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MALLEABILITY OF LAÏCITÉ: PEOPLE WITH HIGH SOCIAL DOMINANCE ORIENTATION USE LAÏCITÉ TO LEGITIMIZE PUBLIC PRAYER BY CATHOLICS BUT NOT BY MUSLIMS

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined whether people with high SDO modify their conception of laïcité (French secularism) when judging public expressions of religious beliefs (street prayers) by France's majority (Catholics) or minority (Muslims) religious group. Participants with high SDO saw street prayer as deviating more from French values when the people praying were Muslims but were more likely to view public expressions of religious beliefs as compatible with laïcité when those praying were Catholics. SDO and religion also had indirect effects, via compatibility of public expressions of beliefs with laïcité, on perceptions of deviation from laïcité and normative pressure.

INTRODUCTION

People of Muslim faith accounted for 3.8% of Europe's population in 2010, a figure that had risen to just over 5% in 2018 and that is expected to reach more than 11% by 2050 (Pew Research Center, 2017). Approaches to integrating people from cultural and religious minorities vary across Europe, with each country having a preferred acculturation orientation. France's approach to managing intergroup relations centers round the principle of laïcité, which is subject to frequent societal and political controversies. For example, some people feel that wearing a full veil or praying in the street goes against laïcité, whereas others consider such expressions of faith to be compatible with laïcité (Gorse, 2019). Social psychology research shows that there is no universally accepted conception of laïcité (Cohu et al., 2018; Roebroeck & Guimond, 2016). Rather, laïcité is a malleable concept that people who support social hierarchy (i.e., people with high social dominance orientation, SDO; Nugier et al., 2016; Roebroeck & Guimond, 2018; Troian et al., 2018) may use to justify

prejudice against minority groups. The present study examines the malleability of high SDO individuals' conceptions of *laïcité* when judging members of a minority (Muslim) versus majority (Catholic) religious group expressing their religion publicly (street prayers).

Cohu et al. (2018) identified four constituent dimensions of *laïcité*—public expression of religious beliefs, religious neutrality of the State, equality of treatment of different religious beliefs, and protection of religious groups. The two main conceptions of *laïcité* prevalent in French society, that is historical and new *laïcité* (Roebroek & Guimond, 2016; Troian et al., 2018), differ mainly on the public expression dimension (Cohu et al., 2021). Historical *laïcité* places the onus on tolerance and equality between religions and accepts public expressions of religious beliefs, whereas new *laïcité* extends the State's religious neutrality to the public sphere (Adam-Troian et al., 2019; Baubérot, 2012; Nugier et al., 2016; Roebroek & Guimond, 2016). Hence, individuals who embrace new *laïcité* expect others to express their religious beliefs (e.g., Muslim women wearing the veil) only in the private sphere and exert pressure on them to do so (Nugier et al., 2016). Moreover, new *laïcité* appears to legitimize prejudice against minority religious groups, because individuals with high levels of prejudice exert greater normative pressure on minority religious groups (e.g., Muslims) than on the majority group (Catholics).

According to social dominance theory, people with high SDO support the idea of a social hierarchy in which higher status groups dominate lower status groups and adhere more easily to inegalitarian ideologies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Thus, people with high SDO might use *laïcité* to justify treating groups of different status unequally (Roebroek & Guimond, 2018; Troian et al., 2018). For example, Troian et al. (2018) found that people with high SDO use new *laïcité* to legitimize their prejudice against North Africans, with new *laïcité* mediating the positive link between SDO and prejudice. In addition, people with high SDO adhered to *laïcité* when presented with a situational symbolic threat but did not adhere to *laïcité* in a non-threatening situation (Roebroek & Guimond, 2018). Taken together, these results suggest that people with high SDO modify their conception of *laïcité* toward new *laïcité* when they feel the need to justify exerting normative pressure on minority groups.

The present study investigated the malleability of conceptions of *laïcité* in response to street prayers by Muslims or Catholics. More specifically, we focused on the malleability of the public expression dimension of *laïcité*, as this is the dimension that differs most between historical and new *laïcité* (Cohu et al., 2021). We expected high SDO individuals to be less attached to allowing others to express their religious beliefs in public when the people praying are Muslims than when they are Catholics, in order to justify exerting normative pressure on the minority religious group. We tested three hypotheses:

H1: High SDO individuals will exert more normative pressure on people who pray in the street and will view public prayer as less compatible with French values and *laïcité* when the people praying are Muslims than when they are Catholics.

