



Priming status-legitimizing beliefs: Examining the impact on perceived anti-White bias, zero-sum beliefs, and support for Affirmative Action among White people

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The current research examines how status-legitimizing beliefs (SLBs) influence White people's perceptions of anti-White bias, endorsement of zero-sum beliefs, and support for Affirmative Action. We suggest that SLBs perpetuate inequality by increasing White people's perceptions of zero-sum beliefs and anti-White bias, which in turn lead to decreased support for Affirmative Action. White individuals primed with SLBs perceived greater anti-White bias, endorsed greater zero-sum beliefs, and indicated less support for Affirmative Action than individuals primed with neutral content. Mediation analysis revealed that the SLB prime decreased support for Affirmative Action by increasing perceptions of anti-White bias. This research offers experimental evidence that SLBs contribute to White people's perceptions of anti-White bias and to decreased support for Affirmative Action.

In most societies, including the United States, existing social systems are organized such that some groups have more access to resources than others (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). One reason inequality persists is that individuals embrace and internalize ideologies which justify existing inequality (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; McCoy, Wellman, Cosley, Saslow, & Epel, 2013). Such beliefs are known as status-legitimizing beliefs (SLBs) and suggest that one's position within the hierarchy is earned and can change based on hard work (Kleugel & Smith, 1986). SLBs justify the existing social hierarchy by characterizing it as legitimate, permeable, and based on individual hard work (i.e., the Protestant work ethic; Jost & Banaji, 1994; Levin, Sidanius, Rabinowitz, & Federico, 1998; O'Brien & Major, 2005).

Status-legitimizing beliefs lead us to interpret events in ways that justify and maintain the existing hierarchy (Chow, Lowery, & Hogan, 2013). High-status individuals who strongly endorse SLBs, are more likely to blame low-status groups for not achieving: Thus holding them responsible for their lower status (Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001). Such a response to low status individuals is thought to be fuelled by a belief in individual merit (a component of SLBs) and serves to justify existing inequality, which upholds the existing hierarchy. SLB-endorsing individuals also respond more negatively to racial

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minorities who claim discrimination than those who do not claim discrimination (Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2003; Schultz & Maddox, 2013; Shelton & Stewart, 2004). Individuals who strongly endorse SLBs may view discrimination claims by low-status individuals as a challenge to the hierarchy. Low-status individuals' discrimination claims may be seen as a threat to the existing social hierarchy, as they suggest that it may be illegitimate (not merit based). Conversely, high-status individuals' discrimination claims may be seen as an effort to defend the existing hierarchy by defending the claimant's privileged position within the hierarchy. High-status individuals tend to respond more positively to ingroup claims of discrimination the more they endorse SLBs and other hierarchy enhancing ideologies (SDO: Unzueta, Everly, & Gutiérrez, 2014; SLB: Wilkins, Wellman, & Kaiser, 2013; Wilkins, Wellman, & Schad, 2015). Taken together, these studies suggest that SLBs are associated with responses that maintain and justify the current status hierarchy.

Priming status legitimacy

The lives of individuals in most western cultures, and particularly in the United States, are filled with subtle (and not so subtle) cues, which suggest that the existing status hierarchy is based on merit, is permeable and legitimate. Status-legalizing myths permeate classic American literature such as the Horatio Alger series, which portray a low-status protagonist achieving success through continuous hard work. Children's books emphasize meritocracy through stories like *The Little Engine that Could*, showcasing the power of will and diligence in obtaining success. Popular culture also includes modern-day idols that market an image of rising to fame from nothing, pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. We even have motivational posters with meritocratic slogans, which hang in offices throughout the United States (e.g., 'DETERMINATION: The will to succeed can overcome the greatest adversity'). We are surrounded by messages that have the potential to prime SLBs.

Given the ubiquity of SLB messages in society, it is important to understand how they may influence individuals' responses. Of particular interest is how SLB cues might motivate high-status individuals to engage in behaviours that perpetuate inequality. For example, priming men with SLBs increases the likelihood they will blame discrimination when they are passed over in favour of a woman (McCoy & Major, 2007). Furthermore, among White people, priming SLBs increases positive evaluations and behavioural intentions towards White people who claim to be victims of anti-White bias (Wilkins *et al.*, 2013). In both these instances, priming SLBs influenced perceptions of discrimination.

