants may become increasingly positive the higher the perceivers' level of SDO.

Interestingly, past research on reactions to discrimination claimants has focused primarily on reactions to minority targets (Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2003; Kaiser et al., 2006). To our knowledge, the present studies are among the first to explore people's reactions to Whites who make discrimination claims (see also Blodorn & O'Brien, 2013; Wilkins, Wellman, & Kaiser, 2013). Moreover, the present studies complement other work that has examined ethnic victimization and found that among Whites, SDO is positively related to increased perceptions that dominant group members are targets of ethnic discrimination (Thomsen et al., 2010).

Studying discrimination claims made by majority group members is particularly important given the research suggesting that Whites are actually more likely to file discrimination claims following termination than are racial minorities (Goldman, 2001) and more recent research suggesting that Whites associate decreases in perceived anti-Black bias with increases in perceived anti-White bias (Norton & Sommers, 2011). Moreover, several recent cases on racial discrimination heard by the Supreme Court involved Whites making discrimination claims

(*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 2007; *Ricci v. DeStefano*, 2009; see also *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, 2012), thus making it important to understand how people react to such claims.

In sum, to the extent that discrimination claims made by minority and majority group members have asymmetrical consequences for maintaining racial inequality, then reactions to Black and White discrimination claimants may differ according to perceivers' level of SDO. Specifically, the higher a person's SDO the more negatively he/she may perceive discrimination claims made by Blacks because such claims potentially attenuate the racial hierarchy. On the other hand, the higher a person's SDO the more positively he/she may perceive White discrimination claimants because such claims potentially enhance the racial hierarchy.

## Overview of studies

Three studies were conducted to assess if reactions to Black and White discrimination claimants differ as a function of perceivers' SDO. Study 1 presents participants with a scenario in which a Black or White target is passed over for a promotion – the target then either does or does not attribute his failure to get promoted to racial discrimination. Study 2 seeks to conceptually replicate Study 1 by exploring if having made a discrimination claim in the past differentially affects the perceived hirability of White and Black job applicants in the present. Finally, in a more direct test of the hypothesis that people differentially evaluate discrimination claimants based on the assumed impact that their claims have on the racial hierarchy, Study 3 exposes participants to a hierarchy threat manipulation. If Black and White discrimination claims respectively challenge and reinforce existing levels of racial inequality, then, as a function of SDO, we should be able to observe increased negativity toward Black claimants and increased positivity toward White claimants when racial inequality is thought to be unstable. When racial inequality is thought to be stable, SDO should be less strongly related to reactions to discrimination claimants, regardless of the discrimination claimants' racial group membership.

## Study 1

Study 1 assesses if reactions to Black and White discrimination claimants differ as a function of perceivers' SDO. To this end, we presented participants with a scenario in which a Black or White target is passed over for a promotion. Subsequently, the target does or does not attribute his failure to get promoted to racial discrimination. The control conditions in which racial discrimination is not claimed were included because without these conditions it is impossible to determine if the interpersonal consequences of SDO on Black and White targets who make discrimination claims are due to the fact that these targets made discrimination attributions or simply that these targets are Black or White. In other words, it is possible that SDO may not reflect differential reactions to discrimination claiming, but rather anti-Black and pro-White bias. In fact, recent research suggests that SDO may be a redundant measure of racism (Lehmiller & Schmitt, 2007; Schmitt, Branscombe, & Kappen, 2003). However, if these conditions show that SDO is not related to the perceptions of Black and White targets who do not claim discrimination, then we can more confidently conclude that any SDO findings in the “did claim” conditions reflect differential reactions to Black and White claimants and not simply anti-Black and pro-White prejudice (see Kteily, Sidanius, & Levin, 2011; Sidanius, Van Laar, Levin, & Sinclair, 2004).

## Method

*Participants.* Consistent with past research on perceptions of discrimination claimants, we restricted participation in Study 1 to White participants (Kaiser et al., 2006). Two hundred and six self-identified White

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