H2: High SDO individuals will view the public expression of religious beliefs dimension as a less important principle of *laïcité* when considering Muslims praying in the street than when considering Catholics praying in the street.

H3: The effect of H1 will be mediated by the effect of the hypothesized interaction on public expression of religious beliefs.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 103 first-year psychology students (83.5% women), aged between 18 and 28 years ($M = 18.62$, $SD = 1.72$), 73.8% of whom declared themselves to be believers (24.3% non-believers, 1.9% did not provide this information). All the participants were of French nationality (three not indicated). Sensitivity analyses showed that this sample allowed us to detect a low to moderate effect size ($f^2 = .08$), with an alpha of 0.05% and a power of .80 in a multiple regression testing one predictor among four (G*Power; Faul et al., 2007).

Procedure and Measures

Participants completed two questionnaires, administered one month apart [1]. All answers were provided on scales ranging from 1 = *completely disagree* to 7 = *completely agree*. The first questionnaire (pre-induction phase) was a French translation (Duarte et al., 2004) of Sidanius and Pratto's (1999) six-item reduced SDO scale (e.g., "Inferior groups should stay in their place"), Cronbach's alpha = .78, $M = 1.89$; $SD = .81$. Participants completed this scale and then provided sociodemographic information (religious beliefs, gender, age, nationality).

In phase two (induction phase), participants were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions in which they read a newspaper article describing either Muslims ($n = 50$) or Catholics ($n = 53$) praying in the street (see Appendix A). They then completed a beliefs about laïcité measure [2] (Cohu et al., 2018), including the public expression of religious beliefs dimension (e.g., "As a principle of laïcité, everyone should be free to express his or her religious beliefs in private and in public"), Cronbach's alpha = .91, and a five-item normative pressure scale inspired by Nugier et al. (2016) (e.g., "To what extent would you try to change their minds?"), Cronbach's alpha = .82. Finally, they completed a two-item perceived deviation from laïcité measure ("To what extent do these people respect the principle of laïcité?" (reversed), "To what extent do you find the behavior of these people is contrary to the principle of laïcité?"), $r = .70$, $p < .001$, and a two-item perceived deviation from French values measure ("To what extent do you think these people respect French values?" (reversed), "To what extent do you think these people's behavior is contrary to French culture"), $r = .56$, $p < .001$. Means and standard deviations for each condition and in total, and correlations between all variables are presented in Appendix B.

RESULTS

In all the following analyses we coded religion of the people praying as Muslim = - 1 or Catholic = +1, and we standardized the SDO and public expression scores [3]. The main effects of SDO and religion on the dependent and mediating variables that were not directly relevant to the present study are shown in Appendix C.

Effect of SDO x Religion on Perceptions of Deviation and Normative Pressure

We conducted a regression analysis with SDO, religion of the people praying, and the interaction between these two variables as predictors of perceived deviation from French values, deviation from laïcité, and tendency to exert normative pressure.

SDO x Religion had an effect on deviation from French values, $B = -0.31$, $SE(B) = 0.15$, $t_{99} = -2.09$, $p = .039$, partial eta-squared = .04. In line with H1, SDO predicted perceived deviation from French values when the people praying were Muslims, $b = 0.68$, $se(b) = 0.21$, $t_{99} = 3.27$, $p = .002$, partial eta-squared = .098, but not when they were Catholics, $b = 0.05$, $se(b) = 0.22$, $t_{99} = 0.25$, $p = .803$, partial eta-squared = .001. Unexpectedly, this model did not reveal any effect of the SDO x Religion interaction on deviation from laïcité or on normative pressure, all $|ts| < 1.37$, $ps > .234$, all partial eta-squared < .03.

Effect of SDO x Religion on Public Expression

A regression analysis with SDO and religion as predictors of public expression showed an interaction effect of SDO x Religion, $B = 0.23$, $SE(B) = 0.10$, $t_{99} = 2.29$, $p = .024$, partial eta-squared = .05. Decomposing this interaction showed that the simple effect of religion on public expression was not significant for high SDO individuals (+1 SD), $b = 0.22$, $se(b) = 0.14$, $t = 1.60$, $p = .112$, or for low SDO individuals (-1 SD), $b = -0.23$, $se(b) = 0.14$, $t = -1.65$, $p = .103$. On the other hand, SDO had a marginal effect on associating public expression with the principle of laïcité in the Catholics condition, $b = 0.26$, $se(b) = 0.14$, $t_{99} = 1.80$, $p = .074$, partial eta-squared = .032, but not in the Muslims condition, $b = -0.01$, $se(b) = 0.20$, $t_{99} = -0.03$, $p = .976$, partial eta-squared < .001.

