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Ideological Motivations Under Threat: How Beliefs in a Just World, Social Dominance Orientation, and Employment Uncertainty Frame Essentialism and Diversity Attitudes

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Abstract

We investigated how individuals with high beliefs in a just world (BJW, the conviction that the world is fair and just) and social dominance orientation (SDO, individual preference for maintaining group-based hierarchies) rely on essentialist explanations as a way to cope with employment uncertainty. In turn, we expected that essentialism would diminish the support for workplace diversity, an important psychological foundation of organizational inclusion. We recruited 314 employees belonging to different organizational contexts and tested our hypothesis using a three-way moderated mediation model. All study variables were assessed through an anonymous self-report questionnaire. Results supported our hypothesis. The positive relationship between employees' BJW and essentialism was strongest when individuals high in SDO endorsed hierarchy-legitimizing ideologies and experienced high levels of perceived employment uncertainty. This finding suggests that essentialist narratives are used to manage employment-related uncertainty when employees are motivated to perceive the world as fair and to support a stable social system. In turn, essentialism was associated with lower support for workplace diversity within the organization. In line with our moderated mediation hypothesis, the whole model suggested a negative indirect association between BJW and support for diversity, mediated by essentialism only when both SDO and perceived employment uncertainty were high. These findings underscore important implications for fostering employees' appreciation of diversity and strengthening social inclusion in the workplace.

Keywords: belief in a just world; social dominance orientation; employment uncertainty; essentialism; support for workplace diversity

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Introduction

Organizations have increasingly emphasized the promotion of inclusive work environments in recent decades (Boyd & Larson, 2023), recognizing that employees' perceptions of diversity and their willingness to appreciate interpersonal differences are fundamental to sustaining equitable workplaces (Mor Barak, 2022). While affirmative action aims to increase the incidence of employees from diverse backgrounds (Estlund, 2005), individuals differ markedly in how they interpret social categories and their openness to diversity in the workplace (Mor Barak et al., 1998). Many employees, particularly those belonging to racial or gender minorities, continue to face difficulties in obtaining support within their workplaces (e.g., Reid & Clayton, 1992). Thus, as workforce diversity increases, it becomes important to attend to how employees value diversity, as this orientation is closely linked to the promotion of inclusion and is commonly addressed through organizational diversity management practices (Mor Barak et al., 1998; Paolillo et al., 2017; Mor Barak, 2022).

Examining the psychological processes through which people interpret social categories and interpersonal differences in their socio-organizational context is crucial to better understanding how inclusiveness can be shaped in work environments. Recent research (Lee, 2023; Tesi, 2025) highlighted the importance of taking into account the interconnected influence of individual, ideological, and situational variables for examining how different sets of individual differences and motivated social cognitions can influence inclusion initiatives within workplaces. Of particular interest, the role of individuals' ideological belief systems and social-cognitive mechanisms that legitimize the maintenance of the societal status quo has been underestimated in preventing support for diversity initiatives when considering organizational-related facets (i.e., Feenstra et al., 2017; Lee, 2023). The present study aims to fill this gap by examining how the interaction between ideological and situational factors, belief in a just world (BJW), social dominance orientation (SDO), and employment uncertainty, jointly shapes essentialism, which in turn is expected to undermine employees' appreciation of differences in the workplace.

Belief in a just world reflects the assumption that social outcomes are basically fair, predictable, and deserved (Lerner, 1980). This belief system provides individuals with a sense of order, predictability, and stability, particularly under conditions of threat or uncertainty (Hafer & Sutton, 2016). The most important assumption of this belief system is that achievements are perceived as "deserved": advantaged and disadvantaged outcomes are both interpreted as deserved. This conviction facilitates the legitimization of social inequalities by encouraging the interpretation of unequal outcomes as fair and rooted in personal or group-based characteristics (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). One such way of interpreting differences is essentialism, the belief that social categories reflect deep, inherent, and unchangeable features (Haslam et al., 2000). Previous studies consistently find that BJW leads to a preference for essentialist explanations of inequalities (Baldner & Pierro, 2024). The idea that members of social categories share an "essence" that allows others to draw conclusions about their members (Haslam et al., 2000) aims at simplifying complex social realities and offers psychological comfort in contexts that threaten the social order, by portraying group boundaries as fixed and thereby reinforcing rigid social boundaries and stereotypes (see Bastian & Haslam, 2006; 2008; Haslam et al., 2006; Keller, 2005).

