



# What causes prejudice? How may we solve it? Lay beliefs and their relations with classical and modern prejudice and social dominance orientation



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## ABSTRACT

This research aimed to examine lay beliefs about the causes of and solutions to ethnic prejudice towards immigrant populations in the Italian context. The research had two main goals: (a) to explore in Italy what non-experts think causes ethnic prejudice against immigrants, and how they suggest we combat it; (b) to assess whether lay perceptions of causes of ethnic prejudice mediate the relationship between SDO and ethnic prejudice, and whether such mediational effects would depend on the form of ethnic prejudice considered (classical vs. modern). In particular, we hypothesized that lay beliefs about the causes of (but not lay beliefs about solutions to) prejudice towards immigrants may mediate the relation between SDO and prejudice towards immigrants. 520 Italian high school students participated in the study and completed a set of questionnaires regarding these issues. Results showed that Italian respondents were especially likely to attribute the causes of ethnic prejudice towards immigrants to ignorance and close-mindedness, and to recommend as main solutions open-mindedness and tolerance of others' values. Moreover, as predicted, beliefs about causes of ethnic prejudice significantly mediated the relation between SDO and modern (but not classical) prejudice. Implications of our findings for social dominance theory were discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Ethnic prejudice, particularly towards immigrants and often expressed in terms of discrimination and xenophobia, is a growing reality in European societies. In 2005, Coenders, Lubbers and Scheepers highlighted that resistance to immigrants is shared by half of the population living in Eastern and Western societies (Coenders, Lubbers & Scheepers, 2005). Similarly, the special Eurobarometer report on Discrimination in Europe (2007) stated that “a significant proportion of respondents (from 27% to 42%) voiced the feeling that discrimination is now more widespread than it was five years ago. Regarding discrimination based on ethnic origin, this share even forms the majority opinion” (p. 10). Specifically, the feeling that discrimination is widespread appeared to be more frequently voiced in countries with higher proportions of foreign-born residents, as already demonstrated in a 2006 study by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC, 2006) that found that there is a higher level of support for attitudes of ethnic exclusionism expressed by the majority population in countries with a larger migrant population.

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In this context, it is important for social psychologists to examine the role of lay beliefs about the nature of prejudice, particularly towards migrants and ethnic minorities, in driving such effects. The psychosocial literature describes lay theories as “knowledge structures with a causal or explanatory component” (Anderson & Lindsay, 1998, p. 8) that “allow people to explain events that have already occurred. . . [and] predict possible futures” (p. 11). Thus, we can say that common people, non-experts in the field of behavioural sciences, use lay perceptions and theories to offer causal explanations for phenomena even if they are not based on scientific methods of investigation. Lay beliefs are likely to be influenced by the individual’s culture and hence also by nationality, cover an array of issues, and may play an important role in maintaining and perpetuating ethnic prejudice (Esses & Hodson, 2006). From the perspective of social dominance theory, these knowledge structures may serve as legitimizing myths oriented to the maintenance of social inequalities and the status quo (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Pratto, 1999; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). That is, lay beliefs may at times serve to support ideological attitudes of group-based dominance and competitive worldviews held by some individuals (Duckitt, 2001, 2005; Sibley, Wilson, & Duckitt, 2007).

In a study on lay perceptions of ethnic prejudice in Canada, Hodson and Esses (2005) found that people’s beliefs about prejudice form a relatively coherent and logical structure. Lay themes of ethnic prejudice focused primarily on ignorance as a cause and tolerance as a solution to prejudice. People supporting social inequalities use these beliefs “to legitimize and bolster the prejudicial attitudes” (Esses & Hodson, 2006, p. 464).

In the present paper we were interested in understanding lay beliefs about ethnic prejudice in Italy and how they relate to individual levels of ethnic prejudice, both classical and modern, and with support for social inequalities, in line with social dominance theory.

### 1.1. Maintenance of the status quo: social dominance theory and ethnic prejudice

Prejudice and social dominance are not completely overlapping concepts, even if they share a common denominator – the maintenance of the status quo. In these terms, Eagly and Diekmann (2005) consider prejudice as a mechanism that maintains status and role differences between groups, whilst social dominance is a predisposition to favour existing group-based hierarchies (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Social dominance orientation (SDO) is a general attitudinal orientation towards intergroup relations, reflecting whether one generally prefers such relationships to be equal (low SDO) vs. hierarchical (high SDO). Of note, individuals who are high in social dominance orientation favour values of power, dominance, and superiority (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; see also Esses, Stelzl, & Mihic, 2007).

Researchers have shown that SDO is often one of the primary predictors of prejudice, and the relationship between these two concepts has been demonstrated in many studies (e.g., Altemeyer, 1998; Ekehammar, Akrami, Gylje, & Zakrisson, 2004; Esses, Jackson, & Armstrong, 1998; Guimond, Dambrun, Michinov, & Duarte, 2003). Social dominance theory assumes that people who are strongly identified with high-status groups and who are high in SDO will be especially prejudiced and discriminatory towards outgroups (Pratto & Lemieux, 2001) since the support of inequalities, which implies an unequal distribution of resources among groups, will benefit their own group (see Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius, Levin, & Pratto, 1996). This assumption, based on the consideration that SDO involves “a view of human existence as zero-sum and relentless competition between groups” (Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1994, p. 999), led to the prediction that people higher in SDO would hold less favourable attitudes towards immigrants since they see immigrants as competitors for resources. As Esses et al. (1998) found, zero-sum beliefs – i.e., beliefs that the more the other group obtains, the less is available for one’s own group – lead people who support social inequalities (high SDO) to be “relatively biased against immigrants and immigration because of the perception that relations with immigrants have zero-sum outcomes” (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 2001, p. 400). The critical role of zero-sum beliefs in producing and sustaining negative attitudes towards immigrants may be due to the implicit assumption that policies that support immigrants’ integration utilize common resources that could be employed otherwise, favouring the respondents’ own group. Building on this work, Duckitt and Sibley (2010) found a significant interaction between SDO and a manipulation of information about immigrants competing with non-immigrants for economic resources, such that individuals who were higher in social dominance orientation and read about competition from immigrants were especially likely to oppose their immigration (see also Dru, 2007). In addition, a similar interaction with SDO was obtained using a manipulation of immigrant disadvantage and low status, presumably because high social dominance oriented individuals are likely to devalue low status groups in order to justify their own group’s relatively superiority.

Following this line of reasoning, several types of lay beliefs may mediate the relation between SDO and attitudes towards immigrants and immigration. In particular, we hypothesized that lay beliefs about the causes of prejudice towards immigrants may mediate the relation between SDO and prejudice towards immigrants such that individuals higher in social dominance orientation may use these lay beliefs to justify their prejudicial attitudes. Thus, for example, beliefs that prejudice is caused by immigrants themselves and real differences between groups may be strongly endorsed by high SDO individuals and play a mediational role in the SDO–prejudice relation. In contrast, beliefs that prejudice is caused by characteristics of the host society, such as ignorance and close-mindedness, may be especially likely to be eschewed by high SDO individuals and also mediate the relation between SDO and prejudice. These beliefs are at the core of justifications for ethnic prejudice because they attribute responsibility for prejudice.

The two forms of ethnic prejudice – blatant and subtle – stand on different theoretical bases. Blatant ethnic prejudice implies a vision of humanity in hierarchized “compartments”, called “races” (Taguieff, 1988); modern ethnic prejudice, instead, is characterized by denial of continued discrimination, antagonism towards minority group demands, and

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