



## Brief Report

# The intergenerational transmission of racism: The role of Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation

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## ABSTRACT

Developmental theory and research suggest that racism is transmitted from one generation to the next. Research also suggests that prejudice dispositions such as Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) are transmitted across generations. Accordingly, we examined whether the intergenerational similarity in RWA and SDO accounts for the intergenerational similarity in racism. In a sample of adolescents and their parents, significant parent–adolescent concordance in racism was found and it was shown that this concordance could largely be explained by the parent–adolescent concordance in RWA and SDO. Results thus suggest that the parent–adolescent similarity in racism largely results from a more fundamental intergenerational transmission of ideology.

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## 1. Introduction

Although the development of racism and prejudice in children and adolescents is determined by a complex interaction between genetic and socialization influences, developmental theory on the origins of racism and prejudice have highlighted the role of parents (e.g., Altemeyer, 1988). One mechanism through which parents may predispose their children to become racist is through their own endorsement and display of racist attitudes. Racism would then be transmitted from one generation to the next through modelling processes. Research examining intergenerational similarity in racism between parents and their pre-adolescent children yielded mixed results, with some studies finding significant parent–child similarity (e.g., Epstein & Komorita, 1966; Katz, 2003) and other studies failing to find such similarity (e.g., Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Davey, 1983). In contrast, the few studies among adolescents converge on the conclusion that there is a significant concordance in racism between parents and their adolescent children (e.g., Carlson & Iovini, 1985; Moscher & Scodel, 1960). The finding that parent–child similarity in racism does not become stable before adolescence suggests that the intergenerational transmission process is particularly salient during adolescence. This finding is in line with the idea that individuals mainly start developing a view on societal issues such as politics and intergroup relations

from adolescence on (e.g., Altemeyer, 1998; Erikson, 1968). Still, studies on parent–adolescent concordance in racism are relatively scarce and have often focused on the role of either mothers or fathers. Accordingly, a first aim of this study was to add to this literature by examining the strength of intergenerational concordance in racism in a sample of adolescents and both of their parents.

A second aim of this study is to examine the dynamics behind the presumed intergenerational similarity in racism. We assume that this parent–adolescent similarity results from a more fundamental intergenerational transmission of ideology. Specifically, in line with Duckitt's (2001) dual-process theory of ideology and prejudice and other current views on the ideological bases of prejudice (e.g., Altemeyer, 1998; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), we examined the role of parent–adolescent similarity in Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO). RWA involves an adherence to social norms, submissiveness to established authorities, and willingness to aggress against persons or groups believed to be categorized as deviant by established authorities (Altemeyer, 1981). SDO reflects a preference for intergroup relations to be hierarchical rather than equal (Pratto et al., 1994). According to Duckitt (2001), RWA and SDO are related to prejudice through differential social-cognitive and motivational pathways. People high on RWA would be vulnerable to prejudice because they tend to view outgroup members as a threat to the social order and to the stability of their own group. In contrast, people high on SDO would be prejudiced because they have a view of the world as a ruthless jungle where every individual needs to maximize his or her personal benefits. RWA and SDO are often thought of as two faces of the original authoritarian personality

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(Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950), with the former referring to authoritarian submission and the latter to authoritarian dominance (Altemeyer, 1998). Research has shown that RWA and SDO predict independent variance in various forms of prejudice, including racism (e.g., McFarland, 2001).

Germane to the topic of this study, research suggests that both RWA and SDO are transmitted across generations. Specifically, studies have systematically shown strong intergenerational similarity in RWA between parents and their adolescent children, with correlations around .40 (e.g., Altemeyer, 1988; Duriez, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2008). Although comparatively less research has examined the intergenerational transmission of SDO, at least one study (Duriez et al., 2008) obtained a significant correlation between SDO of parents and their adolescent children. Although, as is the case for racism and prejudice, parent–adolescent similarity in RWA and SDO is likely influenced by both socialization (e.g., modelling and parenting) and genetic factors and their interaction, there is a growing consensus that RWA and SDO do not develop until adolescence (e.g., Altemeyer, 1998; Duckitt, 2001; Van Hiel, Pandelaere, & Duriez, 2004). Adolescence was therefore considered an ideal developmental phase to examine parent–child similarity in RWA and SDO.