Essentialist accounts likewise function to legitimize inequalities embedded within the social structure (see Rossi & Caricati, 2025). For instance, the injustice reflected in occupational sex segregation often relies on gender essentialism (the idea that men and women possess innate and fundamental differences) as a common explanatory frame (Levanon & Grusky, 2016), including in highly liberal, egalitarian, and economically developed societies (Charles & Bradley, 2009). For this reason, we expect essentialism to lessen the value individuals attribute to diversity within their work environment. At its core, essentialism reduces individuals' cognitive accessibility to alternative, more nuanced perceptions of social groups by promoting the view that members of certain categories possess fixed, immutable, and often negatively stereotyped characteristics (Haslam et al., 2000). Although empirical applications of essentialism in work and organizational contexts remain relatively scarce, its underlying psychosocial mechanisms are theoretically expected to extend to workplace dynamics. Specifically, individuals who hold stronger essentialist beliefs may show reduced openness to interpersonal and intergroup variability, because social inclusion threatens the stability of the stereotypes and hierarchical assumptions they attribute to particular social categories. This expectation is consistent with research demonstrating that essentialist thinking reinforces rigid group boundaries and prejudice (e.g., Bastian & Haslam, 2008; Mandalaywala et al., 2018), suggesting that essentialism may hinder inclusion and diversity efforts within organizations.

Notably, empirical research indicates that essentialism is molded by threats to social order and stability rather than representing a stable cognitive disposition (Morton et al., 2009; Brescoll et al., 2013; Ryazanov & Christenfeld, 2018). Further, the impact of threats to one's status stability also appears to depend on the presence of hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths. For instance, when masculinity is threatened, men tend to approach gender-hierarchy-legitimizing ideologies and engage in compensatory displays of sexual dominance (Valsecchi et al., 2023; Vescio et al., 2025). Similarly, other research shows that when threat-based uncertainty combines with hierarchy-legitimizing beliefs, it can heighten essentialism (Tesi et al., 2026). To extend the existing body of work, we propose that within organizational settings, narratives of essentialism become more prominent when BJW co-occurs with hierarchy-legitimizing ideologies under threatening circumstances. Employees with strong beliefs in justice may rely on essentialist interpretations, especially when they are ideologically motivated to support stable social structures and perceive their stability to be endangered. The convergence of motivational and contextual forces can thus steer individuals toward specific interpretations of social groups, ultimately shaping the degree of inclusiveness within the workplace.

We identify social dominance orientation (SDO; Pratto et al., 1994) as a central hierarchy-legitimizing ideology that may interact with BJW in reducing support for workplace diversity

when conditions within the organization are perceived as unstable. SDO refers to an individual preference for group-based hierarchies and for the dominance of high-status groups over low-status groups (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). SDO is associated with a range of hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths, such as stereotypes, prejudice, and meritocratic narratives that function to justify and preserve existing social inequalities. Individuals belonging to high-status groups typically score higher in SDO and are more likely to endorse such myths in order to maintain their privileged position. However, members of low-status groups may also endorse inequality-supporting legitimizing myths, particularly when they adhere to broader system-justifying beliefs. Consistent with this view, research shows that when preferences for order, meritocracy, or other system-justifying beliefs co-occur with high levels of SDO, individuals are more likely to endorse existing social hierarchies thus justifying the dominance of advantaged groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Tesi et al., 2020). Importantly, this interactive pattern is particularly evident among members of low-status groups, who may internalize hierarchy-supporting beliefs as a means of reducing the threat of instability thus enhancing their perceived control (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Levin et al., 2002). Together, these findings highlight that the interplay between system-justifying beliefs—such as belief in a just world—and SDO is central to understanding how individuals support hierarchy-enhancing myths, regardless of their objective status position (Kunst et al., 2017).

Prior research highlights SDO as a key antecedent in understanding employees' tendency to support inequitable relationships within organizational settings (Tesi, 2025). Work organizations are marked by both implicit and explicit asymmetries that high-status employees (e.g., those in leadership positions) and low-status employees (e.g., subordinates) contribute to sustaining (Aiello et al., 2013). When SDO is paired with a strong motivation to avoid uncertainty, individuals are more likely to rely on mechanisms that preserve asymmetry when confronted with unstable conditions (Tesi et al., 2020). In line with this, research indicates that essentialist ways of thinking tend to be endorsed by individuals high in SDO, as they provide explanations that frame group-based inequalities as orderly, stable, and thus natural and legitimate (Keller, 2005; Tesi, 2025).

