The Effects of Race and Social Dominance Orientation in Simulated Juror Decision Making

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Recent mock-jury research often has found no evidence that White jurors are more likely to convict and impose harsher sentences on Black compared to White defendants. Drawing on social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), this paper argues that this apparent null effect reflects that different racial biases shown by White jurors varying in social dominance orientation (SDO) cancel each other out. A mock-jury study (n = 70) found no main effect for defendant race, but evidence for a crossover interaction with high SDO individuals showing an anti-Black bias and with low SDO individuals showing a pro-Black bias in their guilty judgments and sentence recommendations. The discussion argues race is still a critical factor in White jurors’ decision making.

There is a substantial amount of evidence suggesting that the U.S. criminal justice system produces differential outcomes for different racial/ethnic groups. With only few exceptions (Daudistel, Hosch, Holmes, & Graves, 1999), archival research has established that members of racial minority groups are more likely to be arrested, and more likely to be convicted and to receive harsher sentences than comparable White Americans (for reviews, see Kennedy, 1997; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). These differences are most apparent in capital-murder cases (Gross & Mauro, 1989), but also have been documented for felonies and misdemeanors (Dane & Wrightsman, 1982).

Given these findings, it is surprising that social psychological research on juror decision making has produced findings that are rather mixed if not inconsistent with the racial inequalities identified earlier. Even though there are often cited papers showing that White jurors are biased against minority defendants (e.g., Bernard, 1979; Johnson, Whitestone, Jackson, & Gatto, 1995; Sweeney & Haney, 1992; Ugwuegbu, 1979), there are numerous counterexamples showing either no effect (e.g., McGuire & Bermant, 1977; Skolnick & Shaw, 1997) or even an anti-White bias (McGowen & King, 1982; Poulson, 1990; Shaw &

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Skolnick, 1995). Gordon, Bindrim, McNicholas, and Walden (1988) argued that anti-minority biases occur for low-status crimes, but anti-White biases occur for high-status crimes (Gordon, 1990, 1993), whereas other research has suggested that White jurors do not exhibit anti-minority biases whenever they are concerned with appearing nonracist (Dovidio, Smith, Donnella, & Gaertner, 1997; Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000, 2001).

In a comprehensive meta-analysis focusing on three decades of mock-jury research, Mazzella and Feingold (1994) revealed that neither the race of a defendant nor the race of a victim had any appreciable effects on how culpable White Americans viewed a defendant, with race effects on sentencing being inconsistent. Because in the recent mock-jury literature racially biased responses seem to be the exception rather than the rule (e.g., Abwender & Hough, 2001), some scholars have argued that White racism is no longer a problem in American courtrooms (Skolnick & Shaw, 1997; cf. Nickerson, Mayo, & Smith, 1986; Reynolds, 1996). In this paper, I propose a social dominance approach (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) to racial bias in juror decision making. Specifically, I argue that racial biases in juridic decision making persist, and that apparent null effects of defendant race hide underneath two opposing racial biases that cancel each other out.

Social Dominance Perspective on Criminal Justice

Sidanius and Pratto’s (1999) social dominance theory (SDT) is a comprehensive framework to understand intergroup conflict and prejudice. It is predicated on the assumption that societies are inherently hierarchical, with some groups having greater access to resources and power than other groups. Because dominant groups are more likely to embrace this hierarchical arrangement, they are motivated to maintain their favorable social position in various ways. On the one hand, members of dominant groups discriminate against members of subordinate groups in important societal domains, either in interpersonal contexts or through societal institutions that produce differential outcomes for dominant and subordinate groups. According to SDT, the criminal-justice system is a prime example of such an institution (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

The maintenance of societal hierarchy is facilitated by beliefs that legitimize the superior positions of dominants and help to justify the subordinate position of others. Examples include dominant group members’ beliefs about their own superiority; as well as prejudice and stereotypes that portray minority groups as incompetent, immoral, or out of control, hence unfit to hold power in society. According to SDT, these types of beliefs provide a moral and intellectual basis for the dominant group to discriminate against subordinates.

To capture the general disposition to embrace social hierarchy, social dominance theorists have measured the construct of social dominance orientation
(SDO) as an individual-difference variable (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Research has demonstrated that SDO accounts for a wide range of so-called hierarchy-enhancing beliefs, such as support for public policies maintaining the status quo, support for the oppression of subordinate groups, and racial prejudice (e.g., Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1996).