SLBs positively associated with perceived anti-White bias

Status-legitimizing beliefs appear to motivate high-status individuals to defend their position within the social hierarchy, in part, by increasing their perceptions of bias against their group. Wilkins and Kaiser (2014) found that priming racial progress led SLB-endorsing White people to perceive greater anti-White bias. Similarly, Major and colleagues demonstrated that the more strongly White people endorsed individual mobility (a component of SLBs) the more likely they were to attribute a personal loss to racial bias (Major *et al.*, 2002). Such responses by White people are often viewed as attempts to re-establish the status that White people perceive as being eroded. While there is correlational evidence for a link between SLB endorsement and anti-White bias in

response to clear threat, it is unclear whether priming SLBs (in the absence of such a threat) increases White people's perceptions of anti-White bias.

It is important to examine the possible causal relationship between SLBs and anti-White bias perceptions because of the possible consequences for intergroup relations. White people's perceptions of anti-White bias have been shown to decrease White people's support for Affirmative Action (Wilkins, Wellman, Babbitt, Tossi, & Schad, 2015). Furthermore, among White people who are primed with anti-White bias, the more they endorse SLBs, the more positively they evaluate the resumes of White job applicants, and the less positively they evaluate Black job applicants' resumes (Wilkins, Wellman, Flavin, & Manrique, 2015). Given the prevalence of SLB cues in Americans' everyday lives, it is important to examine the possible link between SLBs and perceptions of anti-White bias, which may in turn affect intergroup interactions.

SLBs positively associated with zero-sum beliefs

Zero-sum beliefs are beliefs that there is a finite amount of resources, which various groups compete for. Thus, the success of one group is viewed as causing a detriment to another. From this standpoint, zero-sum beliefs motivate individuals to work towards the success of the ingroup and undermine the outgroup's ability to succeed in an effort to ensure their own group's successful outcomes (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 2001; Esses, Jackson, & Armstrong, 1998). Thus, individuals who endorse zero-sum beliefs about race perceive that the success of racial minorities comes at the expense of White people and vice versa. In fact, greater SLB endorsement corresponds to greater zero-sum belief endorsement (Wilkins, Wellman, Babbitt, *et al.*, 2015).

Priming SLBs may directly increase White people's zero-sum belief endorsement by increasing perceptions of anti-White bias. Wilkins and colleagues have shown that priming anti-White bias (vs. bias against an irrelevant outgroup) increases White people's endorsement of zero-sum beliefs (Wilkins, Wellman, Babbitt, *et al.*, 2015). While the links between SLBs, anti-White bias, and zero-sum beliefs have yet to be explored, given previous findings, SLBs may increase perceptions of anti-White bias, which in turn leads White people to view intergroup relations as zero-sum. We argue that priming SLBs should increase zero-sum beliefs by increasing perceptions of anti-White bias. Thus, anti-White bias may be the mechanism through which priming SLBs will affect zero-sum belief endorsement.

SLBs are negatively associated with support for Affirmative Action

Individuals who strongly endorse SLBs often oppose programmes aimed at reducing social inequality such as Affirmative Action (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Ni Sullivan, 2003). One consistent objection to Affirmative Action policies is that they violate meritocratic values (Bobocel, Son Hing, Davey, Stanley, & Zanna, 1998; Son Hing *et al.*, 2011). White people who strongly endorse SLBs may perceive Affirmative Action programmes as violating the merit principle and therefore object to them. Thus, priming SLBs might lead individuals to express lower support for Affirmative Action programmes.

Another reason SLBs may decrease support for Affirmative Action among White people is that Affirmative Action may be perceived as a realistic threat to White people's interests (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). In other words, White people may perceive themselves as being in danger of losing an economic advantage they have previously possessed because Affirmative Action is intended to change the racial hierarchy. Such a belief may also lead

individuals to perceive increased group competition, which may result in efforts to reduce other groups' access to resources (Sherif, 1966).

