

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Race-based shifting standards of SES: Potential moderators and implications

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## Abstract

We report three studies investigating race-based shifts in interpersonal judgments of SES, investigating potential racism-related correlates and implications for social judgments. Study 1 examined differences in these race-based shifts based on respondent race and SES, as well as social dominance orientation, while Study 2 investigated differences based on explicit racial prejudice and motivations to control prejudiced responses. While replicating the shifting standards effect, we observed no relation between either the demographic or prejudice measures and the shifting standards effect. Study 3 used individual differences in the tendency to make these race-based shifts to predict discriminatory judgments in monetary expectations. Overall, the results supported individual tendencies to make race-based shifts in judgments of another's SES, and suggest this shift is largely independent of several prominent racial prejudice constructs and predicts potentially discriminatory behaviour. The results are discussed in their implications for interracial and interclass interactions and discriminatory judgments.

## KEYWORDS

race, social status, stereotypes

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Social scientists have uncovered a myriad of ways in which stereotypes influence social perception (Nelson, 2016; Schneider, 2004). A stereotype is 'a set of beliefs about the personal attributes of a social group' (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981, p. 21) and social scientists have demonstrated numerous implications of these expectations. Whether an individual's expectation represents relatively accurate or inaccurate characteristics of a social group's members (see Jussim et al., 2009), the expectation can influence social judgments and behaviours at various levels of awareness, through several distinct mechanisms, and at different stages of information processing. One influence of stereotypes is the tendency to shift subjective standards according to expectations about a group (Biernat, 2012), which alters judgments of others (e.g., Biernat & Fiegen, 2001) and oneself (e.g., Biernat et al., 1997). This Shifting Standards Model (SSM) of stereotype judgments captures our tendency to shift the meaning of subjective language in relation to objective characteristics depending on the target of the observation

(e.g., what we mean by 'very tall' in reference to a woman could be objectively shorter than what we mean by 'very tall' in reference to a man). Scholars have elucidated various processes in and implications of the SSM (see Biernat, 2012 for a review) and have recently applied to race-based shifts in interpersonal judgments of socioeconomic status (SES; Weeks, 2019). That is, given the stereotypic association between the White racial category with high SES and the Black racial category with low SES<sup>1</sup> (Dupree et al., 2020; Moore-Berg & Karpinski, 2018), the standards used to describe Whites and Blacks on SES-relevant dimensions such as financial success and educational attainment differ. A given level of objective financial or educational success (e.g., a certain income level or educational degree obtained) is associated with a higher subjective evaluation for someone who is Black

<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to avoid confusion between different hierarchy-related labelling schemes (e.g., social class vs. SES vs. social status), we use the reference 'SES' here as a general reference to one's position in the social hierarchy. With our focus on measures of financial and educational attainment, SES most closely matches the conceptualization of the social hierarchy relevant to the present studies.

versus someone who is White (Weeks, 2019). For example, a White employee earning a given salary could be subjectively described as 'somewhat financially successful' even as a Black employee earning the same salary is described as 'very financially successful'. The lower SES level associated with the Black racial category shifts the standard down for what it takes to be 'very' successful. This shifting standard empowers the observer to say, 'He's paid really well, *for someone who is Black*', even if the supporting clause is an unstated addendum. An 'agnostic' definition of 'stereotypes', which avoids labelling these beliefs about a social group as accurate or inaccurate (and one we subscribe to for the present research, Jussim et al., 2009) still allows stereotypes this substantial impact on social processes.

We investigated how this race-based shift in SES judgments differs by important demographic and individual difference factors identified within the extensive research on racial prejudice and discrimination. Understanding how these shifting standards differ between target demographics and relate to racism-relevant individual differences is an important step to determining their significance in interpersonal contexts. One's social status is a significant contributor to one's social context (Piff et al., 2018), so these race-based shifts in SES-related judgments are likely to have social implications (an issue we directly address in Study 3). In addition to addressing these shortcomings, the present work demonstrates how this tendency to shift relates to interpersonal social judgments that could serve to disadvantage Black individuals.

### 1.1 | Shifting standards of SES because of target race

Although social psychologists have not historically given this confound its due attention (Fiske & Markus, 2012; Kraus & Stephens, 2012), the confound between racial group membership and levels of SES is well documented in the social science literature. For example, the stereotype of Whites is confounded with higher levels of SES even as the stereotype of Blacks aligns more with lower levels of SES (Bayton et al., 1956; Klonis, 2004). Also, racially ambiguous targets presented with high-status cues are more likely to be categorized as White while those presented with low-status cues are more likely to be categorized as Black (Freeman et al., 2011). Recently, explicitly assessed individual differences in race-status associations (RSAs) have been correlated with a range of hierarchy-maintaining beliefs and attitudes (Dupree et al., 2020). While there remain a number of unanswered questions regarding the nature of the intersection between racial and social hierarchy categories, Weeks (2019) used the SSM to illustrate one implication of the RSAs.

Biernat's SSM (Biernat, 2009) provides a framework for understanding how stereotypic expectations impact the relationship between objective measures and subjective judgments on stereotype-relevant traits. Within the SSM, social stereotypes serve as a frame of reference when we make stereotype-relevant judgments, influencing the range and likely boundaries on an attribute displayed by a target individual (Biernat & Manis, 2007). The SSM predicts *assimilation*

to a stereotype on objective measures, where objective measures are those for which the unit of measure is consistent across targets (e.g., the letter grade on a maths test; an annual salary in dollars). For example, if two students each get an A– on the maths test, they get the same grade. However, the SSM predicts a *contrast* to the stereotype on subjective judgments for which the rating standards are flexible and subject to shifts by domain and a within-group comparison (e.g., a 'very good' grade; an employee having a 'high' salary). That A– on the maths test might be described as 'very good' for a White student, while at the same time only 'pretty good' for an Asian student, for whom the stereotype of 'good at maths' applies. That is, the Asian student who gets an A– on the maths test only had a 'pretty good grade, *for an Asian*' (Biernat, 2012). Previous research supports the view that explicitly examined stereotypes correlated with assimilation (on objective measures) and contrast (on subjective measures) effects consistent with the SSM (Biernat & Manis, 1994). If stereotypes develop from individual and shared experiences (Schneider, 2004), we can expect individuals to vary in the degree to which they hold these stereotypic expectations about the social hierarchy standing of specific racial categories. While evidence suggests a commonly held stereotype associating particular racial categories with differing social hierarchy levels, we would expect variability in these associations.

The race-SES stereotype implies that Black targets will be assessed relative to a lower standard on such SES-relevant traits as financial success and educational attainment than White targets. That is, because Blacks are stereotypically associated with lower SES, a Black target might earn the subjective evaluation of being 'very financially successful' at a lower income than it takes for a White target to warrant the same evaluation, because the Black target is very financially successful '*for someone who is Black*'. The target's race provides a within-group comparison by which to judge the objective income and that judgment operates to disadvantage the Black target. Across three studies and two different methodologies, Weeks (2019) demonstrated these race-based shifts in standards on financial and educational judgments. For example, in the third study, White and Black targets were presented along with different occupations as participants judged the financial success and educational attainment with either objective measures (income in dollars, highest educational degree obtained) or subjective ratings (financial success and educational attainment both rated on Likert-style scales; Study 3). Consistent with the SSM, White targets were assigned higher objective values than Blacks (demonstrating the assimilation to the stereotypes), even as there was no difference in the subjective ratings on these same SES-relevant dimensions. That is, a Black target who was attributed a lower objective salary than a White target was rated just as 'financially successful' as that more highly paid White target.