Cross-cultural studies consistently have shown SDO to be higher in dominant groups than in subordinate groups, even though within each group there is still considerable variance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Moreover, members of hierarchy-enforcing institutions tend to score substantially higher on the SDO scale compared to others. Specifically, with regard to the criminal-justice system, Sidanius, Liu, Shaw, and Pratto (1994) demonstrated that criminal prosecutors are higher in SDO than are public defenders or jurors, even when several background variables are controlled.

SDT also assumes that social hierarchy is never monolithic; rather, there is always an interplay between social forces aimed at maintaining hierarchy and those aimed at subverting social hierarchy. So-called hierarchy-attenuating institutions tend to challenge the existing hierarchy by supporting the rights and resources of subordinate groups. In the legal realm, a good example of a hierarchy-attenuating institution is the public defenders’ office, whose members work for the poor and disenfranchised and who tend to be low in SDO (Sidanius et al., 1994). Correspondingly, hierarchy-attenuating beliefs, typically concentrated in low SDO individuals, involve the perception of group hierarchy as unjustifiable and unfair. Examples of specific hierarchy-attenuating beliefs include support for affirmative-action policies, rejection of just-world beliefs, and a belief that U.S. racial minorities face discrimination in various domains of life (e.g., Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Social Dominance Approach to Juror Decision Making

Whereas SDT provides an account for why the criminal-justice system as a whole discriminates against subordinate groups, it does not predict that racial bias in the decision making of individual jurors is unavoidable, even when these jurors are members of dominant groups. Whether or not White jurors discriminate against Black defendants can be expected to vary as a function of their SDO level and the hierarchy-attenuating or hierarchy-enhancing beliefs they hold.

Individuals high in SDO tend to score high in racial prejudice, and they have been shown to discriminate against racial minorities and to show favoritism toward members of their own group (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Hence, White jurors high in SDO are likely to discriminate against a Black defendant and in favor of a White defendant. As members of the dominant group, they also are likely to embrace the criminal-justice system as an institution that enacts justice
fairly and evenhandedly: a belief that justifies the status quo. This leads to the prediction that even in light of their own discriminatory behavior toward Black defendants, they will deny that race is a significant factor in determining outcomes within the criminal-justice system.

A very different picture emerges for low SDO individuals whose egalitarian stance leads them to reject racial prejudice, as well as White privilege (e.g., Pratto et al., 1994). Yet, where low levels of prejudice would predict the absence of any racial biases, SDT lends itself to the prediction of a somewhat different pattern. Because low SDO individuals are more sensitive to issues of societal inequality, they can be expected to be rather skeptical, if not distrustful, toward the criminal-justice system, which they may suspect of being biased against racial minorities (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Previous research on juridic decision making has established that jurors will adjust their judgments of a defendant if they fear the presence of undue influences on their judgment (e.g., Fleming, Wegener, & Petty, 1999). Consequently, when put in the social role of juror in a criminal case, low SDO individuals may actually try to counteract what they perceive to be inherent biases within the system and adjust their judgment in such a way as to reduce the suspected racial bias in the system. This line of argument predicts low SDO jurors to be lenient toward Black defendants. At the same time, they should be comparatively harsh on White defendants, whom they may suspect to have an unfair advantage in the system. This leads to the prediction of a pro-Black, anti-White bias on the part of low SDO jurors.

The Present Study

Predictions derived from the SDT were tested in a mock-jury situation, adapting a paradigm of Sommers and Ellsworth (2000, Study 2) and focusing on members of the White majority in the U.S. A sample of White participants received a description of an assault case—a type of crime for which Mazzella and Feinstein (1994) have not revealed any systematic influences of defendant race. There were two versions, one involving a Black defendant and a White victim, and a second one involving a White defendant and a Black victim.3 Participants were asked to rate the guilt of the defendant as well as suggest an appropriate sentence. Additional ratings concerned the strength of the evidence presented and the perceived normalcy of the defendant’s behavior—variables that have been implicated in mock-juror judgment (e.g., Sommers & Ellsworth, 2001). Because

3 Although this design does not seem to allow the separation of the effects of defendant race and victim race, previous research has provided evidence that it is primarily defendant race, and not victim race, that shapes mock jurors’ responses (Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000, 2001; for a similar finding, see Lynch & Haney, 2000).
various studies have linked harsher sentences to crime-related internal attributions (e.g., Gordon, 1990; Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000), participants also rated aspects of the defendant’s personality, as well as the perceived risk of recidivism. Finally, participants provided an opinion on the role of race in the criminal-justice system.