Previous correlational research has found that such realistic threats among White men are associated with decreased support for Affirmative Action (Renfro, Duran, Stephan, & Clason, 2006). White people are more likely to object to Affirmative Action when they perceive it as harming their group's interests (Lowery, Unzueta, Knowles, & Goff, 2006; O'Brien, Garcia, Crandall, & Kordys, 2010). Given past research, SLBs may decrease support for Affirmative Action because SLBs increase perceptions of anti-white bias and zero-sum beliefs. Greater endorsement of anti-White bias and zero-sum beliefs should increase the likelihood that Affirmative Action will be viewed as a realistic threat to White people's interests, leading to less support.

Current research

The current research examines how priming SLBs increases White people's perceptions of anti-White bias, zero-sum belief endorsement, and decreases support for Affirmative Action. We also examine three mediation models suggested by previous research. We examine whether the relationship between SLBs and Affirmative Action is mediated by anti-White bias and/or zero-sum beliefs. Then we examine whether the relationship between SLBs and zero-sum beliefs is mediated by anti-White bias.

On the basis of these preliminary mediation models, we examined an integrative mediation model in which anti-White bias was the primary mediator and zero-sum beliefs were the secondary mediator of the relationship between SLBs and support for Affirmative Action. We expected that SLBs would increase perceived anti-White bias, which would decrease support for Affirmative Action. In addition, we examined whether SLBs lead to increased anti-White bias, which leads to increased zero-sum beliefs, which in turn leads to decreased support for Affirmative Action. The proposed model integrates findings on how SLBs, anti-White bias, and zero-sum beliefs impact support for Affirmative Action.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 165 self-identified White people recruited online from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and paid \$0.50 for their participation. We aimed to recruit 150 (75 per condition) and over sampled expecting data loss. Data from 18 participants who failed to complete the prime manipulation and 24 participants who engaged in random clicking were removed from analyses.¹ The final sample consisted of 123 White people (67% male, Age: $M = 32.00$, $SD = 9.81$).

Procedure

Participants were told they were taking part in two separate studies, one on 'cognitive ability' and one on 'social perceptions'. The first 'study' served as our manipulation of SLBs (McCoy & Major, 2007; Wilkins *et al.*, 2013). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions, the *SLB prime condition* or the *control condition*. In both

¹ Random clickers were identified by their failure to indicate the correct response to questions embedded within the study (e.g., failure to select 'Strongly Agree' when asked to).

conditions, participants were given 20 items consisting of five words and told to construct four word sentences. Participants had five minutes to complete as many of the items as possible. In the *SLB prime condition* participants completed sentences related to SLBs (e.g., Item: 'effort, positive, prosperity, leads, to' Answer: 'Effort leads to prosperity'; Item: 'fair close usually is life'; Answer: 'Life is usually fair'). In the *control condition* participants completed sentences unrelated to SLBs (e.g., Item: 'cakes, she, fluffy, likes, cats' Answer: 'She likes fluffy cats'; Item: 'books open worlds count new'; Answer: 'Books open new worlds').

Participants were then told that they were taking part in an unrelated study aimed at assessing their social perceptions. In the 'second study' participants reported their perceptions of anti-White bias, endorsement of zero-sum beliefs, and support for Affirmative Action.

Measures

Participants rated their agreement with statements, anchored at 0 = *not at all*, 6 = *very much*.

Anti-White bias

Eight items assessed participants' perceptions of anti-White bias ($M = 4.18$; $SD = 1.44$; $\alpha = .90$; Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014). For example: 'Prejudice and discrimination against White people are on the rise'. 'White people are victims of racial bias'.

Zero-sum Beliefs

Four items measured zero-sum beliefs ($M = 2.32$; $SD = 1.55$; $\alpha = .91$; Wilkins, Wellman, Babbitt, et al., 2015): 'Rights for Black people mean that White people lose out'. 'As Black people face less racism, White people end-up facing more racism'. 'Less discrimination against minorities has led to increased discrimination against White people'. 'Efforts to reduce discrimination against minorities have led to increased discrimination against White people'.

Affirmative Action

Two items measured support for Affirmative Action ($M = 4.01$; $SD = 1.81$; $\alpha = .75$): 'Affirmative Action programmes are still needed today to address racial inequality'. 'Businesses should increase their efforts to promote racial diversity in the workplace'.