In order to understand the nature of the shifting standards effect within the race-SES context and its implications, we investigated several individual difference measures as potential correlates of the effect. While the replication of the previously observed effect is important, understanding the relationship between these race-based shifts in SES judgments and respondents' demographic (i.e., racial categories and SES levels) and individual differences can help us understand how it

might impact discriminatory behaviour. Few studies have examined attitudinal or cognitive moderators of the shifting standards effect. Modern Racism (McConahay et al., 1981) scores significantly correlated with the tendency to shift standards in stereotype-relevant judgments of Whites' versus Blacks' athleticism (Biernat & Manis, 1994, studies 1 and 2). Specifically, those with higher levels of racism displayed larger stereotype-consistent shifts than those with lower levels of racism. However, racial prejudice did not moderate one's tendency to shift standards when judging the academic competence of Black versus White students and allocation of resources to campus organizations (Biernat et al., 2009). Measures of explicit (e.g., pro-white/anti-black attitudes, Katz & Hass, 1988) and implicit (e.g., a race IAT and a lexical decision task) racial prejudice failed to correlate with the tendency to shift, though scores on the shifting standards task served as independent predictors of race-related discriminatory behaviours. Regarding stereotypes of male and females, Attitudes Towards Women (Spence & Helmreich, 1972) failed to correlate with the tendency to shift in the application of stereotype-relevant verbal judgments of women versus men. A construct related to issues of race and equity, Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) correlates with an individual's tendency to shift standards in moral judgments of heterosexual versus homosexual targets, with those high in SDO holding homosexual targets to a higher moral standard than those low in SDO (Sawaoka et al., 2014). Thus, while some research reports that individuals with more extreme attitudes (i.e., more negative attitudes towards a racial or gender category; higher levels of SDO) display a greater tendency to engage in a stereotype-consistent shift in an attitude-related domain than those with less extreme attitudes, the findings have been inconsistent. These inconsistencies necessitate further investigations into attitudinal and cognitive moderators of individuals' adherence to stereotypes and their tendency to shift.

A stereotype-based shift in standards has implications for social interactions and judgments. The tendency to shift standards has been implicated in such domains as workplace judgments of competence (Biernat & Fuegen, 2001; Lynch & Finkelstein, 2015), mental health symptom severity (Gushue, 2004; Gushue et al., 2008) and racial discrimination (Biernat et al., 2009). As a mechanism of discrimination, these shifts promote behaviours and judgments that could disadvantage members of certain social groups. For example, because of the race-SES stereotype, a Black employee's salary might be judged to be 'pretty good' by a manager, even as the salary is objectively lower than a White employee's 'pretty good' salary. This difference in perception could lead to little motivation to adjust the Black employee's salary, contributing to an ongoing racial wage gap (Weeks et al., 2020; Wilson & Rodgers, 2016). Because of the confound between racial and social hierarchy categories, the present studies address psychological mechanisms influencing both racial and economic inequality. The stereotype-driven shifting standards effect also provides a meaningful context within which to examine the independent impacts of stereotyping and prejudice constructs on discriminatory behaviour (Stangor, 2016). If the tendency to shift standards corresponds to the application of group-based beliefs (Biernat et al., 2009), it could work independently of or in conjunction with prejudiced attitudes

(and motivations to control these attitudes) to influence discriminatory behaviours. Those with a more negative attitude or stronger tendency to maintain group differences would more readily apply these hierarchy-maintaining beliefs about groups. Measures of racial bias and social dominance both positively, yet weakly, correlate with spontaneously assessed race-status associations (Dupree et al., 2020), suggesting that individual variation in these prejudice constructs can relate to awareness or application of these group-based stereotypes. We examined several potential measures, focusing on the racial prejudice and discrimination literature and the burgeoning literature on individual social class measurement.

## 1.2 | Overview

We present three research studies that investigated (a) the potential moderation of race-based shifts in interpersonal SES-related judgments, and (b) the use of individual differences in this shifting standards effect as a predictor of a discriminatory judgment. In Studies 1 and 2, we report results of several potential attitudinal and demographic correlates of the effect, including respondent race and SES (operationalized in several different ways), as well as individual differences in SDO, levels of racial animosity, and motivation to control one's prejudice responses. In Study 3, we treat the tendency to shift standards in race-SES judgments not only as a dependent variable (as in Studies 1 and 2), but also demonstrate it as a predictor of race-based bias in a collegiate financial aid decision.

## 2 | STUDY 1

Study 1 had three primary goals. First, we wanted to replicate the shifting standard effect observed in Weeks (2019). While the effect was observed across three studies using two different methodologies, it represented an application of the Shifting Standards paradigm to a novel domain. Consequently, subsequent work should replicate the effect to substantiate the pattern and better approximate relevant effect sizes. Second, we wanted to compare the race-based shifts in SES judgments by White versus Black respondents and by variations in social hierarchy locations. Research suggests that the shifting standards effect is dependent on an individual's stereotypic expectations for a group (Biernat et al., 1991), but serves as a largely unmotivated process (Biernat, 2012; though level of stereotype endorsement can correlate with the shifting standards effect, Biernat & Manis, 1994). In previous research comparing judgments of financial success of male versus female targets, both male and female respondents judged females' objectively lower incomes to be subjectively more successful than males' objectively higher salaries, shifting standards on financial success in a manner that disadvantaged females relative to males (Biernat et al., 1991). Similarly, when judging male and female targets in verbal ability, both male and female respondents shifted standards on verbal ability in gender-stereotypic tasks in a way that disadvantaged females relative to males (Biernat & Manis, 1994). Extrapolating to the present context, we expect Black respondents are equally familiar

with the race-SES stereotypic expectations (Dupree et al., 2020; Speer, 2016). Thus, we predict Black respondents will display the same shifting standards effect as White respondents. Individual differences in SES also relate to a number of key social factors, significantly contributing to one's social context, development, and cognition regarding social class (see Kraus et al., 2011).

As the second key social demographic for the relevant stereotype, we examined how the effect might differ along variations in respondent SES, though we made no specific predictions about potential differences. Regarding individual SES, previous research clearly substantiates an important differentiation between objective and subjective assessments of SES. Objective measures of SES, commonly measured by individual levels of income and educational attainment, represent access to resources and are closely related to one's degree of influence over one's life outcomes. Alternatively, subjective measures of SES, typically measured by self-reported social class rank or an SES ladder measure (e.g., Adler et al., 2000), represent an individual's perception of their relative placement in a social hierarchy. While objective and subjective measures tend to correlate at least moderately, they represent independent constructs in that they can account for unique variation in outcome variables (e.g., Cohen et al., 2008; Islam et al., 2009). Thus, we included both objective and subjective assessments of respondents' SES.

Lastly, in order to expand our understanding of this shifting standards effect as a mechanism related to prejudice and discrimination, we examined the moderating influence of racism-related individual difference variables on the effect. Since this tendency to shift standards in SES-related judgments could serve as a mechanism to identify targets in a manner consistent with maintaining the existing status differential, one's adherence to a social dominance orientation could relate to one's tendency to shift standards in this domain. The acceptance and maintenance of social inequities is a conceptual hallmark of the social dominance orientation (Pratto et al., 2006). Given that Blacks are stereotypically associated with lower SES positions, the perspective that a given Black target is subjectively judged as equivalent, or even better-off, than a White target of higher objective status could serve to maintain the status differential. That is, if one's subjective sense dominates, then there could be less perceived inequality and lower motivation to remedy SES imbalances.