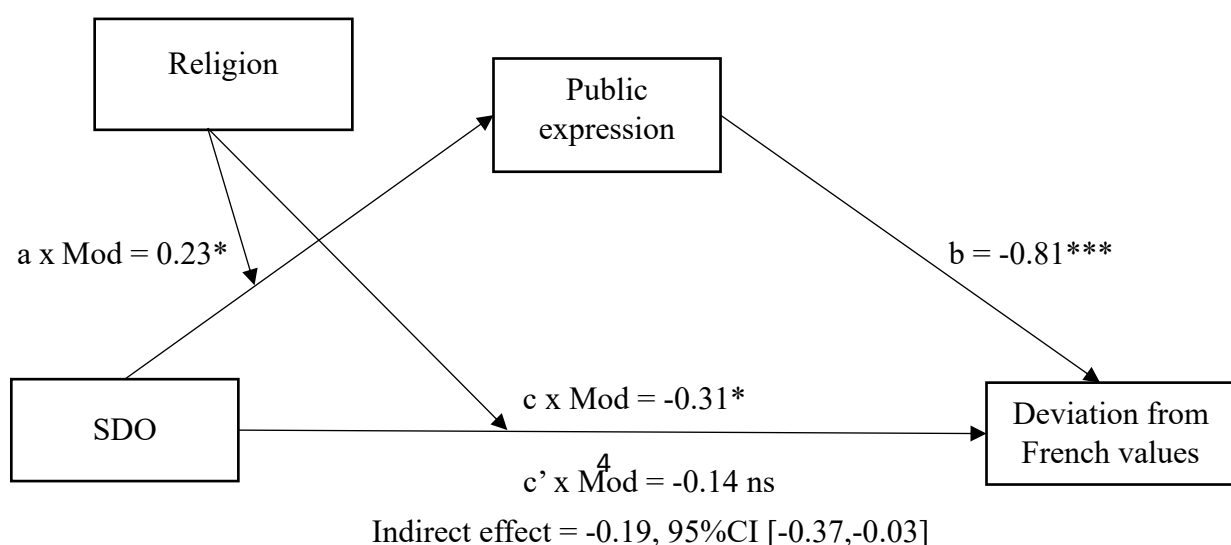
Tests of Moderated Mediation Models

We tested H3 by using the Monte Carlo method to calculate the overall mediation index (bootstrap 5000). Analyses were conducted using R package JSmediation (Yzerbyt et al., 2018).

Model on Deviation from French Values

As noted above, SDO x Religion had a significant interaction effect on public expression, which then had an effect on deviation from French values, $B = -0.81$, $SE(B) = 0.13$, $t_{97} = -6.21$, $p = .016$, partial eta-squared = .28. SDO x Religion also had an indirect effect via public expression on deviation from French values, $b = -0.18$, 95%CI [-0.37, -0.03]. After controlling for public expression, the direct effect of SDO x Religion was not significant, $B = -0.14$, $SE(B) = 0.13$, $t_{97} = -1.08$, $p = .284$, partial eta-squared = .01. Thus, the SDO x Religion interaction had a moderated mediation effect on deviation from French values via the association of public expression with the principle of laïcité (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Moderated Mediation Model Predicting Deviation From French Values



Note. This model shows the effect of SDO x Religion on public expression (a x Mod path), the effect of public expression on deviation from French values (b path), and the total (c x Mod path) and direct (c' x Mod path) effects of SDO x Religion on deviation from French values.

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Model on Deviation From Laïcité

Despite the lack of a total effect of the SDO x Religion interaction on deviation from laïcité, we performed moderated mediation analyses to test for indirect effects (see Hayes, 2009). Both components of the moderated mediation model were significant. Indeed, greater association of public expression with the principle of laïcité resulted in lower perceptions of deviation from laïcité, $B = -0.91$, $SE(B) = 0.13$, $t_{97} = -7.25$, $p < .001$, partial eta-squared = .35. Analyses confirmed the presence of an indirect effect, $b = -0.21$, 95%CI [-0.40, -0.03]. The direct effect of SDO x Religion on deviation from laïcité was not significant, $B = 0.01$, $SE(B) = 0.13$, $t_{97} = 0.11$, $p = .912$, partial eta-squared < .01.