Results

Condition differences

We conducted independent samples *t*-tests to determine whether there were condition differences. As predicted, perceived anti-White bias was significantly higher among participants primed with SLBs ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.35$) than among those in the control condition ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.44$), $t(121) = 2.91$, $p < .01$; $d = .46$. Furthermore, White people primed with SLBs ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.76$) endorsed zero-sum beliefs more than those in the control condition ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.32$), $t(121) = 2.05$, $p = .04$; $d = .37$.

Finally, those primed with SLBs reported significantly *less* support for Affirmative Action ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.72$) compared to the control condition ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.85$), $t(121) = -2.05$, $p = .05$; $d = .35$.

Analysis overview for mediation analyses

We conducted simple mediation analyses using PROCESS to examine the indirect effects of the proposed mediator using a bias corrected and accelerated bootstrapped estimates (BCa; corrects for median bias and skewedness) of the confidence interval (CI) based on 5,000 bootstrap samples. Significant indirect effects are indicated by confidence intervals that do not encompass 0 (Hayes, 2013).

We then examined an integrative serial multiple mediation model (Hayes, 2013) to determine the interrelationships among all our variables. Unlike standard parallel multiple mediation models, serial models predict a causal relationship between the mediators. We examined the indirect effects using a bias corrected and accelerated bootstrapped estimates (BCa; corrects for median bias and skewedness) of the CI based on 10,000 bootstrap samples.

Relationship between SLBs and Affirmative Action mediated by anti-White bias

We examined whether the relationship between the SLB prime and support for affirmative action was mediated by anti-White bias. The SLB condition significantly predicted support for Affirmative Action, $b = -.63$, $p = .05$ and when anti-White bias was entered as a mediator, the direct path was reduced and no longer significant, $b = -.03$, $p = .90$; Model $R^2 = .41$, $F(2, 120) = 42.03$, $p < .001$. As predicted, the indirect path from SLB condition to anti-White bias to affirmative action was significant, point estimate = $-.60$, BCa 95% CI: -1.08 to -0.18 .²

Relationship between SLBs and Affirmative Action mediated by zero-sum beliefs

Then we examined whether the relationship between SLBs and Affirmative Action was mediated by zero-sum beliefs. SLBs significantly predicted decreases in support for Affirmative Action, $b = -.62$, $p < .01$ and when zero-sum beliefs were entered as a mediator, the direct path was reduced and no longer significant, $b = -.31$, $p = .28$; Model $R^2 = .52$, $F(2, 120) = 23.07$, $p < .001$. As predicted the indirect path from SLBs to zero-sum beliefs to Affirmative Action was significant, point estimate = $-.32$, BCa 95% CI: -0.69 to -0.002 .³

Relationship between SLBs and zero-sum beliefs mediated by anti-White bias

Next we examined whether the relationship between SLBs and zero-sum beliefs was mediated by anti-White bias. SLB condition significantly predicted zero-sum beliefs,

² We also tested whether support for Affirmative Action mediated the relationship between SLBs and anti-White bias and found that the indirect effect was significant (point estimate = $.30$, BCa 95% CI: 0.01 to 0.65). However, anti-White bias was a stronger mediator of the relationship between SLBs and Affirmative Action, suggesting that our current model is preferred.

³ We also tested whether support for Affirmative Action mediated the relationship between SLBs and zero-sum beliefs and found that there was no indirect effect of support for Affirmative Action (point estimate = $.31$, BCa 95% CI: -0.01 to 0.65) suggesting that our proposed directionality is preferred.

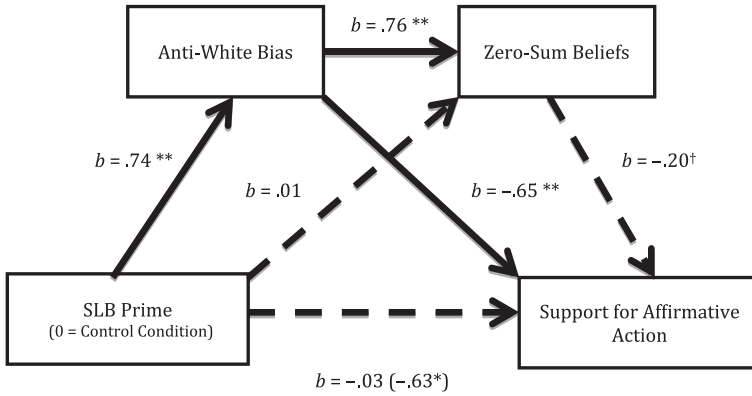


Figure 1. Status-legitimizing belief (SLB) prime decreases support for affirmative action via anti-White bias. Note. Total effect is presented in parentheses. † $p = .08$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

