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## **Investigating the Link between Social Dominance Orientation and Skin-tone Bias among African Americans**

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### **Abstract**

The relationship among social dominance orientation (SDO), Black identity, and skin-tone bias was evaluated. In the study, participants were exposed to a face manipulation test and then completed a social dominance orientation measure and the multidimensional inventory of black identity (MIBI). Data showed no significant difference between types of facial manipulations and evaluation scores. That is, no significant relationships emerged between participants' scores on centrality and nationalists' subsections and type of face manipulation. A significant interaction did emerge, however, between facial manipulation type and assimilation scores, suggesting that higher amounts of skin-tone bias are related to strong assimilationist ideologies in African Americans. Results of the study suggest that certain aspects of racial identity are indicative of heightened skin-tone bias in intragroup relations.

### **Key Terms:**

- Skin-Tone Bias
- Racial Identity
- Social Dominance Orientation
- Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity

Inequality among racial groups is still an issue in American society. Although racism tends not to be as explicit today as it was decades ago, research has shown that it is still very much alive in a subtler form known as aversive racism (Cross & Fletcher, 2011). Although people may not show signs of prejudice in a self-reported situation, they are likely to display prejudice in a measure indirectly evaluating racism (Ronquillo et al., 2007). For example, individuals may not view themselves as racist, but they may unconsciously view a White candidate as being more suitable for a position than a Black candidate even though their qualifications and skillsets are equivalent.

Social dominance orientation (SDO) is a powerful indicator of such intergroup prejudice. SDO picks up on attitudes of superiority or dominance over outgroups. It indicates whether individuals hold an egalitarian or dominating viewpoint of how stigmatized groups should be treated. Social dominance theory asserts that people create hierarchies of groups according to their level of dominance or subordination. Dominant groups have control over subordinate groups and have more resource and power. They stay dominant because both the subordinate and dominant groups acknowledge the power of the dominant group as justified (Cross & Fletcher, 2011; Duckitt & Sibley, 2007). These hierarchy-enhancing tendencies are higher in people with high levels of SDO. High SDO levels also indicate that individuals see the world as a highly competitive place where individuals must contend for power and resources (Carvacho et al., 2013).

There is some debate as to whether social dominance orientation reflects more of a personality trait or social attitude. Prior research by Duckitt (2007) hypothesized that SDO was more directly tied to social attitudes than to personality or behavior traits. Recent research suggests that personality is more influential

when breaking down prejudice and that it ties in with the agreeableness portion of the Big Five personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) more than attitude (Ekehammar, Akrami, & Yang-Wallentin, 2009; Sidanius et al., 2013).

Prior research has put focus on racism and prejudice concerning the dichotomy of Black and White individuals, emphasizing the way society has labeled white, fair skin as good and pure and brown, darker skin as unfavorable and not beautiful, but such research often does not focus on the diversity within a particular race. Just as there is a difference in skin-tone between Black people and White people, there is also a variety of shades and skin-tones in the Black American population. Furthermore, the preferential treatment of light over dark skin individuals is defined as colorism (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). Early research by Hughes & Hertel (1990) showed that Black people with a lighter skin complexion had a tendency to do better in school, make more money, and find more ease in attaining a good job than darker skinned Black people.

Even though the phenotypical facial features of individual Black Americans may be similar, people are more likely to pay attention to skin color and use it as a cognitive shortcut to encode information in order to form a stereotype (Snellman & Ekehammar, 2005). Differences in skin-tone cause differential treatment among light and dark skin African Americans. Previous research has shown that Black Americans are aware of this and tend to associate negative qualities with Black targets of darker skin-tone while associating positive qualities with those of a lighter complexion. When perceivers act on these stereotypes they are said to have a skin-tone bias and are referred to as “color struck” (Maddox & Chase, 2004). This skin-tone bias actually corresponds to changes in the amygdala of the brain (Ronquillo et al., 2007). When

individuals are shown a picture of a person who has been modified to have a darker skin-tone there is an automatic high level of brain activity which suggest that there is immediate negative brain responses to individuals with darker skin, while low levels of brain activity is displayed when shown the same image with a lighter skin-tone. Furthermore, SDO is a dependable measure of prejudice and strongly correlates with prejudice against black Americans and individuals viewed as physically unattractive (Cohrs & Asbrock, 2009).