Model on Normative Pressure

Similarly, despite the absence of a total effect of the SDO x Religion interaction, we tested the model on normative pressure. Both the direct and indirect effects of public expression on normative pressure were significant, $B = -0.62$, $SE(B) = 0.11$, $t_{97} = -5.82$, $p < .001$, partial eta-squared = .26 and $b = -0.14$, 95%CI [-0.28, -0.02], respectively. The direct effect of SDO x Religion on normative pressure was not significant, $B = -0.03$, $SE(B) = 0.11$, $t_{97} = -0.25$, $p = .803$, partial eta-squared < .01.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated whether individuals with high SDO modify their conception of laïcité to justify their differential judgements of Catholics versus Muslims praying in the street. Results partially supported our hypotheses, as the higher a participant's SDO, the more likely they were to feel that Muslims deviate from French values (H1). However, we did not find a link between SDO and deviation from laïcité or intentions to exert normative pressure. In addition, the higher a participant's SDO, the more likely they were to associate public expression with the principle of laïcité when considering Catholics praying in the street, but not when considering Muslims (H2). These results show an indirect effect of SDO and religion, via the degree to which public expression is considered a principle of laïcité, on judgments of people praying in the street as deviating from French values and laïcité and on the normative pressure exerted on them (H3). However, contrary to our expectations, this effect resulted in Catholics being judged more favorably, rather than in Muslims being judged negatively.

Given that people with high SDO believe in a hierarchical society, they may be more inclined to defend the majority religion (Catholicism) compared with a minority religion (Islam). Because some people consider France to have Christian roots (Brubaker, 2017) and because religion is a criterion that affects perceptions of cultural distance (Triandis, 1994), people with high SDO may perceive themselves as being closer to Catholics and therefore change their conception of *laïcité* to favor this group. Moreover, debates in France about public expressions of religious beliefs mostly focus on Islam (e.g., wearing the full veil; Gorse, 2019), so people with high SDO may automatically associate such expressions with Islam and therefore weakly associate the public expression dimension with *laïcité*. However, in situations in which Catholics express their beliefs in public, not according people this right is detrimental to the majority religious group and thus to the maintenance of the social hierarchy that people with high SDO advocate. Consequently, such situations require people with high SDO to re-evaluate their position with respect to public expressions of religion, so they can judge the majority religious group positively.

Our second unexpected result was that religion did not affect the normative pressure expressed by high SDO participants or their perceptions of deviation from *laïcité*, but it did impact their perceptions of deviation from French values. Although our measures did not allow us to assess which French values participants were thinking about, this result highlights the importance of considering *laïcité* and French values separately. The lack of a total effect suggests that other factors, not considered here, mitigate negative judgments of Muslims (see Hayes, 2009). One such factor may be perceptions of why Muslims pray in the street. For example, reports about Muslims lacking indoor space to practice their religion are quite common: According to Laurent (2015), in 2012 France had only one place of worship for every 1,200 Muslims, compared with one place of worship for every 241 Catholics. This may explain why Muslims praying in the street were not perceived as deviating from the principle of *laïcité* and why there was no intention to exert normative pressure against them. Because the lack-of-space argument is difficult to apply to Catholics, people with high SDO need to find another way of legitimizing street prayer by Catholics. One way to do this is to more strongly embrace the idea that displaying one's religious beliefs in public is compatible with *laïcité*. Our results could also be viewed through the lens of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Indeed, although we considered the measure of deviation from French values as part of the norms and normative pressure field, it might also be a way of reinforcing intergroup distinctiveness. By affirming that Muslims deviate from French values, individuals reinforce the intergroup distinction between Catholics and Muslims in France.

Although our study revealed an important result on the malleability of *laïcité*, it has limitations. First, all our participants were students. Nevertheless, previous studies of *laïcité* have reported similar effects for general population and student samples (Roebroeck & Guimond, 2018), so there is no reason to suspect that mechanisms should differ between students and the general population. Future studies could check this hypothesis by testing different populations. Second, we did not observe the expected direct interaction effect of SDO and religion (Muslims vs. Catholics) on deviation from *laïcité* and normative pressure. In addition to the possible explanations we suggested, this may be due to our sample being slightly too small to detect these interaction effects.