$b = .51, p = .05$ and when anti-White bias was entered as a mediator, the direct path was reduced and no longer significant, $b = -.01, p = .94$; Model $R^2 = .47, F(2, 120) = 54.79, p < .001$. As predicted, the indirect path from SLB condition to anti-White bias to zero-sum beliefs was significant, point estimate = .52, BCa 95% CI: 0.17 to 0.90.⁴

Integrative mediation model

Finally, we examined a serial mediation model to clarify how SLBs, anti-White bias and zero-sum beliefs impact support for affirmative action. Specifically we tested whether relationship between SLBs and Affirmative Action is mediated through both anti-White bias and through anti-White bias relationship with zero-sum beliefs. SLB condition significantly predicted support for Affirmative Action, $b = -.63, p = .05$. When anti-White bias and zero-sum beliefs were entered as mediators, the direct path between SLB condition and affirmative action was reduced and no longer significant, $b = -.03, p = .90$; Model $R^2 = .43, F(3, 119) = 29.54, p < .001$. As predicted, the indirect path from SLB condition to anti-White bias to affirmative action was significant, point estimate = $-.48$, BCa 95% CI: -0.92 to -0.16 . The indirect path from SLB condition to anti-White bias to zero-sum beliefs to affirmative action was also significant, point estimate = $-.11$, BCa 95% CI: -0.31 to -0.01 . However, the indirect path from SLB to zero-sum beliefs to Affirmative Action was not significant, point estimate = $-.00$, BCa 95% CI: -0.10 to 0.09 . This suggests that anti-White bias may be a mechanism through which the SLB prime influenced White people’s support for Affirmative Action (Figure 1).

Discussion

This study examined whether priming SLBs affects White people’s perceptions of anti-White bias, endorsement of zero-sum beliefs, and support for Affirmative Action policies. When SLBs were primed, White people perceived greater anti-White bias, endorsed

⁴ We also tested whether zero-sum beliefs mediated the relationship between SLBs and anti-White bias. We found no significant indirect effect of zero-sum beliefs on the anti-White bias (point estimate = .33, BCa 95% CI: -0.01 to 0.67) suggesting that our proposed directionality of the relationship is preferred.

zero-sum beliefs to a greater extent, and indicated less support for Affirmative Action policies. The current findings are consistent with correlational research, which demonstrates a positive relationship between SLBs and perceptions of anti-White bias (Wilkins, Wellman, Babbitt, *et al.*, 2015). However, the current research is the first study (to our knowledge) to provide evidence of a causal relationship between SLBs and increased perceptions of anti-White bias. These findings are troubling as cues that promote meritocracy and protestant work ethic (components of SLBs) are prevalent throughout society. The current research suggests that such messages may prime White people to perceive greater anti-White bias, which may in turn impact their support for Affirmative Action.

Our mediation analyses integrate previous findings on the relationships between SLBs, anti-White bias, zero-sum beliefs and White people's support for Affirmative Action. Our model suggests that SLBs increase perceived anti-White bias, which in turn decreases support for Affirmative Action. Further we demonstrate that anti-White bias exerts part of its influence on support for Affirmative Action by increasing zero-sum beliefs. Thus, when White people perceive increased anti-White bias, it leads them to view interracial relations as zero-sum and to reject Affirmative Action.

Our data also suggest that anti-White bias drives the relationship between SLBs and zero-sum beliefs. While previous research has found an association between SLBs and zero-sum beliefs (Wilkins, Wellman, Babbitt, *et al.*, 2015), we provide evidence that anti-White bias serves as a mediator of this relationship. This model suggests that when White people are primed with SLBs they perceive greater anti-White bias, which may lead them to increase their zero-sum beliefs and look out for their own group's interests.