Given that both research (e.g., McFarland, 2001) and theorizing (e.g., Altemeyer, 1998; Duckitt, 2001; Pratto et al., 1994) identified RWA and SDO as essential predictors of prejudice in general and of racism in particular, and given that both RWA and SDO appear to be transmitted across generations (e.g., Duriez et al., 2008), we hypothesized that the intergenerational similarity in RWA and SDO may at least partly account for the observed parent–adolescent similarity in racism. Thus, the main aim of the present study is to investigate whether the intergenerational transmission of RWA/SDO mediates any observed parent–adolescent similarity in racism.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 956 high-school students following either an academic track ( $N = 486$ ), an arts education ( $N = 233$ ), or a technical education ( $N = 237$ ). Participants were recruited in secondary schools in the Flemish speaking part of Belgium and participated during school hours (mean age = 17.59;  $SD = 0.51$ ; 41% male). All of these participants had parents belonging to the dominant Flemish ethnic majority. Of these participants, 732 came from intact families, 192 had divorced parents, 31 had a deceased parent, and one was an orphan. All participants received additional questionnaires for their mother and father. They were asked to return these questionnaires in a closed envelop ultimately 2 weeks later and to hand them over to a staff member from school who was

responsible for collecting them. In total, 542 mothers (57%; mean age = 43.00;  $SD = 3.68$ ) and 462 fathers (49%; mean age = 45.21;  $SD = 4.26$ ) participated. Parents reported their level of education by encircling one of six categories (primary education; education till the 9th grade; education till the 12th grade; short-term higher education; long-term higher education; university studies). Specifically, 21% of the fathers and 18% of the mothers had dropped out of school before the end of ninth grade; 38% of fathers and mothers had completed high school; and 41% of fathers and 46% of mothers had completed some form of higher education. After listwise deletion of missing values, 528 mother–child and 447 father–child dyads were retained. Independent samples  $t$ -tests showed no significant differences between children of parents who participated versus children of parents who did not participate on any of the study variables (all  $ps > .05$ ). Further, a comparison of the correlation matrix of each group by means of a chi-square test indicated no differences in pattern of associations ( $p > .05$ ). These analyses suggest that the final sample does not represent a selective subgroup of the initial sample.

### 2.2. Measures

All items were administered in Dutch, and 5-point likert scale items anchored by *Completely disagree* and *Completely agree* were used for all measures. Participants completed a 6-item racism scale (Duriez, Vansteenkiste, Soenens, De Witte, 2007; e.g., ‘We have to keep our race pure and fight mixture with other races’), a 14-item RWA scale (Duriez et al., 2008; e.g., ‘Obedience and respect for authority are among the most important virtues children should learn’), and a 14-item SDO scale (Duriez et al., 2008; e.g., ‘It’s sometimes necessary to step on others to get ahead in life’). Cronbach alpha’s, means, and standard deviations for these scales can be found in Table 1.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Preliminary analyses

Independent samples  $t$ -tests indicated that boys, relative to girls, scored higher on racism [ $t(935) = 4.48, p < .001$ ] and SDO [ $t(941) = 7.41, p < .001$ ]. Paired samples  $t$ -tests indicated that fathers scored higher than mothers on RWA [ $t(426) = 2.34, p < .05$ ] and SDO [ $t(423) = 2.73, p < .01$ ]. In addition, univariate ANOVA-analyses indicated that the educational groups differed significantly with respect to racism [ $F(2, 934) = 5.27, p < .01$ ] and RWA [ $F(2, 942) = 13.57, p < .001$ ], with post-hoc Tukey comparisons indicating that technical students scored higher on racism than arts students and academic track students. For mothers, educational level was significantly related to racism, RWA, and SDO ( $rs = -.25, -.33, \text{ and } -.12, p < .01, \text{ respectively}$ ). For fathers,

**Table 1**  
Cronbach alpha’s, means, standard deviations, and correlations between the variables.

Measure	Alpha	Mean	SD	01.	02.	03.	04.	05.	06.	07.	08.
01. Racism, mother	.82	1.84	0.77								
02. Racism, father	.83	1.99	0.75	.34***							
03. Racism, child	.85	1.98	0.76	.28***	.21***						
04. RWA, mother	.71	2.85	0.50	.48***	.30***	.26***					
05. RWA, father	.79	3.03	0.56	.32***	.47***	.19***	.52***				
06. RWA, child	.77	3.10	0.54	.20***	.14**	.35***	.41***	.28***			
07. SDO, mother	.86	2.35	0.65	.53***	.21***	.20***	.41***	.20***	.21***		
08. SDO, father	.88	2.16	0.66	.26***	.47***	.20***	.24***	.31***	.11*	.35***	
09. SDO, child	.83	2.25	0.62	.20***	.11*	.59**	.19***	.10*	.25***	.22***	.30***

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

educational level was significantly related to racism and RWA only ( $r_s = -.26$  and  $-.36$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively).