Method

Participants

A total of 70 undergraduate students (35 male, 35 female) at a large midwestern university participated in the present experiment in exchange for course credit. All participants described themselves as White or European American.

Procedure

Participants were told that they would be participating in a series of unrelated experiments. The first part of the session was devoted to legal decision making. Participants were provided with a one-page trial summary previously used by Sommers and Ellsworth (2000, Study 2) in their non-race-salient condition. This scenario described the case of a man who was accused of assault and battery of his girlfriend at a bar, after she had teased him in front of his friends (for details, see Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000). In the Black defendant condition, the participants received the following information:

**Defendant:** Albert Barkley, 34-year-old African American male, 6’1”, 190 pounds, computer analyst

**Victim:** Kelly Simmons, 26-year-old White female, 5’5”, 125 pounds, day-care worker

In the White defendant condition, the description was changed to the following:

**Defendant:** Kevin Montgomery, 34-year-old White male, 6’1”, 190 pounds, computer analyst

**Victim:** Kelly Simmons, 26-year-old African American female, 5’5”, 125 pounds, day-care worker

Participants were asked to read the trial description carefully and respond to a number of questions about the case. To ensure that participants would take the task seriously, they were provided with the Penal Code criteria for conviction for misdemeanor assault and battery. Specifically, participants learned that in order
to convict the defendant, they would have to find that (a) he had the ability to injure another person or make another person reasonably fear immediate injury; (b) he intentionally committed a battery against another person, with battery being defined as forceful or violent touching of the person; and (c) his mental state was such that his behavior was intentional and he knew the consequences of his actions.

To respond to all post-trial questions, participants relied on 9-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 9 (very much). First, they indicated how guilty they thought the defendant was. After an explanation of the possible maximum sentence, participants were asked to select a recommended sentence for the defendant from among nine choices. The latter ranged from no punishment to 6 months in jail, 1 year probation, and a $2,000 fine. For statistical analysis, these sentence recommendations were coded using a 9-point scale, with higher numbers being assigned to more severe sentences.

Additional ratings first addressed the strength of evidence, with participants evaluating the strength of the prosecution’s case and the strength of the defense’s arguments. Second, to tap dispositional attributions, participants rated how aggressive, moral, honest, and violent participants thought the defendant was, as well as how likely he was to be arrested on a similar charge in the future. Third, to capture the perceived normalcy of the defendant’s actions, participants indicated how many other individuals would behave in a manner similar to the defendant if put in a comparable situation. Finally, participants also answered a question concerning the extent to which they believed that the race of a defendant determines whether he or she receives a fair trial.

After an unrelated filler task, which took approximately 10 to 15 min, participants completed a 16-item version of Pratto et al.’s (1994) Social Dominance Orientation scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .89$), which was embedded in a packet of unrelated survey measures. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked to recall the race of defendant and victim before being debriefed and dismissed.

**Results**

**Preliminary Analyses**

First, it was determined that average levels of SDO did not vary as a function of experimental condition ($F < 1$). Second, 89% of all participants correctly recalled the defendant’s race, but only 74% correctly identified the victim’s race (sign test, $p < .04$). Recall accuracy for both variables did not differ between the two experimental conditions, both $\chi^2(1, N = 70) < 1.03, p > .31$. This pattern is consistent with the notion that defendant race was more important than victim race in shaping participants’ responses to the trial (cf. Lynch & Haney, 2000; Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000).
Main Analyses

An exploration of the distributions of the variables reveals that SDO and the sentence recommendations were positively skewed. Hence, these variables were log-transformed. Because one of the two independent variables was continuous (SDO), multiple linear regression was used for data analysis. For this purpose, SDO was centered, and the experimental condition was dummy-coded such that 0 refers to the White defendant condition, and 1 refers to the Black defendant condition.

