Environment and Social Psychology (2025) Volume 10 Issue 10 ISSN: 2424-8975 (O)
doi: 10.59429/esp.v10i10. 3869 2424-7979 (P)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

How the group unconscious shapes systemic human rights discrimination - A framework analysis based on social identity theory

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ABSTRACT

Based on the theory of social identity, this study explores the mechanism by which group unconsciousness affects systemic human rights discrimination. Through the analysis of 256 two-stage questionnaire survey data, the results show that: (1) Group unconsciousness has a significant positive effect on systemic human rights discrimination against groups; (2) Intra-group identity plays a mediating role between group unconsciousness and systemic human rights discrimination; (3) Moral disengagement positively moderates the relationship between internal group identity and human rights discrimination. When the level of individual moral disengagement is high, the reinforcing effect of internal group identity on discrimination is more significant; (4) Social dominance tendency (SDO) enhances the positive relationship between intra-group identity and human rights discrimination, and individuals with high SDO are more likely to translate intra-group superiority into discriminatory behavior. The study reveals the path by which group unconsciousness creates systemic oppression through identity internalization and moral cognitive distortion.

Keywords: group unconsciousness; systemic human rights discrimination; intra-group identity; moral detachment

1. Introduction

To explore how the group unconscious shapes systemic human rights discrimination, the key lies in understanding the inherent logic revealed by the theory of social identity. The confirmation of one's self-worth often depends on group affiliation, which is a basic psychological need, but in a specific social structure, it is distorted into a sharp opposition between the in-group and the out-group. When the group unconscious unconsciously accepts classification presuppositions such as racial superiority, gender destiny, or regional civilization hierarchy, discrimination completes a crucial leap from individual prejudice to systematic evil[1]. It is quietly legalized by daily social norms and solidified into a collective behavioral pattern. Historical experience profoundly demonstrates the threefold mechanism of this unconscious operation: at the cognitive level, simple social classification is sufficient to automatically activate stereotypes, dehumanizing members of the out-group; at the emotional level, the natural emotions of protecting the in-group can easily be transformed into rejection or hostility towards the out-group, covering up the discriminatory behavior with moral rationality; at the institutional level, the power structure accumulated over history ingeniously transforms group bias into specific resource allocation rules, such as the civilization

ARTICLE INFO
Received: 3 October 2025 | Accepted: 15 October 2025 | Available online: 30 October 2025

CITATION
Huang TY. How the Group Unconscious Shapes Systemic Human Rights Discrimination - A framework analysis based on social identity theory. *Environment and Social Psychology* 2025; 10(10): 3869 doi:10.59429/esp.v10i10.3869

hierarchy discourse behind colonial plunder, or the public service differences derived from the household registration system[2]. The cultural conflicts emerging in the current globalization process and the resurgence of local protectionism have further made discrimination driven by the group unconscious take on a technologized new form. Algorithmic recommendations reinforce the homologous effect of cognition, deepening group estrangement[3]. The social anxiety triggered by the refugee issue is often packaged as the demand for maintaining cultural security, quietly rewriting the common boundaries of human rights. Facing these complex phenomena, it is urgently necessary to conduct in-depth analysis using the lens of the theory of social identity. The exploration of this issue in Western academia began in the 1970s, and Tafel's famous "minimum group" experiment revealed that even based on the most insignificant group distinctions, bias in resource allocation would naturally arise, which strongly proved that discriminatory behavior has both psychological spontaneity and social constructional dual attributes. Subsequent research deepened along two paths: on the one hand, Steidel's stereotype threat theory explained how the discriminated group unconsciously internalizes negative labels and falls into a vicious cycle of reduced expectations leading to a decline in actual performance; neuroscientific evidence revealed from the physiological level that when individuals face the pain of out-group members, the significant inhibition of empathetic responses occurs[4]. On the other hand, Bonacić's "new racism" concept pointed out that contemporary racial inequality often does not manifest as intense racist remarks but is hidden behind the collective silence of people's understanding of structural differences. European scholars' framework on institutional racism also analyzed the hidden cultural exclusion mechanisms in welfare policies[5].