Racial identity, another concept of interest in the current study, refers to how people integrate their concept of self-identity and how they view themselves within their race (Banks & Kohn-Wood, 2007). Racial identity stems from people's interactions, beliefs, and experiences with discrimination, as well as their sense of racial heritage. A number of researchers have examined the causes and effects of racial identity on members of minority groups. Banks (2007), for example, found that some patterns of racial identity intensify the negative effects of discrimination on the targets of discrimination. One central measure of racial identity is the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton & Smith, 1997). The MIBI comprises subscales that measure centrality, ideology, and racial regard on the private and public level. For the purpose of this research, emphasis will be on the centrality, assimilation, and nationalist subsections of the ideology concepts. People who score high in centrality on the MIBI strongly identify with their race. Those who score high in assimilationist ideologies focus on the collective links between African Americans and other groups of people instead of differences between the two. People who score high on the nationalist ideology subsection tend to view their race and heritage as important and distinctive. Though nationalist and assimilationist ideologies have conflicting beliefs and ideas, it is very

possible for people to feel an overlap in beliefs and agree with beliefs from both sections (Wandert et al., 2009).

The present research suggests that there is certain discrimination of Black Americans with darker skin and preferential treatment of Black Americans with lighter skin in the United States. Furthermore, as a consequence of exposure to discrimination and beliefs on racial identity, Black Americans differ on how strongly they relate to their own and other races. I hypothesized that SDO can be an indicator of skin-tone bias and that participants high in social dominance orientation would be high in their level of skin-tone bias. I also hypothesized that individuals exhibiting skin-tone bias will score high in assimilation ideologies. Finally, I hypothesized that individuals with little to no skin-tone bias will have higher scores in centrality and nationalist ideologies.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 29 undergraduate students from Xavier University. Two participants' data were omitted because they did not self-identify as African American. Participants were given the opportunity to attend a study entitled "Personal perceptions and evaluations." Each experimental session lasted 20 minutes. Students received credit in participating psychology courses for participation in the study.

### *Measures*

Social Dominance Orientation. The first measure was a 16-item Social Dominance Orientation scale (Pratto et al., 1994) in order to determine preference for group social dominance. Questions were answered on a Likert-type scale where 1 is "very positive" and 7 is "very negative." High scores on the SDO scale show resistance to equality and a tendency to rank groups in a hierarchical fashion.

Face Manipulation Test. The second measure was a picture of a random, unknown man manipulated by a computer to have either a light or dark skin complexion. Under this picture was a brief, fictional resume and description of why the pictured male individual feels that he deserves a job position. Lastly, the qualification of the pictured individual for the job was assessed using a 7-point Likert type scale. A score of 1 indicates that the applicant is strongly qualified and 7 indicates that the participant is not at all qualified.

Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI). The MIBI (Sellers et al., 1997) assesses aspects of racial identity in African Americans. The Nationalist, Centrality, and Assimilation Subsections of the MIBI that were utilized have a total of 27 items. Questions were answered on a Likert type scale where responses range from 1 “Strongly disagree” to 7 “Strongly agree.”

### *Procedure*

Participants were recruited for the study by a psychology log where they had the option to participate in the study. Participants arrived in groups. Each participant was seated in the classroom where the study took place. After participants took their seat, they were handed consent forms and informed that they have the right to not participate in the study if they chose. After all consent forms were signed and picked up, the experiment began.

Participants were given the SDO scale and instructed to place it face down when they were finished completing it. When the experimenter observed that all participants had completed the measure, participants were instructed to place the papers face down on the corner of their desks.

Participants were randomly assigned to receive a Face Manipulation Test with either a

light or dark skinned face. After looking at the face and reading the description underneath for five minutes, participants were asked to flip over the paper and complete the Likert-type scale evaluation.

When all participants completed the face manipulation test, they were given the Centrality, Nationalist and Assimilation Subscales of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity with demographic questions attached and told to place all papers face down at corner of their desk when finished. Once all of the participants finished, the papers were collected and placed in a folder. Once all papers were picked up, participants were debriefed orally and told the purpose of the study. Participants were then thanked for their participation in the study and reminded to fill out the psychology logs in order to receive their extra credit from participating professors.

## **Results**

An independent samples *t*-test compared the evaluation scores of light and dark targets. The difference between evaluation scores was nonsignificant, as participants scored the light-skinned target as equally qualified for the position ( $M = 2.15, SD = 1.98$ ) as they scored the dark-skinned target ( $M = 3.75, SD = 2.34$ ),  $t(27) = 1.98, p > .05$ .

In order to analyze the interaction between skin-tone and SDO, a median split separated the sample into high and low SDO categories. A factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed no significant main effects or interaction. There was a nonsignificant relationship between SDO scores and target evaluations  $F(1, 25) = .892, p > .05, h_p^2 = .034$ .