## 2.1 | Method

### 2.1.1 | Participants

Using the TurkPrime service (Litman et al., 2017), we recruited 123 White and 120 Black respondents from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) for a study on social judgments. All participants were residents of the United States, at least 18 years of age and completed an informed consent prior to completing the survey. Only MTurk workers with at least a 95% approval rating were eligible and they could not repeat the survey. The task took approximately 10 min and participants were paid \$1.25. After accounting for incomplete responses

**TABLE 1** Respondent demographics for Study 1.

Measure	Respondent race	
	White	Black
% Female	58.3	60.6
% Male	41.7	39.4
% Lower- or working-class	45.8	59.4
% Middle- or upper middle-class	52.5	37.5
Median age	57	43
Median income range	\$30,000–\$44,999	\$15,000–\$29,999
Median education	Some college, but less than a 4-year degree	Some college, but less than a 4-year degree

and removing four respondents for completing the task too quickly (less than 5 min to complete all instructions, ratings, and demographic questions), we retained final samples of 112 White and 120 Black respondents. Table 1 reports relevant demographic comparisons for the White and Black samples. A power analysis using G\*Power (Faul et al., 2007) indicated these final sample sizes was adequate to detect an interaction effect on the shifting standards task of the size observed by Weeks (2019; approximately  $\eta^2 = .11$ ), (b) a moderate difference ( $d = .5$ ) between White and Black respondents on the shifting standards effect ( $\alpha = .05$ ; two-tailed), and (c) moderate correlations ( $r = .3$ ) between the shifting standards effect and moderator variables with a power greater than or equal to 80%.

### 2.1.2 | Measures

#### Objective SES

Respondents reported both their annual income and highest educational degree obtained. For annual income, respondents selected the item that 'includes your current income', with items ranging from a low of '\$0–\$14,999' to a high of '\$150,000 or higher', in \$15,000 increments. For highest educational degree, respondents selected from eight ordinal options, from a low of 'less than a high school diploma' to a high of 'doctorate degree (PhD, EdD)'.

#### Subjective SES

Respondents self-reported 'the social class rank you most associate with yourself'. They selected from the following ordinal list of responses: Lower-, Working-, Middle-, Upper Middle-, and Upper-Class.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> We also asked participants to assign themselves to a particular rung on the SES Ladder (Adler et al., 2000) and had intended to use this as our primary measure of subjective social status. However, only 57.0% of the respondents provided an answer to the question. For those who responded to the ladder, scores were highly correlated with the social class identification measure ( $r = .672$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Given the substantial loss of participants, with the associated loss of statistical power, we opted to use the self-report social class identification as our primary measure of subjective social status.



### Social dominance orientation

SDO (Pratto et al., 1994) represents an acceptance and expectation of inequality between groups. Those who score high on measures of SDO prefer an arrangement of a social hierarchy between groups. SDO has been tied to notions of racism, with an acceptance that some ethnic groups are lower in the social hierarchy than others (Jetten & Iyer, 2010; Pratto et al., 2006). Previous research has tied higher levels of SDO to more negative attitudes towards outgroups (e.g., Pratto & Shih, 2000). Within the present context, the tendency to shift SES standards for those of different races could serve as a mechanism for maintaining status inequalities. That is, if one's subjective perception is that two individuals maintain subjective equivalence (i.e., similar positions in the social hierarchy) despite differing objective attainments (i.e., one individual makes less money, has less education, and holds a less prestigious and influential occupation than the other), this shift could serve to maintain group inequalities. We used the 14-item measure found in Pratto et al. (1994), in which respondents rate their level of positivity-negativity (1 = very positive, 7 = very negative) to a series of items (e.g., 'Some people are just inferior to others'; 'We would have fewer problems if we treated people more equally', *reverse-scored*).

### 2.1.3 | Procedure

First, participants completed a measure of the race-based shifts in SES-related judgments. Modelling the procedure reported in Study 3 of Weeks (2019), respondents judged the financial success and likely educational attainment of 32 targets. Each target was represented by (1) a photograph of a White or Black male, (2) a race-neutral name, and (3) an occupation. We differentiated target status by including equal numbers of low-SES and high-SES occupations, with occupations at the two status levels differentiated by associated class level, prestige, financial attainment, and educational attainment (see Weeks, 2019 for a complete description of this distinction). Names and occupations were randomly assigned to specific photographs. All photographs were selected from the Chicago Face database (Ma et al., 2015) and depicted either a White or Black male wearing nondescript clothing. The sets of White and Black targets were selected to be comparable in attractiveness and age (see Weeks, 2019). Half of the targets were rated with objective questions of financial success (i.e., selecting an income range, from a low of '\$0–\$14,999' to a high of '\$150,000 or more' in \$15,000 increments) and educational attainment (seven ordinal responses, from the lowest of 'Less than a high school diploma' to the highest of 'Doctorate degree (e.g., PhD, EdD, etc.)'). The other half of the targets were rated with subjective questions of these same domains (9-point Likert-type scales anchored at 'Not financially successful at all' to 'Extremely financially successful' and 'Not well educated at all' to 'Very well educated'). Respondents completed the objective and subjective response blocks separately and it was randomly determined whether a participant completed the block of objective or subjective measurements first. Within each block, it was randomly determined whether the participant completed the financial or educational attain-

ment questions first.<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of each block, participants responded to two practice targets (no data were recorded from these responses) before completing sixteen target trials.

After completing the shifting standards task, respondents completed several demographic questions, including their race, gender, age, personal income, highest educational degree obtained, and self-reported social class rank. Lastly, respondents completed a SDO measure (Pratto et al., 2006), with the 14 items presented in a random order. Participants were then thanked and debriefed with a description of the research study.

## 2.2 | Results

First, we examined the results for evidence of the race-based shifts in SES judgments reported in Weeks (2019). On the shifting standards task, all responses were standardized (to allow the comparison of the objective and subjective responses within the financial and educational domains). We performed a mixed-effects model analysis to account for random effects for both the participants and stimuli. These scores were submitted to a 2 (SES Domain; financial, educational)  $\times$  2 (Target Race; White, Black)  $\times$  2 (Target Status; low, high)  $\times$  2 (Judgment Type; objective, subjective)  $\times$  2 (Respondent Race; White, Black) mixed-effects analysis, with Respondent Race as a between-subjects factor. We included random intercepts for participant (ICC = 0.222), Target Face (ICC = 0.002), and Target Occupation (ICC = 0.000).

The shifting standards effect is indicated by a Target Race  $\times$  Judgment Type interaction, with the White targets rated higher than the Black targets on the objective measure, but comparable or even reversed scores on the subjective measure. This interaction was statistically significant,  $b = -0.122$ , 95% confidence interval (CI)  $[-0.194, -0.051]$ ,  $SE = .036$ ,  $t(29.7) = -3.360$ ,  $p = .002$ , and Table 2a displays the pattern of means congruent with the shifting standards effect. This interaction effect was not significantly moderated by SES Domain ( $p = .690$ ), indicating that the effect was consistent across both financial and educational judgments. Simple effects testing (using a Bonferroni-adjusted  $\alpha$  of .025 on these and all subsequent pairwise comparisons) revealed that White targets ( $M = .05$ ,  $SD = .65$ ) were rated significantly higher than Black targets ( $M = -.02$ ,  $SD = .67$ ) on objective measures ( $p < .001$ ), but Black targets ( $M = .04$ ,  $SD = .67$ ) were rated marginally higher than White targets ( $M = -.01$ ,  $SD = .69$ ) on subjective measures ( $p = .038$ ) of the same domains. Respondent Race did not qualify the Target Race  $\times$  Judgment Type interaction in either the 3-way ( $b = 0.058$ , 95% CI  $[-0.050, 0.166]$ ,  $SE = .055$ ,  $t(15171.2) = 1.055$ ,  $p = .291$ ) or any higher-order interactions ( $ps > .5$ ). Given the specific interest in Respondent Race, we tested for the Judgment Type  $\times$  Target Race interaction separately for White and Black respondents. The interaction was statistically significant for White respondents,  $b = -0.149$ , 95% CI  $[-0.253, -0.046]$ ,  $SE = .053$ ,  $t(22.8) = -2.834$ ,  $p = .009$ , and approached statistical significance for

<sup>3</sup> In initial analyses, Judgment Order (objective first or subjective first) and Occupation Set Order (Set A first, Set B first) showed no main effects or interactions for this or either of the latter studies. Thus, they will not be discussed further.