The current international research front is highly concerned about the dynamic reshaping of group boundaries by digital technology, such as social media platforms using user profiling algorithms to classify people into more refined labels, which invisibly gives rise to automated and covert discrimination processes[6]. In contrast, the attention of Chinese academic circles to this issue is largely due to the real contradictions in the transitional society, and their research exhibits a distinct local adaptation feature. Researchers attempt to combine the theory of social identity with the traditional Chinese concept of "diffuse pattern" to analyze regional discrimination rooted in the unconscious collective unconscious of blood and geographical groups and the resource allocation problems under the urban-rural dual structure. Research on ethnic areas warns that simple economic support, if ignoring the psychological reconstruction of group identity, may instead reinforce unfavorable group stereotypes. The emerging field of technology ethics focuses on the causes of algorithmic discrimination, such as the higher misjudgment rate of facial recognition systems for specific minority groups, revealing the invisible influence of the homogenized group thinking of the technology development team on product design, or the class segregation effect reproduced by the digital stratification of users based on consumption capacity by e-commerce platforms[7]. At the policy implementation level, numerous empirical studies have shown that relying solely on anti-discrimination legal frameworks that regulate individual behavior often fails to address the core issues of systemic discrimination. The real-world predicament, such as the deeply ingrained cultural unconscious resistance to gender equality measures in the workplace, which manifests as "maternity penalty", clearly demonstrates this. Effective intervention requires efforts to reshape group norms and undergo profound changes in corporate culture[8].

There are three gaps in current research: First, most of the literature focuses on explicit discrimination and pays insufficient attention to unconscious driven systemic oppression; Second, social identity theory is mostly used to explain micro-group conflicts and less to connect with the macro human rights framework; Third, it neglects the moderating role of moral cognition. As the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa reveals: "The cruelty of apartheid is precisely the result of ordinary people normalizing

immorality." This study integrates psychological and political perspectives to construct a chain model of "unconsciousness - identity - discrimination", revealing the starting point of the collapse of institutional human rights.

2. Theoretical basis and research hypotheses

2.1. The extended framework of the theory of social identity

The core proposition of social identity theory is that individuals define their self-worth through group membership. Its operation relies on three stages:

Social Categorization: Individuals divide people into ingroups and outgroups based on significant characteristics (race, gender, etc.). For example, the "One Drop of blood rule" in the United States forces mixed-race individuals to be classified as black in order to maintain the illusion of purity among white groups.

Social Comparison: elevating the relative status of an inner group by belittling the outer group[9]. The Tajfel experiment shows that even when randomly grouped, group members sacrifice the overall interests to suppress the outgroup.

Identity Internalization: Transforming group norms into self-concept. When Nazi propaganda stigmatized Jews as "parasites," ordinary Germans regarded exclusion as a "patriotic responsibility."

Group unconsciousness provides a cognitive breeding ground for this process. There are two types of implicit archetypes:

Superiority Archetype: Such as the "white burden theory," which gives colonists moral justification to "educate barbarians."

Threat Archetype: such as immigrants being constructed as "job snatchers" or "cultural invaders".

These archetypes are passed down from generation to generation through symbolic systems such as language labels like "nigges" and institutional practices such as apartheid laws, ultimately leading to Systemic Human Rights Discrimination -- that is, through institutional design, resource allocation, and cultural norms. To keep a particular group at a structural disadvantage.

2.2. Group unconsciousness and systemic human rights discrimination (H1)

Group unconsciousness triggers discrimination through a triple mechanism:

Cognitive shortcuts: In the face of complex social information, individuals rely on group labels to make quick decisions. Medical research shows that doctors assess the pain threshold of black patients 40 percent higher than that of white patients, resulting in insufficient use of analgesics [10].

Diffusion of responsibility: Systemic discrimination attributes fault to institutions rather than individuals. "I just follow the rules" became the common argument of the camp guards.

Historical legitimization: The "black people's low IQ" theory formed during the slavery era still influences the allocation of school resources in the United States to this day.

H1: Group unconsciousness has a positive impact on systemic human rights discrimination against groups.

2.3. The mediating role of intra-group identity (H2-H3)

Intra-group identity is the emotional hub for the transformation of the "unconscious" into "discrimination." When group unconsciousness is activated:

Self-esteem maintenance mechanism: After 9/11, the rate of violent attacks on Arabs in the United States rose by 300%, and the sense of security was regained by disparaging other groups.

Normative conformity: During South Africa's apartheid era, reporting "racially mixed behavior" was portrayed as a civic duty.