Correlation analyses showed significantly positive correlations between all measures (see Table 1). In sum, the necessary conditions for the hypothesized mediation model are fulfilled. Analyses testing this model are reported in the next section. Given the gender and education differences, adolescent gender and level of education as well as parental level of education were used as control variables. In this respect, a dummy variable was created contrasting academic track and arts students (coded as 0) to technical students (coded as 1) to control for adolescent level of education.

### 3.2. Primary analyses

Structural equation modelling with manifest variables was performed using Lisrel, and models were estimated separately for mothers and fathers. The covariance matrices were used as input and solutions were generated on the basis of maximum-likelihood estimation. To evaluate model fit, the Satorra–Bentler scaled chi-square (SBS- $\chi^2$ ) instead of the regular chi-square was inspected because the former corrects for data non-normality. To further evaluate model fit, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) were selected. According to Hu and Bentler (1999), combined cut-off values close to .95 and .09, respectively, indicate good model fit.

First, we examined parental racism as a direct predictor of adolescent racism. Estimation of fully saturated models showed that parental racism significantly predicted adolescent racism, both in the maternal and paternal model ( $\beta = .27$  and  $.17$ ;  $p < .001$ , respectively). To examine whether parental gender moderated the parent–adolescent similarity, a multigroup analysis was conducted comparing a constrained model (in which this relation was set to be invariant across mothers and fathers) with an unconstrained model (in which this parameter was freely estimated across mothers and fathers). No significant difference was found between both models,  $\chi^2_{diff}(1) = 3.55$ ,  $ns$ . In both the maternal and the paternal model, adolescent level of education ( $\beta = -.15$  and  $-.24$ ;  $p < .001$ , respectively) and parental level of education ( $\beta = -.25$  and  $-.25$ ;  $p < .001$ , respectively) related to parent racism, and adolescent gender related to adolescent racism ( $\beta = -.20$  and  $-.27$ ;  $p < .001$ , respectively).

Second, we examined whether the direct effect of parental on adolescent racism was mediated by the parent–child concordance in RWA and SDO. To test this, the direct effects model was extended by inserting parental RWA and SDO as predictors of parental racism and by inserting adolescent RWA and SDO as predictors of adolescent racism. In this model, direct effects of parent RWA on adolescent RWA and of parent SDO on adolescent SDO

were allowed. In addition, adolescent RWA and SDO were allowed to correlate. This model had a good fit in both the maternal and the paternal data [SBS- $\chi^2(6) = 13.99$  and  $2.84$ ; CFI = .99 and  $1.00$ ; SRMR = .03 and .01, respectively]. The resulting models are depicted in Fig. 1 and show that the direct effect of parental racism on adolescent racism became non-significant when taking the father–child concordance in RWA and SDO into account. In the maternal model, the direct effect of parent on adolescent racism remained significant, but the strength of this effect decreased substantially (i.e., a reduction of 52%). Both the indirect effect of parent RWA on adolescent racism through adolescent RWA ( $z = 4.54$  and  $3.94$ ;  $p > .001$ , for mothers and fathers, respectively) and the indirect effect of parent SDO on adolescent racism through adolescent SDO ( $z = 5.07$  and  $5.16$ ;  $p > .001$ , for mothers and fathers, respectively) were significant.

In the final models, the paths from parental RWA to parental racism and adolescent RWA were significant, and so were the paths from parental SDO to parental racism and adolescent SDO. The paths from adolescent RWA and SDO to adolescent racism were also significant. In both the maternal and paternal model, parent RWA and SDO ( $\beta = .41$  and  $.21$ ;  $p < .001$ , respectively) and adolescent RWA and SDO ( $\beta = .17$  and  $.21$ ;  $p < .001$ , respectively) were significantly correlated. In both the maternal and paternal model, adolescent gender related to adolescent SDO ( $\beta = -.31$  and  $-.28$ ;  $p < .001$ , respectively), adolescent level of education related to adolescent RWA ( $\beta = -.16$  and  $-.26$ ;  $p < .001$ , respectively) and parent RWA ( $\beta = -.19$  and  $-.14$ ;  $p < .001$ , respectively) and parental level of education related to parent RWA ( $\beta = -.32$  and  $-.36$ ;  $p < .001$ , respectively), parent racism ( $\beta = -.10$  and  $-.11$ ;  $p < .01$ , respectively), and adolescent racism ( $\beta = -.07$  and  $-.11$ ;  $p < .05$ , respectively). In the maternal model, parental level of education also related to parent SDO ( $\beta = -.12$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