**TABLE 2** Objective and subjective ratings by target race for Studies 1 (panel a), 2 (panel b), and 3 (panel c). Mean (standard deviation).

(a) Study 1						
	Target Status					
	Combined		Low		High	
	Judgment type		Judgment type		Judgment type	
	Obj	Subj	Obj	Subj	Obj	Subj
White	.05 (.65)	−.01 (.69)	.03 (.75)	.01 (.81)	.06 (.68)	−.03 (.79)
Black	−.02 (.67)	.04 (.67)	−.02 (.76)	.00 (.81)	−.03 (.71)	.08 (.74)
(b) Study 2						
	Judgment type					
	Obj	Subj				
White	.07 (.58)	.00 (.61)				
Black	−.04 (.57)	.02 (.63)				
(c) Study 3						
	Judgment type					
	Obj	Subj				
White	.04 (.70)	−.01 (.65)				
Black	−.05 (.62)	.04 (.67)				

Black respondents,  $b = -0.091$ , 95% CI  $[-0.185, 0.004]$ ,  $SE = .048$ ,  $t(36.5) = -1.878$ ,  $p = .068$ .

There was, however, a significant Target Status  $\times$  Target Race  $\times$  Judgment Type interaction,  $F(1, 230) = 8.839$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\eta^2 = .037$  [.007, .085]. Simple effects analyses focused on determining the presence of the shifting standards effect for both low- and high-status targets. For low-status targets, the Target Race  $\times$  Judgment Type interaction was not statistically significant ( $p > .2$ ; see Table 2a), nor was this 2-way interaction significantly qualified by any higher-order interaction ( $ps > .2$ ). Given the specific pattern predicted by the shifting standards model, we used simple effects testing to examine this ordinal interaction. White targets ( $M = .03$ ,  $SD = .75$ ) were rated higher than Black targets ( $M = -.02$ ,  $SD = .76$ ) on the objective measure ( $p = .044$ ), but there was no significant difference between White and Black targets on the subjective measure ( $p = .638$ ). For high status targets, the Target Race  $\times$  Judgment Type interaction was statistically significant,  $F(1, 234) = 24.574$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .095$  [.043, .157] (see Table 2a). This interaction was not qualified by any higher-order interactions ( $ps > .3$ ). Simple effects testing showed that White targets ( $M = .06$ ,  $SD = .68$ ) were rated significantly higher than Black targets ( $M = -.03$ ,  $SD = .71$ ) on objective measures ( $p = .001$ ), but Black targets ( $M = .08$ ,  $SD = .74$ ) were rated significantly higher than White targets ( $M = -.03$ ,  $SD = .79$ ) on subjective measures ( $p < .001$ ).

Having identified evidence for the shifting standards effect, subsequent analyses examined the potential moderating influence of respondent race, respondent SES, and SDO scores. Employing the procedure described in Biernat et al. (2009), we calculated a shifting standards index (SSI) for each participant using the following formula,  $SSI = (\text{Objective}_{\text{White}} - \text{Objective}_{\text{Black}}) - (\text{Subjective}_{\text{White}} - \text{Subjective}_{\text{Black}})$ . For the SSI, values above zero represent a tendency to shift scores in the stereotype-consistent direction. In order to exam-

ine their potential unique relationships with the individual differences variables, we calculated separate indices for the financial ( $\alpha = .804$ ) and educational ( $\alpha = .841$ ) judgments (which were moderately correlated,  $r = .459$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Table 3 reports descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between the measures of SDO ( $\alpha = .76$ , White respondents;  $\alpha = .74$ , Black respondents) and respondent SES, as well as correlations with the financial and educational shifting standards scores. This analysis revealed no significant correlations between SSI scores and measures of SES or SDO.

To determine if White and Black respondents differed in their relationship between SES or SDO and the shifting standards effect, we conducted individual hierarchical regression analyses on the financial and educational SSIs. For each analysis, we entered respondent race, objective SES, subjective SES and mean-centred SDO scores on step 1 and the interaction between Respondent Race and each of the three individual differences on step 2. Consistent with the ANOVA results, respondent race was not a significant factor for either financial or educational judgments (all  $ps > .2$ ). There were no significant main effects for either SES variables or SDO, nor did these measures significantly interact with respondent race (all  $ps > .3$ ; see Supplemental material for full regression table).

## 2.3 | Discussion

We successfully replicated the race-based shifts in financial and educational judgment domains first reported in Weeks (2019). In both domains, respondents attributed higher objective incomes and educational degrees to White targets than to comparable Black targets. However, the White and Black targets were ascribed similar levels of subjective success on these domains. In fact, when judging

**TABLE 3** Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between shifting standards indices for financial and educational measures, social dominance orientation, and measures of respondent's SES for Study 1, separated by respondent race.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. SSI—Financial	.10	.48	–	.46*	.02	–.09	–.04	–.01
2. SSI—Educational	.12	.49	.36*	–	.10	.00	–.04	.04
3. SDO	4.81	.87	–.05	.00	–	–.01	.01	.11
4. Social class rank	–	–	.09	–.02	–.03	–	.49*	.30*
5. Income level	–	–	–.10	.15	.17	.48*	–	.45*
6. Highest degree	–	–	–.14	–.11	.13	.45*	.40*	–

Note: White respondents are reported below the diagonal; Black respondents reported above the diagonal. SSI = Shifting Standards Index. SDO = Social Dominance Orientation. \* $p < .001$ .

high-status targets, Black targets were rated subjectively *higher* than the White targets. Even though Black targets were ascribed a lower income and lower educational degree, this lower degree of objective attainment was seen as subjectively *more* successful than the White targets' higher achievement. Unlike Weeks (2019), this effect was only statistically significant for the high-status targets, though low-status targets showed a pattern of results consistent with the SSM. Our investigation of respondent racial and SES demographic factors revealed only weak and non-significant relationships with the shifting standards effect. White and Black respondents showed similar patterns of results on the shifting standards task. Thus, even Black respondents showed a pattern of results that would serve to disadvantage a Black target. A respondent's level of SES, either objectively or subjectively assessed, was unrelated to the tendency to shift standards. Given that the shifting standards effect is driven by stereotype content (Biernat, 2012), this finding suggests that the race-SES stereotypic association is held by both White and Black respondents and by individuals across a range of SES demographics. Lastly, individual levels of SDO were uncorrelated with the tendency to engage in the shifting standards. So, explicit endorsement of social hierarchy maintaining beliefs was independent of the tendency to exhibit the potentially discriminatory stereotype-based shift.

Overall, these findings support the pervasiveness of the race-based shifts in SES standards, suggesting that this shift occurs independent of SDO and occurs similarly across several socially relevant demographic factors (race and SES). Next, we examine additional prejudice-related constructs that could theoretically relate to the tendency to engage in these race-based shifts. Prejudicial attitudes can correlate weakly with endorsement of race-SES stereotypes (Dupree et al. 2020), but it remains to be seen how these attitudes or individual motivations to control them relate to the shift that occurs from stereotype awareness.