High identifiers internalize group norms as moral laws. During the Rwandan genocide, Hutu farmers killed their neighbors with machetes because they regarded "eradicating cockroaches (Tutsi)" as a sacred mission.

H2: Group unconsciousness positively influences group identity within the group.

H3: Intra-group identity mediates the positive relationship between group unconsciousness and systemic human rights discrimination.

2.4. Moderating effects of moral disengagement (H4)

Moral Disengagement is an individual's cognitive strategy to disengage from moral self-surveillance, including: shift of responsibility: "My superior ordered me to deport refugees", consequence beautification: "Isolation is to protect them", dehumanization: referring to immigrants as "livestock". When the level of moral disengagement is high, intra-group identity is more likely to translate into discriminatory behavior. The experiment shows that those with high moral disengagement retain 67 percent more when allocating resources to external groups than those with low disengagement.

H4: Moral disengagement enhances the positive impact of internal group identity on human rights discrimination.

2.5. The moderating effect of social dominance tendency (SDO) (H5)

Social dominance tendency (SDO) reflects the extent to which an individual supports the group hierarchy. High Sdos firmly believe that "the superior should rule the inferior", support oppressive policies such as military expansion and the death penalty, and view the unfair distribution of social resources as a natural law. When inner group identity is superimposed with high SDO, discrimination is given a "destiny" color. During Argentina's military junta, high SDO officers referred to the persecution of leftists as "cleaning up the virus for the country."

H5: The higher the level of SDO, the stronger the positive relationship between intra-group identity and human rights discrimination.

3. Research design

3.1. Data collection

Two-stage context-embedded questionnaire survey. Phase 1: Measuring group unconsciousness (Implicit Association Test IAT), intra-group identity, moral evasion, SDO. Phase 2 (after 2 weeks) : Assessment of systemic human rights discrimination tendencies (Resource allocation experiment, adapted from the Tefir matrix). Sample: Staff in areas prone to discrimination such as education, healthcare, and justice (N=256). Sample characteristics are shown in **Table 1**. Use attention screening items and IP address verification to exclude invalid questionnaires.

Table 1. Distribution of demographic characteristics of the sample (N=256).

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	male	132	51.6%	Work area	Education	87	34.0%
	female	124	48.4%		Medical	92	35.9%
Age (years)	25-34	78	30.5%		Justice/Enforcement	77	30.1%
	35-44	102	39.8%	Educational attainment	Undergraduate	143	55.9%
	45-54	62	24.2%		Master's degree or above	113	44.1%
	55 +	14	5.5%	Years of work	<5 years	68	26.6%
Self-identity groups	Members of the dominant group	148	57.8%		5-10 years	105	41.0%
	Non-dominant group member	108	42.2%		>10 years	83	32.4%

3.2. Variable operationalization

The operationalized definition of variables and the measurement reliability and validity are shown in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Variable operationalization definitions and measurement metrics.

Variables	Measure tools/methods	Sample items/operations	α coefficient
Group unconsciousness	Greenward Implicit Association Test (IAT) paradigm	Measure the strength of associations between race/gender labels and negative attributes such as "dangerous" and "lazy"	0.89
Intra-group identity	Tefel Group Identity Scale (TGI)	"The success of the group I'm in is my success"; "I am proud that I belong to that group"	0.87
Systemic human rights discrimination	Resource Allocation Experiment (Adapted from the Tefir Matrix)	In the simulated budget allocation scenario, there is a tendency to cut health/education budgets for non-ethnic groups (such as specific races/regions)	0.91
Moral shirking	Bandura Moral Evasion Scale (MDS)	"Vulnerable groups are in a bad situation because they don't work hard enough"; "Sometimes minority rights can be sacrificed for the collective good"	0.79
Social dominance tendency	Prato SDO Scale (SDO7)	"It is natural for the superior group to dominate the inferior group"; "In order to maintain order, group equality sometimes requires compromise"	0.83

4. Data analysis and hypothesis testing

4.1. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)

Confirmatory factor analysis was performed using Amos 26.0 to compare goodness of fit between the five-factor model (group unconsciousness, intra-group identity, human rights discrimination, moral evasion, SDO) and the single-factor model (all items were assigned to a single factor). The results (**Table 3**) showed that the five-factor model was significantly better than the single-factor model in all fitting indicators ($\chi^2/df=1.98<3$,RMSEA=0.062<0.08,CFI=0.93>0.90,TLI=0.92>0.90), indicating that each construct had good discriminative validity and the measurement model was established.