Thus, both BJW and SDO can be framed as motivated belief systems that ideologically rationalize social differences (Jost & Hunyady, 2005), and they may strengthen individuals' reliance on cognitive tools that impose order when facing instability (Jost et al., 2004; Tesi et al., 2026).

Perceived employment uncertainty (hereafter PEU) can be conceptualized as the perception of the discrepancy between one's preferred level of certainty and the current opportunities offered by the actual employment (Mantler et al., 2005). The higher the PEU, the greater the subjective perception of unpredictability and ambiguity regarding one's future employment continuity, career trajectory, and role expectations (Caplan et al., 1975). Conceptually related to job insecurity, PEU emphasizes epistemic instability and future ambiguity rather than the explicit threat of job loss. Extensive research on job insecurity has shown that perceived threats to employment stability are associated with anxiety, reduced perceived control, and chronic stress responses that undermine psychological well-being, job satisfaction, and physical health (De Witte, 1999). Although distinct from the traditional focus on job-loss threat, PEU represents a related form of employment-related uncertainty that may activate comparable psychological mechanisms. Under such conditions of instability, individuals may increasingly rely on beliefs that help stabilize their worldview in order to cope with uncertainty (e.g., Mantler et al., 2005; Morton et al., 2009). An essentialist way of thinking may emerge as an attempt to restore a sense of order and predictability in response to heightened PEU. Indeed, the core mechanism of essentialism lies in partitioning the social world into clearly defined categories, thereby reducing ambiguity and providing seemingly stable explanations for social outcomes. Hence, we expect that this combination of high BJW and high SDO will translate more readily into essentialist views when employees experience high levels of PEU. Essentialist beliefs may serve as a means of reconciling employment-related uncertainty with ideological motivations to trust and legitimize the social system (Brescoll et al., 2013). Although previous studies have highlighted that ideological belief systems such as BJW and SDO, as well as epistemic motivations, can independently contribute to reduced social inclusivity in organizational settings (Baldner & Pierro, 2024; Contu et al., 2023; Di Santo et al., 2020), there remains a gap in examining their interplay and the potential mediating role of essentialism. The aim of the present study is to highlight how the interplay between ideological motivations and employment-related uncertainty contributes to reduced social inclusivity in organizational settings. As far as we know, no studies have tested how essentialism is implicated in reducing employees' support for workplace diversity in their work environments; however, a large body of research in the broader domain of intergroup attitudes, stereotyping, and prejudice (Haslam et al., 2000; Haslam et al., 2006) suggests that essentialism is expected to entail important consequences for how employees interpret workplace diversity. Essentialist beliefs tend to constrain openness to individual variation, reinforce rigid stereotypes, and diminish the perception of within-group variability (Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Rattan & Dweck, 2010). By depicting differences as fixed and potentially divisive, essentialism reduces the value individuals assign to diversity and, in turn, may weaken their support for inclusive interpersonal relations.

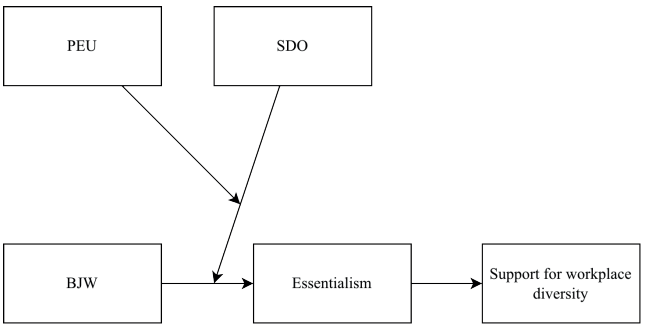
In sum, the present study proposes and tests a three-way moderated mediation model (Figure 1): BJW is expected to predict higher levels of essentialism when individuals also score high in SDO and report higher levels of PEU (i.e., employment-related uncertainty). In turn, essentialist thinking is hypothesized to reduce the value workers assign to organizational diversity. To strengthen the robustness of our analyses, we included gender, age, and type of job contract as covariates. These variables have been shown to influence intergroup attitudes, ideological orientations, and responses to employment-related uncertainty, thereby potentially accounting for variance in essentialist beliefs and diversity-related outcomes. For instance, gender differences are well documented in research on social dominance and prejudice, with men typically scoring higher on hierarchy-enhancing beliefs that correlate with essentialist thinking (Sidanius et al., 1994). Age has similarly been associated with greater endorsement of system-justifying ideologies and resistance to social change, which may shape receptivity to diversity and the adoption of