### 3 | STUDY 2

Social psychology's relative emphasis on racial issues as compared to SES-related issues and the general lack of attention to the race-SES confound has created a context in which the conceptual understanding of racism-related factors (e.g., racial stereotype content; various conceptualizations of racial prejudice and motivations to control prejudice

and discriminatory behaviours) are poorly understood in relation to class-related contaminants. As we have argued, the tendency to engage in race-based shifts on judgments of SES-related domains could disadvantage Blacks. Study 1 continues to provide evidence that differing standards are applied in these domains. Thus, it would be helpful to understand to what degree those low in racial prejudice or those motivated to control prejudicial tendencies shift standards on status judgments in comparison to those individuals high in racial prejudice or those not particularly motivated to control prejudicial tendencies. Study 2 continued our examination for potential correlates of this shifting standards effect by studying several racism-related individual differences.

In Study 2 we measured individual differences in racial prejudice and motivation to control racial prejudicial tendencies among a large sample of White respondents. Some research has looked at the relation of explicitly measured racial prejudice to the tendency to shift standards between White and Black targets. These applications have used different conceptualizations of racial prejudice, including both the Modern Racism Scale (McConahay et al., 1981) and a pro-Black/anti-Black attitude assessment (Katz & Hass, 1988), but have focused on the tendency to shift on judgments of stereotypic traits (e.g., verbal ability; Biernat & Manis, 1994) or race-related group behaviours (e.g., resource allocation to a Black student organization; Biernat et al., 2009). In neither case has any SES-relevant information been part of either the manipulation or measurement. Researchers have examined motivation to respond without prejudice in relation to implicit response tasks, with those high in internal motivation but low in external motivation displaying less implicit racial bias than all other combinations of motivations (Devine et al., 2002). However, this difference was observed on a measure of racial prejudice, which is a process distinguishable from the application of stereotypic expectations (Amodio & Devine, 2006). Given the novel application of these race prejudice-related constructs to the present domain, this study was largely exploratory.

### 3.1 | Method

#### 3.1.1 | Participants

Participants were 154 White respondents (39.6% female; 60.4% male) recruited from MTurk through the TurkPrime service for a study on

social judgments. Participants who had completed Study 1 were ineligible for Study 2. The task took approximately 10 min and participants were paid \$1.25. Respondents had a median age of 35 years, 40.9% self-reported as lower- or working-class and 57.8% as middle- or upper middle-class. The median income range was \$30,000–\$44,999 and median level of education was an Associate's degree. All participants were residents of the United States, at least 18 years of age and completed an informed consent prior to completing the survey. Only MTurk workers with at least a 95% approval rate were eligible and they could not repeat the survey. Four participants were removed for incomplete data on the shifting standards tasks and seven were removed for completing the procedure too quickly (less than 5 min to complete all instructions, ratings, and surveys), resulting in a final sample of  $n = 142$ . A power analysis using G\*Power indicates this sample size is adequate to detect (a) a significant interaction for the shifting standards task (based on effect sizes from both Study 1 and Weeks, 2019) and (b) moderate correlations ( $r = .3$ ;  $\alpha = .05$ ; two-tailed) between shifting standards effects and moderator variables with a power greater than or equal to 80%.

### 3.1.2 | Measures

#### *Symbolic racism*

As a measure of racial prejudice, we used the 8-item Symbolic Racism 2000 Scale (SRS; Henry & Sears, 2002). Adhering to a 'new racism' conceptualization (Henry & Sears, 2002; McConahay, 1986), the SRS measures racial antipathy, with the negative racial judgments stemming from a belief that Blacks' continuing disadvantage is their own doing and that they lack any significant social obstacles. The use of different standards in stereotypic judgments could be a mechanism of discrimination maintenance perpetrated, even unintentionally, by those who experience negative attitudes towards Blacks, but associate this with Blacks' responsibility for their continuing lower status. Distinct from political conservatism and more blatant assessments of racial attitudes, the SRS affords us a valid measure of race-related attitudes towards Blacks.

#### *Internal and external motivation to respond without prejudice*

The internal and external motivation to respond without prejudice scales (IMS and EMS, respectively; Plant & Devine, 1998) represent an important additional measurement of prejudice-related constructs, largely distinct from both one another (e.g., average  $r = -.14$ , Plant & Devine, 1998) and measures of racial prejudice. Importantly, these constructs serve as useful additions to, rather than replacements for, more direct measures of racial prejudice, accounting for unique individual differences related to the regulation of prejudice attitudes and behaviours (see Devine et al., 2002). Individuals who are highly internally motivated to control prejudiced responses have demonstrated significant pre-conscious control of stereotype activation (Amodio et al., 2008; Park et al., 2008) and application (Fehr et al., 2012). Given the nature of the shifting standards

effect, this preconscious control could serve to reduce the tendency to shift.

### 3.1.3 | Procedure

Respondents first completed the same shifting standards task described in Study 1. Next, they completed the items from the SRS, IMS and EMS. The items for motivation to control prejudice measures were presented separately from the SRS items, the IMS and EMS items were intermixed and presented in random order, and the order in which participants completed the SRS and motivation to control prejudice scales was randomized. Lastly, respondents completed the same demographic items reported for Study 1.

## 3.2 | Results

As with Study 1, all objective and subjective ratings were standardized and initially submitted to a 2 (SES Domain; financial, educational)  $\times$  2 (Target Race; White, Black)  $\times$  2 (Target Status; low, high)  $\times$  2 (Judgment Type; objective, subjective) mixed-effects analysis, with random intercepts for participant (ICC = 0.135), Target Face (ICC = 0.004), and Target Occupation (ICC = 0.000). The shifting standards-indicative Target Race  $\times$  Judgment Type interaction was statistically significant,  $b = -0.150$ , 95% CI  $[-0.255, -0.045]$ ,  $SE = .054$ ,  $t(23.3) = -2.789$ ,  $p = .010$ , and Table 2b displays the pattern of means congruent with the shifting standards effect. This effect was not significantly moderated by SES Domain ( $p > .8$ ), indicating that the effect was consistent across both financial and educational judgments. Planned follow-up analyses showed White targets ( $M = .07$ ,  $SD = .58$ ) were rated significantly higher than Black targets ( $M = -.04$ ,  $SD = .57$ ) on objective measures ( $p < .001$ ), but there was no significant difference on subjective measures ( $p = .738$ ). Unlike Study 1, this effect was not moderated by a significant 3-way interaction with Target Status ( $b = -0.020$ , 95% CI  $[-0.191, 0.151]$ ,  $SE = .087$ ,  $t(26.3) = -0.230$ ,  $p = .820$ ), indicating that the shifting standards effect was consistent for both low-status and high-status targets.

Having substantiated the presence of the shifting standards effect, we investigated the moderating effects of the racial prejudice and regulation of prejudice responses measures. As with Study 1, we calculated individual SSI scores for judgments of financial ( $\alpha = .865$ ) and educational ( $\alpha = .831$ ) attainment for each participant, using the procedure previously described. Table 4 reports the zero-order correlations for the financial and educational SSI scores, as well as SRS, IMS, and EMS scores. Similar to previous reports, the IMS and EMS scores were only weakly correlated. Individual regression analyses were run on the financial and educational SSI scores. For each regression analysis, on the first step, SSI scores were regressed on mean-centred values for SRS, IMS, and EMS scores; on the second step, we added each 2-way interaction between SRS, IMS, and EMS. There were no significant main effects or interactions for any measure on either the financial or



**TABLE 4** Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between shifting standards indices for financial and educational measures, symbolic racism scores, and internal and external motivation to respond without prejudice scores for Study 2.