Table 1 summarizes the most important findings. Inspection reveals, first of all, that none of the main effects for experimental condition was significant. In other words, participants did not consider a Black defendant more or less guilty, or more or less deserving of harsh punishment than a White defendant. This finding seems consistent with the conclusion drawn by authors like Mazzella and Feingold (1994) that White jurors do not generally discriminate against Black defendants.

There was, however, substantial evidence that the race of the defendant interacted with SDO in shaping perceptions of the trial. Most prominently, SDO and race jointly influenced perceptions of guilt \( (B = 3.27, p < .01) \). We used simple slope analysis to unpack this interaction, computing predicted guilty at 1 standard deviation above the mean and 1 standard deviation below the mean of the SDO distribution. In the Black defendant condition, SDO was related positively to perceptions of guilt \( (B = 1.70, p < .03) \); but in the White defendant condition, SDO was related negatively to perceived guilt \( (B = -1.57, p < .02) \). As shown in Figure 1, there is an anti-Black bias at very high levels of SDO, but a pro-Black bias at low levels of SDO.

Sentence recommendations yielded a very similar pattern. Decomposing the significant interaction term \( (B = 0.74, p < .03) \) reveals that in the White defendant condition, higher SDO predicted less severe sentences \( (B = -0.44, p < .04) \), but that this relationship was reversed in the Black defendant condition, even though not reaching conventional levels of significance \( (B = 0.30, p < .24) \). Although weaker, this pattern emerged for the perceived strength of the prosecution’s evidence \( (interaction effect B = 2.20, p = .052) \), but a corresponding effect for the convincingness of defense arguments was not obtained (all \( Bs = |0.42|, p > .32 \)). In other words, high and low SDO individuals varied only in their evaluation of the incriminating evidence.

Surprisingly, ratings of dispositional aggressiveness, violence, or the morality of the defendant did not yield any significant effects. However, an interaction effect emerged for anticipated recidivism \( (B = 2.28, p < .05) \). For White defendants, high SDO participants assessed the risk of recidivism as slightly lower than low SDO participants \( (B = -0.81, p < .26) \), but the direction of the relationship was reversed for Black defendants \( (B = 1.47, p < .10) \), even though none of
### Table 1

**Results of Regression Analyses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Race&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>SDO simple slopes</th>
<th>Black defendant&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>SDO × Race&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
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*Note.* SDO = social dominance orientation. SDO and recommended sentence variables were log-transformed. Coefficients displayed represent nonstandardized regression coefficients.

<sup>a</sup>Coefficients in this column pertain to the regression model in which the White defendant/Black victim condition was coded as 0, and the Black defendant/White victim condition was coded as 1.  
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the simple slopes reached conventional levels of statistical significance. There was also an interaction effect for perceptions of honesty ($B = -2.13$, $p < .01$). There was no link between SDO and perceived honesty when the defendant was White ($B = 0.26$, $p < .61$); but for a Black defendant, high SDO was substantially linked to perceptions of dishonesty ($B = -1.87$, $p < .004$).

A similar picture emerged with regard to the perceived consensus of the defendant’s actions (interaction $B = -2.38$, $p < .03$). For White defendants, SDO was related to greater perceived normalcy at trend level ($B = 1.13$, $p < .09$), but the direction of the relationship was reversed for Black defendants ($B = -1.25$, $p < .12$).

Finally, findings regarding the extent to which race determines whether defendants get a fair trial corroborated this overall picture. Breaking down a now familiar SDO × Condition interaction effect ($B = -2.37$, $p < .05$) shows that after working on a case involving a White defendant, high and low SDO participants did not differ in the perceived link between race and fairness of the criminal-justice process ($B = 0.66$, $p < .34$). However, with a Black defendant case, low SDO participants felt that race played a bigger role in determining trial fairness than did their high SDO counterparts ($B = -1.71$, $p < .05$). This pattern, illustrated in Figure 2, is consistent with the idea that high SDO individuals minimize the role race plays in the criminal-justice system.

**Discussion**

The present study illustrates that the absence of a main effect for defendant race cannot be taken as evidence that race plays no role in the judgment of White mock jurors. To the contrary, defendant race had a marked effect, especially on guilty judgments and sentence recommendations, but it operated in interaction with jurors’ SDO level. High SDO participants exhibited the anti-Black biases.
previously documented by other authors such that Black defendants were deemed more culpable and received higher sentences than did White defendants (e.g., Johnson et al., 1995; Ugwuegbu, 1979). The pattern for low SDO participants, however, mirrored these results by showing a pro-Black bias similar to the one previously found by Poulson (1990) and by Shaw and Skolnick (1995). Most of all, the results of the present study suggest that race is still a critical factor in juridic decision making and that claims of White jurors being race-neutral are premature. In spite of the fact that there is no apparent racial bias in the aggregate, race is a critical factor in shaping White jurors’ judgments.