A multigroup analysis compared the final maternal and paternal models. In a first step, the model fit was assessed after constraining all parameters of the structural model to be invariant across both models. In a second step, the model fit was examined after allowing the parameters to be freely estimated across both models. Step 2 did not result in a significant increase in model fit ( $\chi^2_{diff}(9) = 6.92$ ,  $ns$ ), indicating that the strength of associations did not differ between the maternal and paternal model. To rule out the possibility that the similarity in RWA and SDO is a side-effect from a direct influence of parental racism on both adolescent racism and adolescent RWA and SDO, it was tested whether the fit of the multi-group model would be improved when allowing direct paths from parental racism to adolescent RWA and SDO. Adding these paths did not improve model fit ( $\chi^2_{diff}(2) = 1.03$ ,  $ns$ ), and both the direct path from parent racism to adolescent RWA and from parent racism to adolescent SDO turned out non-significant ( $\beta = .01$  and  $.07$ ,  $ns$ , respectively).

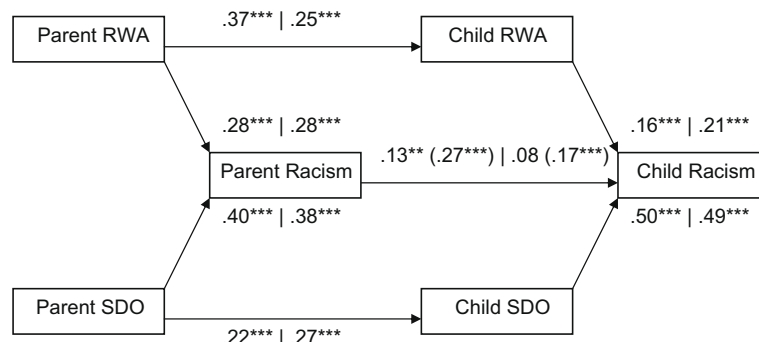


Fig. 1. Structural model of relationships between RWA, SDO and racism of parents and their children. Coefficients are standardized estimates. First coefficients refer to mothers. Second coefficients refer to fathers. Direct effects of parental racism on child racism can be found between brackets. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$  and \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

#### 4. Discussion

A first aim of this study was to examine whether there is parent–adolescent similarity in racism. Although previous research (O'Bryan, Fishbein, & Ritchey, 2004) suggested that the concordance between mothers and their adolescent children is more pronounced than between fathers and their adolescent children, a multigroup analysis revealed that, at least in our data, father–child concordance is not significantly stronger than mother–child concordance. Our results primarily show that, even after taking into account several relevant background variables such as adolescent gender and adolescent and parent level of education, there does exist a significant concordance in racism between adolescents and both of their parents. Second, consistent with previous research (Duriez et al., 2008), we found significant intergenerational similarity in the prejudice dispositions of RWA and SDO. More importantly, the initially observed parent–adolescent similarity in racism was largely (in the case of mothers) or even fully (in the case of fathers) reduced after taking this intergenerational similarity in RWA and SDO into account. This mediation model was also invariant across parental gender. Additional analyses showing that the similarity in RWA and SDO is not a side-effect of a direct influence of parental racism on both adolescent racism and adolescent RWA and SDO provide further support for our thesis that the intergenerational transmission of racism is undergirded by a more fundamental transmission process of ideology. Hence, future research would do well to focus on the processes shaping adolescent RWA and SDO rather than on the processes shaping racism as such.

An important limitation of the present study is its cross-sectional design. Given that the process of intergenerational transmission is by its very nature a longitudinal phenomenon, longitudinal studies should test the processes underlying the intergenerational transmission of RWA and SDO. As such, our findings do not allow to address the issue whether this transmission is driven by socialization influences, by genetic influences or by an interactive combination of both. To date, there is evidence supporting both heritability (e.g., McCourt, Bouchard, Lykken, Tellegen, & Keyes, 1999) and socialization (e.g., Duriez et al., 2008) effects in the development of RWA and SDO. Yet, research examining gene–environment interactions in this area is lacking. Future research might fill this gap by examining the relative contribution of genetic and socializations factors in greater depth. As for the socialization part, recent studies point to parental goal promotion as an important mechanism underlying the development of RWA and SDO (Duriez, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2007, 2008). However, future research might also want to take into account the influence of other social-

ization agents that might play a role in the development of racism, RWA, and SDO such as peers, school teachers, and the media.

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