essentialized group schemas (Henry & Sears, 2009). Research has also shown significant gender differences in how employees perceive the value of diversity programs, with women tending to value them more than men (Mor Barak, 2022).

Finally, employment stability and contract type have been linked to perceptions of control and employment-related uncertainty (De Witte, 1999), suggesting that workers in less secure forms of employment may be especially susceptible to cognitive strategies, such as essentialism, that help restore predictability under uncertainty. Including these covariates, therefore, helps ensure that the hypothesized effects are not confounded with demographic or structural factors known to influence intergroup cognition.

Overall, the tested model underscores the importance of investigating how personal ideologies and employment-related uncertainty jointly shape the cognitive foundations of inclusion in organizational environments.

Fig. 1. Study's model



Method

Procedure and participants

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of University of Pisa. Participants were recruited through Prolific Academic, a web-based recruitment platform, and received monetary compensation. Participants had to be Italian nationals, at least 18 years old, and currently employed within an organization. Participants gave explicit informed consent to take part in the study and answered an anonymous self-report questionnaire that included measures of the study variables. The sample consisted of 314 respondents (144 women, 170 men), with a mean age of 36.78 years (SD = 10.05). Regarding job contracts, 213 participants reported having permanent employment, whereas 101 reported having fixed-term employment.

Measures

Beliefs in a Just World (BJW) were measured using the six-item Dalbert's "General belief in a just world" scale (1999) (i.e., "I think basically the world is a just place"; "I believe that, by and large, people get what they deserve"). Participants gave their responses on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The reliability was α = .86

Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) was measured using the Italian version (Aiello et al., 2019) of the SDO_7 scale (Ho et al., 2015). The scale captures the extent to which individuals support group-based dominance and inequalities and is composed of sixteen items (i.e., "An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on the bottom"; "It is unjust to try to make groups equal"). Participants gave their responses on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The reliability was α = .93.

Perceived employment uncertainty (PEU) was assessed using an adaptation of Caplan et al.'s (1975) job future ambiguity measure, consisting of three items (e.g., "I am uncertain about what my future career picture looks like"; "I am uncertain about my responsibilities in the near future"). Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The reliability was α = .85.

Essentialism was assessed using an adaptation of Bastian and Haslam's (2006, 2008) measure of essentialist beliefs. The scale was translated into Italian following standard back-translation procedures. The scale measures the cognitive bias that leads people to essentialize human attributes related to their biological basis, discreteness, and informativeness. The scale is composed of nine items (i.e., "Whether someone belongs to one category type or another is determined by their biological make-up"; "The boundaries that define the differences between categories of people are clear-cut"; "Knowing about a few of the basic traits of a category of people can lead to accurate predictions of their future behavior"). Participants were asked to respond on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The reliability was α = .91.

Support for workplace diversity was measured using the Italian version (Paolillo et al., 2017) of the "Personal Diversity Value" subscale from the short version of the Diversity Climate Scale (Mor Barak et al., 1998). The subscale captures perceptions of the importance of diversity for the individual and consists of three items (i.e., "Knowing more about cultural norms of diverse groups would help me be more effective in my job"; "I think that diverse viewpoints add value"; "I believe diversity is a strategic business issue"). Participants gave their responses on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The reliability was α = .85.

Results

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS. Descriptive statistics and correlations are reported in Table 1.