	M	SD	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4
1. SSI—Financial	.14	.50	.747	–			
2. SSI—Educational	.13	.51	.676	.40**	–		
3. SRS	17.88	5.61	.892	.03	–.04	–	
4. IMS	2.53	1.45	.916	.09	.15	.17*	–
5. EMS	4.84	1.62	.874	.01	–.05	–.13	–.20*

Note: SSI = Shifting Standards Index. SRS = Symbolic Racism Scale. IMS = Internal Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice Scale. EMS = External Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice Scale. Possible scores on the SRS range from 8 (higher prejudice) to 31 (lower prejudice). \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .001$ .

education SSI scores (see [Supplementary material](#) for full regression table).

as political conservatism; these measures were not significantly related to the SSE.

### 3.3 | Discussion

Examined in conjunction with several prejudice-related measures, the results from Study 2 again supported the race-based shifts in judgments of target SES. Participants judged White targets to make more money and have higher educational attainment than comparably described Black targets, though they judged White and Black targets as comparable on subjective judgments of the same constructs. These effects were not correlated with individual levels of racial prejudice or motivation to respond without prejudice. This supports a dissociation between the stereotype-based shift in judgment standards and the affect-based prejudice and its motivated regulation. Since the shifting standards effect varied independently of the explicitly measured constructs, it would not seem appropriate to characterize the effect as a *mechanism* of racism; at least, not when this term refers to an explicit, prejudice-motivated process of disadvantaging a racial group (Zárate, 2009). However, this conclusion does not imply that the effect is inconsequential in interpersonal perception or discriminatory behaviour. Quite the contrary, these shifting standards could establish performance appraisal criteria in the workplace (e.g., Biernat et al., 2012) or minimum standards of competence in hiring situations (Biernat et al., 1997). In Study 3, we examined the shifting standards effect's role as a predictive measure of a discriminatory judgment, in and of itself.

Study 2 afforded an additional opportunity to assess any possible relationship between respondent SES, using both objective and subjective measurements, and the tendency to engage in the race-based shifts. In Study 2, we again collected respondents' income range, highest educational degree, and self-reported social class rank. Rather than simply run the same analysis as Study 1 on the additional set of data, we combined the White respondents from Studies 1 and 2 (total  $n = 266$ ) in order to have a more powerful test of the null hypothesis that respondent SES is unrelated to the shifting standards effect. There were no significant correlations (all  $r_s < .1$ ,  $p_s > .1$ ) between either SSI and measures of respondents' income, education, or self-reported social class rank. [Supplemental material](#) 1 details an additional study correlating the SSE with a respondent's current versus childhood SES, as well

### 4 | STUDY 3

While Studies 1 and 2 support the existence of the race-based shifts in judgments of SES across a range of relevant demographic variables, they also showed that the SSE was largely independent of several key individual differences associated with racial bias and stereotyping. Consequently, we expected the individual tendency to apply the shift would have implications for stereotype-relevant judgments independent of these individual differences. That is, the magnitude of the shift should influence down-stream judgments and decisions in SES-relevant contexts. In Study 3, we put this expectation to the test, examining how individual variation in the tendency to make the race-based shifts in SES impacted judgments of another's expected financial contribution towards higher education. Since the shifting standards effect is driven by a stereotyping (as opposed to prejudice) effect, we measured an instrumental form of behaviour (as opposed to consummatory; Amodio & Devine, 2006), having participants form an impression of a target based on a subset of information. We hypothesized that the shift in standards would influence that impression, and thus a subsequent judgment.

Using the SSE as an individual differences measure is not common, but there is precedent. Biernat et al. (2009) found that those who made a greater stereotype-consistent shift in judgments of White and Black students' academic ability provided fewer funds to a Black student organization. With a Black student's academic performance judged relative to a lower standard than a White student's, the magnitude of the shift correlated with the funding for a college's Black Student Union (BSU), independently of explicit racial prejudice. Those who showed the greatest shift (i.e., higher subjective ratings for a Black student with lower objective achievement than a White student) provided the least funding for the BSU. In the present study, we applied the same logic to our race-based shifts in perceived SES. Given a lower expectation of achieved status, SES-relevant criteria (high income, prestigious careers) are judged subjectively better for a Black family than a comparably described White family. This higher subjective evaluation should have the consequence of judging the Black family as able to make a

larger financial contribution to a child's college education than the White family. We predicted that this shifting standards effect will operate independently of explicitly reported racial prejudice.

The rising costs of higher education and the increased strain placed on families to meet these costs provide fertile ground for illustrating the impact of these shifting standards in financial success. Economic reports show that Black students incur greater financial debt for college attendance than White students (Scott-Clayton & Li, 2016) and the shifting standards effect observed in Studies 1 and 2 could be an unintended bias contributing to this finding. Within this context, a family judged to be of substantial financial success could reasonably be expected to cover a larger portion of the cost of college attendance than a family judged to be of less financial success. Thus, a key factor would be how the family's financial situation is perceived. Individual variations in the tendency to engage in the race-based shifts in SES (as in Studies 1 and 2) should relate to a Black (as compared to a White) family's perceived financial success. Thus, we predicted that those who show a greater tendency to make the stereotype-consistent shift would perceive the Black family as able to make more of a financial contribution to a child's college attendance than those who show less shift. On the basis of the results of Study 2, we expected the effect to operate independently of levels of racial prejudice.

## 4.1 | Method

### 4.1.1 | Participants

We aimed to recruit 200 White respondents through the Turkprime website. Oversampling to account for attrition resulted in having  $n = 240$  respondents collected. Missing data on one of the measures and failure to pass the attention check (see below) resulted in a final sample of  $n = 220$ . Participants who had completed Studies 1 or 2 were ineligible for Study 3. Based on a power analysis using G\*Power, this sample size is sufficient to detect a moderate relationship ( $r = .3$ ) between SSI and financial contributions and a moderate difference ( $d = .5$ ;  $\alpha = .05$ ; two-tailed) in this effect between White and Black targets with power greater than or equal to 80%. Of the final sample, 65.6% were female, 34.4% were male, the median age was 49 years old, median level of education was an Associate's degree, and median level of income was \$45,000–\$59,999.

### 4.1.2 | Procedure

Participants completed three primary tasks. For the first task, we told participants we were conducting a study on 'the perceptions of academic preparedness and financial support'. Participants read a profile of a fictitious student who would be attending a highly ranked and expensive private university the upcoming autumn.<sup>4</sup> We manipulated

the assumed race of the student by randomly assigning participants to read a stereotypically Black ('DeShawn Washington') or White ('Brad Matthews') name. We included the institution's official logo and cost of attendance (broken down by tuition and fees, on-campus room and board, and total cost of attendance). The student's profile (held constant across participants) included information on his academic performance (e.g., high school GPA of 3.82, ACT score of 29 with percentile rank of 91%, class rank of 12th out of 213, and major extracurricular activities). The profile also included information on the family's composition and financial state. For each participant, we reported that there were a mother and father living in the home, who worked as a real estate agent and attorney, respectively. There were four people living in the home (two parents, the college-bound son, and a sibling). Finally, we provided a combined annual salary for both parents of \$175,640 (almost three times the median household income in the US and the 90th percentile in household incomes in the US; Guzman, 2019). Thus, the profile depicted a student who had strong academic credentials from a family of substantial financial means.