Further, the present study helps to account for the heterogeneity of findings in previous research on racial biases in juror decision making in suggesting that the variability in earlier studies was a result of unexamined variation in the SDO level of research participants. Assuming that SDO sample means in mock-jury studies are normally distributed, the present findings provide a potential explanation for why Mazzella and Feingold (1994) found a null effect for defendant race. Nevertheless, jurors’ SDO level is certainly not the only variable to moderate the emergence and size of racial biases in mock-jury studies. Without a doubt, the racial identity of the jurors is a critical factor.

The experience of membership in an oppressed group makes minority jurors more lenient toward defendants of their own race (Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000) or more punitive toward defendants of the majority racial group (Skolnick & Shaw, 1997). Note that such pro-minority or anti-majority biases are similar to those found for low SDO Whites in the present experiment, suggesting that minority jurors’ responses are at least in part accounted for by the low SDO levels typical for minority populations (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). There is also good reason to believe that the specific context and circumstances of a case

Figure 2. Assumed importance of race in determining whether defendant gets a fair trial as a function of race and participant social dominance orientation (SDO). Figure displays predicted values for SDO at 1 standard deviation above and 1 standard deviation below the mean.
moderate juror bias; such as the stereotypicality of the crime, the social status of
the defendant, and pre-trial publicity (e.g., Fein, Morgan, Norton, & Sommers,

Sommers and Ellsworth (2000) demonstrated that the salience of the defen-
dant’s racial group membership alone qualifies juridic biases. These authors
reported that racial biases in White jurors occurred only when the defendant’s
race was of no apparent relevance to the crime. However, racial biases disap-
peared when defendant race was an explicit and prominent aspect of the crime,
presumably because White jurors were concerned about the possibility of appear-
ing prejudiced (cf. Dovidio et al., 1997; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Pfeiffer &

Although the strongest findings emerged for judgments of guilt and sentence
recommendations, the present study also provides partial support for the idea that
perceived strength of evidence and internal attributions mirror guilt judgments
and sentence recommendations (e.g., Gordon, 1990; Sommers & Ellsworth,
2001). Interestingly, there was no interactive effect of SDO and race for trait
aggression—the typical dispositional inference drawn from violent behavior in
criminal trials (e.g., Sommers & Ellsworth, 2000). However, the importance of
internal attributions for decision making became apparent in jurors’ judgments of
anticipated recidivism: Whenever high or low SDO participants thought a defen-
dant to be trouble in the future, they were ready to convict and impose a harsh
punishment. Trait attributions emerged with regard to honesty, though, as low
SDO jurors considered a Black defendant to be more honest than high SDO
jurors, pointing to the fact that distrust is an important motive in tense intergroup
counters (cf. Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002).

The present study confirmed the hypothesized difference in the stance of high
and low SDO jurors toward the criminal-justice system. Based on SDT, it was
predicted that high SDO individuals would generally embrace and justify
hierarchy-enhancing institutions, whereas low SDO individuals would suspect
such institutions of discriminating against subordinate groups. Findings from this
study are congruent with this conceptualization. Where a White defendant did
not elicit any SDO differences in the perceived race neutrality of the criminal-
justice system, exposure to a Black defendant prompted a good deal of skepti-
cism on the part of low SDO individuals who thought that justice is not color-
blind (cf. Sidanius & Pratto. 1999). Presumably, this distrust of the criminal-
justice system gives rise to leniency toward Black defendants on the part of low
SDO Whites.