One alternative to the current model is that SLBs reduce support for Affirmative Action which then leads individuals to justify their opposition by increasing perceptions of anti-White bias and zero-sum beliefs. Our current data, however, does not support this interpretation. While we found a significant indirect path between SLBs and anti-White bias via Affirmative Action, it was weaker than the indirect path between SLBs and Affirmative Action via anti-White bias. In addition, support for Affirmative Action did not mediate the relationship between SLBs and zero-sum beliefs. While it is possible that anti-White bias justifies opposition to Affirmative Action (e.g., because it harms White people), our data suggest that it is more likely that perceptions of anti-White bias reduce support for Affirmative Action. Taken together, the current research offers greater insight into the relationship between SLBs and Affirmative Action support.

Implications

While White people increasingly perceive that anti-White bias is a problem in the United States (Norton & Sommers, 2011; Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014), it is important to realize that inequality between White people and other racial minorities persists (Pettit, 2012). Issues of employment, wage disparity, housing, and access to education continue to be influenced by bias against racial minorities in the United States (Kochhar, Taylor, & Fry, 2011). Hence, policies that address racial inequality, such as Affirmative Action are still needed. In the light of this, the current findings are troubling.

While previous research has found that SLB endorsement is associated with increased perceptions of anti-White bias only in the presence of a clear threat (e.g., racial progress; Wilkins & Kaiser, 2014; personal loss; Major *et al.*, 2002), we find that perceptions of anti-White bias increase when SLBs are simply primed. Previous work has focused primarily on conscious SLB endorsement but the current data suggest that unconscious priming of SLBs

may also impact support for Affirmative Action. Priming SLBs appears to increase White people's perceptions of anti-White bias which decreases support for affirmative action. Our findings suggest that SLBs may function on an unconscious level to justify and maintain social inequality. Given the pervasiveness of these cues and the ease with which SLBs can be primed, it is important to further examine how they may be impacting White people's behaviours and judgments.

Status-legitimizing beliefs are often considered group-neutral in that both high- and low-status individuals endorse them at equal rates. Given this, one might expect Black people and other racial minorities to respond similar to White people when primed with SLBs (e.g., increase their perceptions of anti-White bias). However, although both low- and high-status individuals endorse SLBs, racial minorities do not perceive anti-White bias at similar levels to White people. Black people perceive significantly less anti-White bias than White people (Norton & Sommers, 2011). In fact, Black participants were near the floor of the scale. Like White people, racial minorities primed with SLBs might reduce their support for Affirmative Action, but the mechanism by which this occurs is unlikely to be anti-White bias. Rather, Black people primed with SLBs may reduce their support for Affirmative Action due to increased perceptions that Affirmative Action violates the principles of merit.

While our findings seem unlikely to generalize to low-status groups, they may generalize to other high status groups (e.g., men) who are increasingly likely to perceive bias against their ingroup (Bosson, Vandello, Michniewicz, & Lenes, 2012; Kehn & Ruthig, 2013). Endorsement of SLBs has been shown to be positively related to perceptions of ingroup bias among men (Wilkins, Wellman, & Schad, 2015). Given this, men may perceive increased anti-male bias when primed with SLBs and this may lead them to reduce their support for Affirmative Action.

Limitations and future directions

This study does not examine support for specific Affirmative Action policies but rather Affirmative Action programmes in general. It is possible that particular policies would be more or less affected by SLB primes. For example, White people's objections to Affirmative Action often arise when the policy is seen as harming White people (Lowery et al., 2006; O'Brien et al., 2010). Specific objections to Affirmative Action may also be differentially shaped by priming SLBs (e.g., violates the merit principle, harms White people, harms racial minorities). Future research could examine how and under what circumstances SLB primes are related to specific objections to Affirmative Action. Understanding more about the mechanisms (e.g., anti-White bias, zero-sum beliefs) underlying the relationship between SLBs and individuals' opposition to Affirmative Action may also inform interventions aimed at increasing acceptance of Affirmative Action.

Conclusion

The current findings suggest that inequality may be perpetuated and maintained, in part, by SLB messages that permeate our environment. Given recent evidence that perceptions of anti-White bias are on the rise among White people, it is particularly important to examine the causes and consequences of anti-White bias for intergroup interactions and social policy support. Further it is important to examine the role that anti-White bias and zero-sum beliefs as a mechanism by which SLBs may perpetuate social inequality.

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