Respondents made a series of judgments about the profiled student and the family's likely financial contribution to his academic studies. First, respondents read that the student had received a scholarship from the university in the amount of \$25,000 and were asked to indicate the appropriateness of the scholarship on a 7-point scale ranging from 'much too high' to 'much too low' and centered at 'just about right'. Next, participants completed an attention check measure that asked them to click on three pieces of information in the profile (the student's age, the total cost of attendance, and the parents' combined annual income), ensuring that the respondent noticed key financial information. Next, respondents were told that, given the total cost of attendance and the academic scholarship, the remaining cost of attendance due to the university would be approximately \$39,000. Respondents were asked, 'Given his family's financial situation, how much of this remaining cost can [name]'s family afford on a yearly basis?' They responded using a 9-point rating scale anchored at a low of 'Little or none' and a high of 'Most or all'. Finally, the respondent was asked the same question, but selected one of nine ordinal dollar amounts, from a low of '\$0–\$4000' to a high of '\$32,000–\$36,000', in \$4000 increments. The respondent was then warned that they were switching to a new task.

The respondent then completed the same shifting standards task (with the same materials and procedures) used in Studies 1 and 2. Finally, the respondent completed several demographic questions, including sex, age, highest level of educational attainment, self-reported social class rank, current household income, and the items for the SRS.

## 4.2 | Results

First, we examined responses on the shifting standards task. As with Studies 1 and 2, all objective and subjective ratings were standardized and submitted to a 2 (SES Domain; financial, educational)  $\times$  2

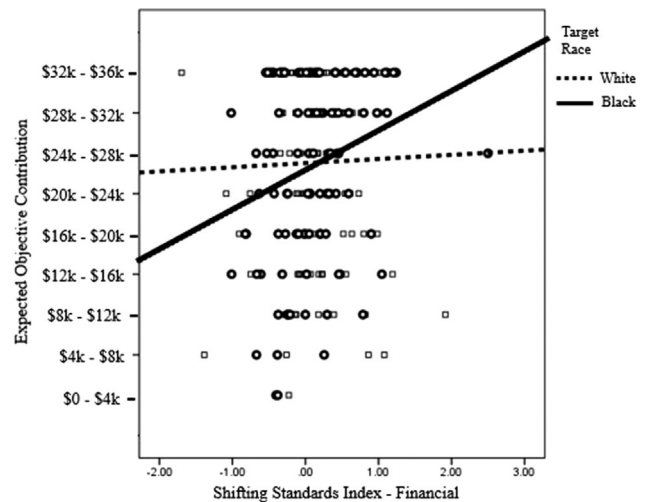
<sup>4</sup> For the study, we used the University of Richmond, selecting a highly regarded and expensive institution, but not one that was considered elite. All financial information presented about the

university was accurate, as reported at <https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>, at the time of the study.

(Target Race; White, Black)  $\times$  2 (Target Status; low, high)  $\times$  2 (Judgment Type; objective, subjective) mixed-effects analysis with random intercepts for participant ( $ICC = 0.170$ ), Target Face ( $ICC < 0.001$ ), and Target Occupation ( $ICC = 0.000$ ). The shifting standards indicative Target Race  $\times$  Judgment Type interaction was statistically significant,  $b = -0.109$ , 95% CI  $[-0.178, -0.040]$ ,  $SE = .035$ ,  $t(32.8) = -3.079$ ,  $p = .004$ , and Table 2c displays the pattern of means congruent with the shifting standards effect. Follow-up significance testing revealed that on objective measures, White targets ( $M = .040$ ,  $SD = .70$ ) were rated significantly higher than Black targets ( $M = -.045$ ,  $SD = .62$ ;  $p < .001$ ). On subjective measures, Black targets ( $M = .035$ ,  $SD = -.67$ ) were rated higher than White targets ( $M = -.007$ ,  $SD = .65$ ;  $p = .068$ ). This effect was not moderated by SES Domain ( $p > .5$ ), indicating that the effect was consistent across both financial and educational judgments. Also, this effect was not qualified by a significant 3-way interaction with Target Status ( $b = -0.091$ , 95% CI  $[-0.218, .035]$ ,  $SE = .065$ ,  $t(276.6) = -1.411$ ,  $p = .159$ ), indicating that the shifting standards effect was present across both low- and high-status targets. Thus, initial analyses substantiated the principle shifting standards effect for both financial and educational judgments, including showing the SSM-consistent shift on the subjective measure. Also, consistent with previous studies, the SSI-financial ( $\alpha = .806$ ) and SSI-educational ( $\alpha = .756$ ) measures were significantly correlated,  $r = .531$ ,  $p < .001$ .

#### 4.2.1 | Shifting standards index as a predictor

Our primary goal was to examine if individual differences in the tendency to engage in the race-based shift in perceived SES would predict the family's expected financial contribution, with greater stereotype-consistent shifting associated with larger expected financial contributions by the Black family. That is, those with the greatest tendency to shift standards would perceive the Black family as particularly well-off financially and this would translate to a higher expected financial contribution. Given the context, the SSI-financial should be a better predictor than the SSI-Educational. To test this prediction, we conducted a linear regression analysis predicting the objective financial contribution. On Step 1 of the analysis, we entered Target Race (dummy coded; White = 1, Black = -1), SRS scores ( $\alpha = .891$ ), and SSI-Financial scores. On Step 2, we entered the interaction terms between (a) Target Race and SRS scores and (b) Target Race and SSI-Financial scores. Results are reported in Table 5. On Step 1, the only factor to approach significance was the SSI-Financial ( $p = .055$ ). Those who showed the greatest stereotype-consistent shift expected the family to provide the largest financial contribution. On Step 2, the SSI-Financial achieved statistical significance, but consistent with the prediction, this was qualified by a marginally significant Target Race  $\times$  SSI-Financial interaction ( $p = .065$ ). Using linear regression, we regressed SSI-Financial scores on the objective contributions separately for Black and White targets. SSI-Financial scores significantly predicted expected financial contributions for Black targets ( $b = 1.178$ ,  $SE = .428$ ,  $p = .007$ ), with larger shifts in standards associated with larger expected contributions. SSI-Financial scores were not signifi-



**FIGURE 1** Objective family contribution as a function of Shifting Standards Index score (financial) by Target Race (Study 3).

cantly related to expected financial contribution for the White family ( $b = .069$ ,  $p > .8$ ; see Figure 1). That is, those respondents who perceived a given objective dollar amount as subjectively more successful for Black as compared to White targets also expected the Black family to be able to contribute more money towards their son's college education.

While the SSI-Financial and SSI-Educational scores moderately correlated, the nature of the dependent variable in this study (a financial contribution) would suggest the SSI-Financial should be the more significant predictor of the two SSI. Consistent with this prediction, statistical analyses using the SSI-Educational showed a pattern consistent with the use of SSI-Financial, though effects were not statistically significant. The full regression analysis using SSI-Educational as a predictor is reported in the [Supplemental material](#).

#### 4.3 | Discussion

The race-based shift in judgments of SES means that a Black target is judged as subjectively more successful than a White target of comparable objective attainment. From this, we predicted that those who show a greater shift in this stereotypic direction would perceive a Black family described with favourable objective SES information (high income, prestigious occupations) as subjectively more successful than a comparably described White family. Consequently, the Black family would be judged able to provide a larger financial contribution to their child's college education than the White family. Results supported this prediction, confirming this stereotyping effect that disadvantaged the Black family. Results also showed this effect was independent of explicitly measured racial prejudice.

These results illustrate the implications of these race-based shifts in SES judgments. Despite having the same objective information, the families of the Black and White students were perceived differently. While there are additional stereotypic expectations likely at play

**TABLE 5** Regressing objective contribution by the family on target race, explicit racial prejudice, and the financial shifting standards index score (Study 3).