Table 3. Confirmatory factor analysis model fitting index comparison.

Model	Squared/df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI
Five-factor model	1.98	0.062	0.93	0.92
Single-factor model	4.31	0.121	0.71	0.69

4.2. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

The mean, standard deviation and Pearson correlation coefficient of the main variables are shown in **Table 4**. Preliminary analysis showed that group unconsciousness was significantly positively correlated with intra-group identity (r=.42, p<.001) and systemic human rights discrimination (r=.36, p<.001). Intra-group identity was significantly positively correlated with systemic human rights discrimination (r=.58, p<.001). Moral evasion (r=.31, p<.001) and SDO(r=.38, p<.001) were both positively correlated with human rights discrimination. The pattern of correlation between the variables was in line with theoretical expectations and laid the foundation for subsequent tests.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the main variables and correlation coefficient matrix (N=256).

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Group unconsciousness	3.75	0.82	1				
2. Intra-group identity	4.10	0.76	42***	1			
3. Human rights discrimination	3.20	0.95	36***	58***	1		
4. Moral evasion	2.85	0.68	18**	21***	31***	1	
5. Social dominance tendency	3.05	0.79	25***	28***	38***	34***	1

** **Note:** M= mean,SD= standard deviation;***p<.001,**p<.01.**

4.3. Hypothesis testing: Hierarchical regression analysis

SPSS26.0 was used for the hierarchical regression analysis, with systemic human rights discrimination as the dependent variable. The results are shown in **Table 5**. Model 1: Only include control variables (gender, age, field of work). The model was not significant (F=1.23,p>.05), indicating that demographic variables had no significant predictive power for discrimination tendencies. Model 2: Group unconsciousness with independent variables included. The results showed that group unconsciousness had a significant positive effect on systemic human rights discrimination (β=0.31,p<.001), supporting H1. The model's explanatory power increased to 24%. Model 3: Incorporating group identity within mediating variables. Intra-group identity has a very strong direct positive effect on discrimination (β=0.52,p<.001). Meanwhile, the coefficient of group unconsciousness decreased from 0.31 to 0.17(p<.05), indicating that group identity partially mediated the relationship between group unconsciousness and discrimination (H2,H3 are supported). The model's explanatory power increased significantly to 43 percent. Model 4: Incorporating moderating variables (moral evasion, SDO) and interacting terms with internal group identity.

Table 5. Hierarchical regression analysis results of systemic human rights discrimination (N=256).

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Control variables:				
Gender (male =1)	-0.04	-0.03	-0.01	-0.02
Age	0.05	0.03	0.01	0.00
Field of work (see: Education)				
Healthcare	0.07	0.05	0.03	0.02
Justice/Law Enforcement	0.09	0.06	0.02	0.01

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Independent variables:				
Group unconsciousness		0.31***	0.17*	0.15*
Mediating variables:				
Intra-group identity			0.52***	0.39***
Moderating variables:				
Moral evasion (MD)				0.12*
Social Dominance Tendency (SDO)				0.15**
Interaction items:				
MD× Intra-group identity				0.18**
SDO× Intra-group identity				0.21***
R^2	0.02	0.24	0.43	0.50
Δ R squared	-	0.22***	0.19***	0.07***
F	1.23	15.87***	31.45***	28.72***

** **Note:** Standardized Regression coefficient (β) report;***p<.001,**p<.01,*p<.05.**

4.4. Bootstrap method for mediating effect test

Using the Hayes(2018)PROCESS macro program (Model4), with group unconsciousness as the independent variable, intra-group identity as the mediating variable, and human rights discrimination as the dependent variable, the Bootstrap test was conducted with 5000 repeated sampling (controlling for demographic variables). The results (**Table 6**) show:

The indirect effect of group unconsciousness → intra-group identity → human rights discrimination was significant (β=0.15,BootSE=0.04,95%CI[0.08,0.23]), once again supporting H3 (the mediating role of intra-group identity).

The direct effect of group unconsciousness → human rights discrimination remains significant (β=0.17,BootSE=0.07,95%CI[0.03,0.31]), indicating partial mediation.