Our study provides further evidence for the ways in which individuals, depending on their level of SDO, use the principle of *laïcité* to justify their attitudes, in this case, in favor of a majority religious group. In addition to confirming that *laïcité* is a malleable ideology for people with high SDO (Roebroeck & Guimond, 2018), we showed that this malleability

encompasses the public expression of religious beliefs dimension when a situation violates a person's position with respect to this dimension. In other words, in situations that would otherwise be considered as deviating from secularist principles, individuals with high SDO adjust their conception of laïcité in order to legitimize the majority group's behavior. Hence, our findings support the idea that although laïcité was conceived as an egalitarian principle, individuals may modify their conception of it in order to justify treating different groups in different ways.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Our questionnaires also included other measures. Because these measures do not serve the purpose of our study, they are not reported here.

[2] We also measured beliefs relating to laïcité in a pre-induction phase. Analyses with pre-induction public expression as a covariate showed similar results. To keep our paper concise, we have not reported these analyses.

[3] We report here only results relating to the public expression dimension. Mediation analyses showed no indirect effect of SDO x religion via other dimensions of laïcité (equality, neutrality, protection) on the dependent variables.

APPENDIX A

Original Newspaper Article

"Prières dans la rue sur la place _ Aujourd'hui, c'est une scène particulière qui s'est déroulée devant les passants, dans la ville de _. En effet, pas moins d'une cinquantaine de catholiques [musulmans] se sont retrouvés dans la rue afin de prier. Au moment de la prière, la petite église [mosquée] présente sur la place _ a connu une affluence particulièrement importante de croyants. Une partie d'entre eux a fait le choix de ne pas rentrer dans l'édifice religieux et a

pratiqué leur religion devant celui-ci. Ainsi, différentes personnes se sont installées sur la place, pendant une trentaine de minutes afin de prier. "¹

English Translation

"Prayers in the street on XXX Square. Today, passers-by in XXX were treated to an unusual sight. No fewer than 50 Catholics [Muslims] had gathered in the street to pray. When the service [prayers] was [were] due to begin, the small church [mosque] in XXX Square was particularly crowded with believers. However, some of them decided to stay outside the church and practice their devotions in front of it. Thus, a group of people sat praying in the square for about 30 minutes."

APPENDIX B

Means and Standard Deviations for the Full Sample and for Each Condition (-1 = Muslim condition, +1 = Catholic condition) and Correlations Between all the Variables

	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD) -1	Mean (SD) +1	1	2	3	4
1 SDO	1.89 (.81)	1.77 (.74)	2.20 (.88)	-			
2 Public Expression	3.58 (1.64)	3.58 (1.68)	3.60 (1.60)	.02	-		
3 Normative pressure	3.75 (1.23)	3.70 (1.25)	3.88 (1.22)	.12	-.50***	-	
4 Deviation from laïcité	4.97 (1.55)	5.05 (1.56)	4.79 (1.59)	.03	-.58***	.46***	-
5 Deviation from French values	3.80 (1.57)	3.70 (1.56)	4.06 (1.65)	.24*	-.52***	.62***	.53***

* $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

APPENDIX C

Regression of the Dependent and Mediating Variables on Religion, SDO, and their Interaction.

Variable	B	SE(B)	t	p	η^2_p
Deviation from French Values					
Religion	0.02	0.15	0.13	.897	.000
SDO	0.37	0.15	2.45	.016	.057
Religion x SDO	-0.31	0.15	-2.09	.039	.042
Deviation from Laïcité					
Religion	0.35	0.15	2.29	.024	.050
SDO	0.06	0.15	0.41	.682	.002
Religion x SDO	-0.19	0.15	-1.23	.223	.015

¹ Participants were told that the names of the town and the square had been masked to ensure anonymity.

	Normative Pressure				
Religion	0.23	0.12	1.91	.059	.035
SDO	0.15	0.12	1.26	.209	.016
Religion x SDO	-0.16	0.12	-1.36	.177	.018
	Public Expression				
Religion	0.00	0.16	-0.03	.976	.000
SDO	0.05	0.16	0.30	.763	.001
Religion x SDO	0.37	0.16	2.29	.024	.050

Note. $N = 103$. Religion was coded as -1 = Muslim, +1 = Catholic.

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$.

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