The present data reveal problematic racial biases at both ends of the SDO
continuum. The anti-Black bias—shown in this study by high SDO people only—has long been condemned as inherently unfair and undemocratic. However, it is hard to see how the same moral standard does not apply to the pro-Black bias exhibited by low SDO persons: Even though it is arguably driven
by an effort to undo the perceived discrimination, it can be considered unfair with regard to the rights of the individual White defendant. Similarly, from a legal standpoint, there is hardly any difference between these two types of biases, as both violate the constitutional due-process provision. In contrast to instances where the law sanctions the variable treatment of members of different group—for example, to rectify confirmed patterns of past discrimination or in the name of compelling interests (e.g., Grutter v. Bollinger et al., 2003; Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, 1978)—juror biases occur without any judicial or legislative mandate, even if they are aimed at redressing a perceived injustice. Nonetheless, even though anti-Black biases and pro-Black biases share many similarities, it is clear that anti-Black biases must be considered a problem of much greater proportions than any pro-Black biases, given the continuing unequal treatment of minority and majority individuals by the criminal-justice system (cf. Kennedy, 1997; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

However, it would be premature to hold biased White jurors responsible for all of the racial inequality in the criminal-justice system. After all, the present study showed no overall evidence of racial bias. But it is important to keep in mind that in the United States, most criminal cases are not tried in front of a jury, but are either settled or decided by a judge. In many states, juries are involved only in determining guilt, but do not participate in sentencing. Whereas this clearly limits the impact of juries on existing racial inequalities in the criminal-justice system, it highlights the role of legal professionals and decision makers, many of whom Sidanius et al. (1994) found to be high in SDO (Sidanius, Pratto, Martin, & Stallworth, 1991). Given that high SDO induces anti-minority biases, as demonstrated in this research, this points to the conclusion that those who make the decisions to prosecute or not, to go to trial or not, and who determine the specific charges are more directly implicated in the existing racial inequalities in the criminal-justice system than jurors (cf. Sidanius et al., 1994). However, one must acknowledge that any conclusions drawn based on a brief, highly controlled and noninteractive simulation of a jury situation can be made only with great caution, as mock-jury experiments leave out a number of important elements of real-life trials, including the process of deliberation, its duration and intensity, specific instructions on the part of the judge, and so forth (e.g., Bernard, 1979; Constanzo & Constanzo, 1994).

Given that the construct of social dominance orientation is a relatively recent one, it is appropriate to wonder about the uniqueness of SDO’s effects on the role of race in White jurors’ decision making. Critics might argue that SDO has the
effects demonstrated in this research because it is closely linked to the more venerable construct of authoritarianism or because it is essentially a measure of prejudice. In light of the literature, as well as the present findings, these criticisms are hardly tenable. First, research investigating the relationship between SDO and authoritarianism has found them to be quite distinct empirically (e.g., Altemeyer, 1998; Heaven & Bucci, 2001; Pratto et al., 1994; Whitley, 1999). Hence, the two constructs cannot be deemed redundant. Second, it is clear from SDT that SDO has to be correlated with prejudice, racism, and a host of other “isms” and hierarchy-enhancing ideologies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). However, prejudice alone lends itself only to the prediction of discriminatory behavior against out-group members, but not in-group members. Indeed, mock-jury studies typically find that high and low levels of prejudice shape responses of White jurors to Black defendants, but with regard to the judgment of fellow Whites, level of prejudice is inconsequential (e.g., Dovidio et al., 1997). In contrast, the present study revealed a complete reversal of the discriminatory bias of mock jurors, with high SDO jurors exhibiting an anti-Black bias and low SDO jurors showing a pro-Black bias. This pattern is uniquely explained by SDT’s notion of hierarchy enhancement and hierarchy attenuation, but cannot be accounted for by common conceptions of prejudice.

As with all experimental research, the present study is limited. The present effects of SDO were illustrated using only one assault case. An exploration of the generality of the present effects to other crimes is certainly desirable, primarily because crimes differ in the degree to which they are considered stereotypical for different racial groups (cf. Gordon et al., 1988). Also, it would be informative to explore further the role of victim race with regard to participants’ SDO level—especially since there is archival evidence showing that Blacks who transgress against Whites are punished more severely than are Blacks who transgress against Blacks (e.g., Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

In closing, the present article supports the conclusion that even in today’s criminal-justice system one cannot assume that Black and White Americans are judged without regard for their race (e.g., Sommers & Ellsworth, 2001), even if there is no apparent main effect for race in mock-jury studies. Rather, the pertinent question is not if race is taken into account, but how and when it is taken into account in their White jurors’ decision making. The answer provided by the present research is that this depends on the social meaning that jurors attribute to race within a hierarchical society.

References