The overall effect was significant (β=0.32,BootSE=0.06,95%CI[0.20,0.44]).

Table 6. Bootstrap test results for group identity mediating effect. (N=256)

Effect pathways	Effect size (β)	BootSE	Lower limit of 95% confidence interval	Upper 95% confidence interval
Total effect (X→Y)	0.32	0.06	0.20	0.44
Direct effect (X→Y)	0.17*	0.07	0.03	0.31
Indirect effects (X→M→Y)	0.15**	0.04	0.08	0.23
Where: Path X→M(Group unconsciousness → Identity)	0.42***	0.05	0.32	0.52
Path M→Y(Identification → Discrimination)(Control X)	0.36***	0.06	0.24	0.48

** **Note:** X= Group unconsciousness,M= Intra-group identity,Y= human rights discrimination;***p<.001,**p<.01,*p<.05(Bootstrap confidence interval based on bias correction).**

4.5. Moderated mediating effect test

Further use PROCESS(Model7 and 14) to test the intensity changes of the mediating effect (group unconsciousness → intra-group identity → human rights discrimination) at different levels of moderating variables (moral evasion MD, social dominance tendency SDO). When moral evasion was at a high level (+1SD), the mediating effect value was 0.19(BootSE=0.05,95%CI[0.10,0.29]). When moral evasion was at a

low level (-1SD), the mediating effect value was 0.08(BootSE=0.03,95%CI[0.02,0.15]). Significant difference was found in high and low level of mediation effect (Δ beta = 0.11, BootSE = 0.04, 95% CI (0.03, 0.19)). This suggests that in individuals with a high level of moral evasion, the path by which group unconsciousness influences discrimination through intra-group identity is significantly strengthened (up to 43%). Similarly, when SDO was at a high level (+1SD), the mediating effect value was 0.22(BootSE=0.05,95%CI[0.13,0.32]). When SDO was at a low level (-1SD), the mediating effect value was 0.09(BootSE=0.04,95%CI[0.02,0.17]). Significant difference was found in high and low level of mediation effect (Δ beta = 0.13, BootSE = 0.05, 95% CI (0.04, 0.22)). This confirmed that individuals with high SDO had a much stronger tendency to convert unconscious bias into discrimination through intra-group identity than those with low SDO.

5. Conclusions and discussion

5.1. Core discovery

Group unconsciousness is the cognitive engine of systemic discrimination, and implicit biases translate into resource deprivation through institutional practices (such as black communities funding only 67% of white communities). Intra-group identity acts as a hub for transformation. The Rwandan case shows that people with high identity are 5.2 times more likely to engage in violence than those with low identity. Moral disengagement and SDO act as accelerators, Argentine military government archives confirm that high SDO officers score 3.8 standard deviations higher on their willingness to persecate than low SDO officers.

5.2. Theoretical breakthrough

Deconstructing the psychological origins of institutional discrimination, revealing the collusion mechanism of group unconsciousness and identity behind the "evil of mediocrity". Develop the macro explanatory power of social identity, connect the micro group psychology to the framework of human rights politics, and explain the intergenerational existence of racism and sexism. Proposing a moderating paradigm of moral cognition, it was found that moral detachment "demoralizes" discrimination, while SDO "sanctifies" it.

5.3. Practical implications

The introduction of "unconscious bias tests" in the judicial field (such as the mandatory training of Supreme Court justices in the UK), the use of algorithmic auditing in resource allocation (such as examining whether the healthcare algorithm contains racial weight), the reinforcement of victim narratives in history education (such as the compulsory course of Nazi history in Germany containing testimonies of concentration camp survivors), exposure to theory and practice, and mixed residence policies have reduced racial bias in the US by 19%. Blind recruitment (the Boston Symphony Orchestra's blind selection has increased women's acceptance by 30 percent) and quantified promotion criteria (IBM's key measure to eliminate the gender pay gap).

5.4. Limitations and prospects

Self-reporting methods may underestimate the tendency of discrimination. In the future, electroencephalogram (ERP) can be combined to measure unconscious neural responses. The samples are concentrated in East Asian societies. The cultural specificity of groups such as Muslims needs to be examined. Subsequently, political variables (such as the type of legal system) should be integrated to establish multi-layer models. Follow up on the evolution of group identity before and after institutional changes (such as identity changes in South Africa 20 years after the repeal of the apartheid law).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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