Several ANOVAs tested for interactions between dichotomized (via median split) dimensions of the MIBI and the manipulated

skin-tone in predicting evaluations of the target. The ANOVA on the Nationalist Ideology subscale and skin-tone produced no significant main effects or interaction,  $F(1, 25) = .03, p > .05, h_p^2 = .001$ . There was also no significant main effect or interaction in the analysis of the Centrism subscale and skin-tone,  $F(1, 25) = .051, p > .05, h_p^2 = .002$ .

The analysis of the Assimilation subscale and skin-tone revealed that the main effect for Assimilation was not significant ( $F[1, 24] = .12, p > .05, h_p^2 = .005$ ), but the main effect for skin-tone was significant ( $F[1, 24] = 4.36, p = .047, h_p^2 = .154$ ), indicating that participants saw the light-skinned target as more qualified ( $M = 2.15, SD = 1.98$ ) than the dark-skinned target ( $M = 3.84, SD = 2.43$ ). This effect was qualified by a significant 2 X 2 (Assimilation [high, low] X Skin-tone [dark, light]) interaction,  $F(1, 24) = 6.07, p = .021, h_p^2 = .202$ . As the means in Table 1 indicate, individuals who scored high on the Assimilation subscale judged the light-skinned target as most qualified, but the dark-skinned target as least qualified. Low-Assimilation targets, however, gave similar evaluations to both the dark and light manipulation.

## Discussion

The present study measured the relationship between Black identity, social dominance orientation, and skin-tone bias in college students. The first hypothesis was that SDO can be an indicator of skin-tone bias. The second hypothesis was that individuals that displayed high skin-tone bias would also have strong Assimilationist values. The third hypothesis was that individuals who showed increased skin-tone bias would have strong Centralist and Nationalist views.

Hypotheses 1 and 3 relating to social dominance orientation, nationalist views, and centralist views were not supported. There was

no significant relationship between SDO and skin-tone bias, nor was there any significant interaction between the Nationalist and Centralists subsections and the skin-tone bias variable. However, hypothesis 2 was supported by the data, such that participants with high Assimilationist ideology scores exhibited more skin-tone bias than individuals with lower such scores. It is plausible that high Assimilationist perceivers demonstrate more of a positive bias toward lighter skinned people due to a desire to blend in with Eurocentric mainstream culture. People with a lower level of Assimilationist ideology, on the other hand, may be more likely to see other African Americans more equally because they are less inclined to want to affiliate with European American systems.

This research is important because it can shed light on another aspect of skin-tone bias by focusing purely on intergroup relations and how it may correlate with different aspects of racial identity and ethnic values. Further research can use the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity to see how assimilation further plays into colorism and other intergroup relations. In addition, other subsections of the MIBI can be used in future studies to see how those identity traits correlate with skin-tone bias. Colorism could also be researched more in-depth and accurately. For example, in areas where research focuses on generations of skin-tone bias, researchers could attempt to take more experimental instead of investigative approaches. This research could have helpful implications for both the field of Black psychology and any fields dealing with matters of perception and racism.

Future researchers should consider incorporating a skin-tone self-evaluation in order to determine whether participants' skin-tone is related to their degree of skin-tone bias and aspects of racial identity. Also, other research has shown that context can change perceptions of how Blacks view themselves and others in

regard to skin-tone. For example, Harvey (2005) found that students at historically Black colleges and universities placed stronger emphasis on skin-tone than students at predominantly White institutions. It is possible that emphasis on skin-tone was heightened in this research because the sample is from a historically Black university. Further directions could incorporate Black students from predominantly White schools and assess any differences or similarities in patterns of skin-tone bias and racial identity.

Limitations of the study were composition of participants. The sample of individuals was drawn from a population of predominantly females and that factor may have played a role in the type of data that was received. In addition, there was not much variability in evaluations of applicants, which could be indicative of a ceiling effect. The face manipulation test could have been more subtle, so as not to spur participants to reactivity. The pictured individual could have been less attractive and a little less qualified. Also some questions in the face manipulation test section should have been reversed ordered in order to get participants really thinking instead of just blindly scoring the target as highly suitable for the position.

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Table 1

*Assimilation\*Face Manipulation Interaction*

Assimilation	Manipulation	
	Light <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Dark <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )
Low	2.93 (2.52)	2.64 (2.06)
High	1.28 (0.32)	4.83 (2.41)

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