Variable	Step 1				Step 2			
	<i>b</i>	SE	95% CI	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	SE	95% CI	<i>p</i>
Target Race	.053	.154	−.251, .356	.733	.096	.387	−.667, .859	.805
SRS	.037	.158	−.196, .270	.754	.044	.120	−.191, .280	.711
SSI-financial	.576	.298	−.012, 1.163	.055	.623	.299	.035, 1.212	.038
TR × SRS					.007	.120	−.229, .242	.956
TR × SSI					−.555	.299	−1.143, .034	.065

Note: SRS = Symbolic Racism Scale scores; SSI = Shifting Standards Index; TR = Target Race (1 = White, −1 = Black)

(e.g., a higher competency judgment for the parents of the Black student, having achieved such a high level of success), our results suggest that this effect of the race-status association was a significant factor. These findings build on previous work with the SSM to suggest further implications of stereotype-relevant shifts in social judgments. While the findings must be considered within both their correlational nature and the larger, multi-factored context of financial aid judgments, they could have direct implications in grant and scholarship allocation for Black students, as financial aid counsellors perceive a Black family as able to contribute more than a White family. In a different context, perhaps that higher sense of subjective financial success associated with a Black employee's salary (as compared to a White employee's same salary) would demotivate an employer to agree with the Black employee's request for a raise. More generally, the findings provide further insight into the shifting standards effect, substantiating the view that individual shifting perceptions impact stereotype-relevant social judgments. Commensurate with previous research, this shifting operated independently of explicit racial prejudice. The close temporal proximity of the objective contribution measure and the shifting standards task could raise methodological concerns that responses to one task primed or otherwise influenced responses on the other, inflating the correspondence of the two measures. We would note, however, that (a) the objective contribution was measured first and therefore would not be influenced by considering the series of race-SES decisions from the shifting standards task and (b) the shifting standards effect observed in the present study was statistically similar in magnitude to those observed in Studies 1 and 2.

## 5 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Research suggests a stereotypic association between racial categories and levels of SES. Specifically, Whites are associated with higher levels of SES than Blacks. Applying the shifting standards model to this stereotype finds that Whites are assigned higher values on objective measures of SES-relevant judgments (financial and educational) than Blacks, even as Whites and Blacks are rated comparably, or even reversed, on subjective judgments of these same constructs. This can disadvantage a Black individual on outcomes relevant to such

judgments, as an objectively lower level of financial or educational achievement is judged to be subjectively equivalent to or greater than a White individual's higher level of achievement. We would characterize this as an unintentional process because it is not clearly motivated or intentional to judge individuals of different races along separate standards (Corneille & Hütter, 2020). However, we have yet to test this aspect of the process systematically.

The studies presented here set out to address two primary questions regarding this shifting standards effect. First, we examined the robustness of the shifting standards effect in regard to relevant demographic group differences and prejudice-related constructs. These demographic differences included respondent race and SES (measured both objectively and subjectively) and individual differences related to the application of racial stereotypes. Across all studies, we found evidence for the race-based shift in standards effect. Regarding the demographic differences, we found no evidence that White and Black respondents differed in their demonstration of the shifting standards effect (Study 1). Respondent SES, measured with multiple objective and subjective measures and differentiated between current and childhood SES (see [Supplemental materials](#)), showed no relationship with the shifting standards effect (Studies 1 and 2). Thus, this shifting standards effect seems robust across these relevant social demographics.

The measures related to racial stereotype application focused on prejudice-related constructs, as these race-based shifts in SES judgments could relate to a general tendency to disadvantage Black targets relative to Whites. However, differences in social dominance orientation (Study 1), symbolic racism (Study 2), and motivations to control prejudiced responses (Study 2) proved unrelated to the shifting standards effect. There are several points worth noting here. First, given the consistency of the shifting standards effect in light of these well-validated constructs, the effect is quite robust. Since the shifting standards effect is based on one's awareness rather than endorsement of the stereotype (Biernat & Manis, 1994), perhaps the prevalence of the stereotype is such that its application through the shifting standards effect is not subject to strong individual differences. The general prevalence of the race-SES associations, or the specific White = high SES and Black = low SES associations, has not been widely assessed, so this remains an unanswered question addressable in future research. Second, in conjunction with Study 3, the SSE seems to operate independent of individual variations in racial prejudice and

social dominance, though the effect does capture a meaningful aspect of intergroup relations, as depicted by its ability to predict the discriminatory behaviour observed in Study 3. Perhaps individual variation in the awareness of the stereotype, rather than an aspect of prejudicial attitudes, is sufficient to explain this relationship with the measured discriminatory behaviour. Of course, the lack of significant correlations between the shifting standards effect and the prejudice measures could be attributable to the disconnect between the unintentional shifting standards task and the deliberately measured individual differences variables (though see Devine et al., 2002). Subsequent research that measures race-related stereotypes and attitudes at the same level of awareness could further illuminate potential relationships.

The second primary question addressed whether individual tendencies to engage in these race-based shifts related to a discriminatory judgment. We found that those who showed a greater stereotypic shift expected a financially successful Black family to be able to make a larger financial contribution to a son's college education than a comparably described White family. This effect was independent of explicitly measured racial prejudice. Consistent with Biernat et al. (2009), this supports the view that these unintended shifts in standards are potentially significant factors in discriminatory situations, though the causal nature of the relationship remains unclear. Among individuals displaying larger SSI scores, when two families had equal means, the Black family was expected to pay more. As with some other bias effects, these subtle shifts could lack a sense of malice and operate without explicit motivation, contributing to racial bias via an individual, rather than institutional/societal, mechanism (Banaji et al., 2021). Nevertheless, they could have significant impacts and warrant further investigation. Consequently, they add to our understanding of the psychological processes perpetuating racial and economic inequality, especially as they are intertwined (Piff et al., 2018).

## 5.1 | Limitations and future directions

The present work is limited to a single domain: the race-SES association. Even within this context, we limited our work to only two racial categories (White and Black), though research supports status associations with other racial categories, as well (e.g., Asian associated with middle to high status; Woo et al., 2018). While the White/Black status associations could have substantial social consequences (such as, compensation and hiring decisions), future research should examine the effect of shifting standards within other domains, to illuminate how shifting standards relate to potentially discriminatory behaviour against other marginalized groups. Also, given likely interactions between target sex and the status manipulation, we used only male targets. Future research should extend the intersectionality of this present work by examining female and non-binary targets as well. Our present work also suffers from another limitation present in other social psychological research addressing social status-related issues. Namely, we focused on two levels of social status ('low' and 'high'), operationalized as different locations in the social hierarchy. While one of these operationalizations was relatively higher than the

other, our use of 'low status' and 'high status' could best be conceptualized as a differentiation of two levels of status rather than a specification of the lowest and highest ranges of the social hierarchy (Weeks & Leavitt, 2017). For example, our occupations that operationalized 'high status' do not necessarily convey the highest end of the social hierarchy; rather, just higher than the 'low status' occupations (which might not represent the lowest). Consequently, the shifting standards effect could change based on the level of social status being operationalized. Future research is needed to understand the nature of the status associations with different racial categories, as well as these implications for the shifting standards effect.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data and supporting supplementary material for the studies is available at [https://osf.io/7as9q/?view\\_only=266aa7c9f17e4c33a5a37c51421717aa](https://osf.io/7as9q/?view_only=266aa7c9f17e4c33a5a37c51421717aa). In addition, for each study we report all measures, conditions, data exclusions, and appropriate sample size determinations.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The authors confirm that the manuscript adheres to ethical guidelines specified in the APA Code of Conduct and received approval from the Rhodes College Human Subjects Research Committee. All participants provided informed consent.

## TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

For each study we report all measures, conditions, data exclusions, and appropriate sample size determinations. Data for all studies is available at [https://osf.io/7as9q/?view\\_only=266aa7c9f17e4c33a5a37c51421717aa](https://osf.io/7as9q/?view_only=266aa7c9f17e4c33a5a37c51421717aa)

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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