Tab. 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

	Descriptives		Correlations			
Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1.BJW	3.364	1.144				
2.SDO	2.349	1.035	.216*			
3.PEU	4.451	1.603	-.307*	-.105		
4.Essentialism	2.815	1.152	.258*	.578*	-.009	
5.Support for workplace diversity	5.039	1.474	-.027	-.413*	-.003	-.255*

** p ≤ .001; BJW = Beliefs in a just world; SDO = Social dominance orientation; PEU = Perceived Employment Uncertainty*

To test the study hypotheses, we performed a three-way moderated mediation analysis using PROCESS macro (Model 11; Hayes, 2018) with 95% confidence intervals and 5,000 bootstrap samples. Continuous independent variables were mean-centered prior to the analysis (i.e., BJW, SDO, PEU). Results are presented in Table 2. The model predicting essentialism explained 41.1% of the variance (R^2 = .411, p < .001), whereas the model predicting support for workplace diversity explained 13.5% of the variance (R^2 = .135, p < .001).

Tab. 2. Three-way moderated mediation model analysis

	Outcome: Essentialism					Outcome: Support for workplace diversity				
				95% CI					95% CI	
Predictors	B	SE	p	LL	UL	B	SE	p	LL	UL
BJW	.150	.048	.002	.055	.245	.113	.072	.120	-.030	.255
SDO	.657	.054	<.001	.551	.764	–	–	–	–	
PEU	.031	.035	.383	-.039	.100	–	–	–	–	
Essentialism	–	–	–	–		-.339	.072	<.001	-.479	-.198
BJW x SDO	.068	.043	.116	-.017	.153	–	–	–	–	
BJW x PEU	.041	.027	.128	-.012	.095	–	–	–	–	
SDO x PEU	.052	.031	.091	-.008	.112	–	–	–	–	
BJW x SDO x PEU	.043	.019	.022	.006	.079	–	–	–	–	
Covariates										
Gender[a]	-.108	.108	.319	-.320	.105	.539	.163	.001	.218	.859
Age	-.007	.005	.199	-.017	.004	.001	.008	.946	-.015	.016
Job contract[b]	.310	.115	.007	.084	.537	.531	.173	.002	.190	.872

Note. BJW = Beliefs in a just world; SDO = Social dominance orientation; PEU = Perceived Employment Uncertainty; [a] Gender coded as: 0 = male; 1 = female; b Job contract coded as: 1 = permanent job; 2 = fixed term contract

Following a multiple linear regression approach (Aiken et al., 1991), we entered BJW, SDO, PEU, and four interaction terms as predictors: BJW × SDO, BJW × PEU, SDO × PEU, and the three-way interaction (BJW × SDO × PEU). Gender, age, and job contract were included as covariates. The results showed that BJW (B = 0.150, SE = .048, p = .002, *95% CI:* [.055; .245]), SDO (B = .657, SE = .054, p < .001, *95% CI:* [.551; .764]), and the three-way interaction BJW × SDO × PEU (B = .043, SE = .019, p = .022, *95% CI:* [.006; .079]) were positively and significantly associated with essentialism. The two-way interactions, BJW × SDO (B = .068, SE = .043, p = .116, *95% CI:* [-.017; .153]), BJW × PEU (B = .041, SE = .027, p = .128, *95% CI:* [-.012; .095]), and SDO × PEU (B = .052, SE = .031, p = .091, *95% CI:* [-.008; .112]), were not statistically significant.

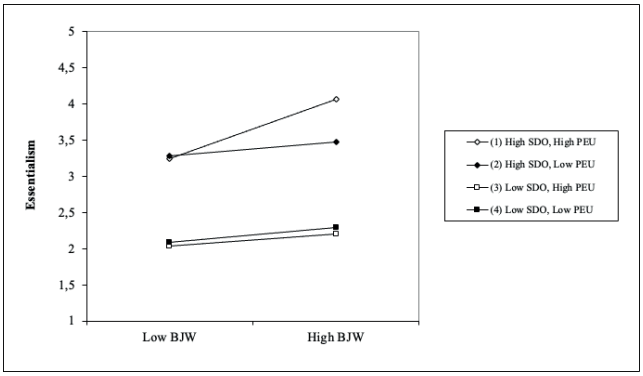
Additionally, we conducted a simple slope analysis to determine whether the strength of the association between BJW and essentialism varied across different levels of SDO and PEU (±1 *SD*). As reported in Figure 2, BJW was significantly associated with essentialism only when both SDO and PEU were high (B = .358, SE = .082, p < .001, *95% CI:* [.196; .520]). The association was not significant when SDO was high and PEU was low (B = .083, SE = .076, p = .273, *95% CI:* [-.066; .232]), when SDO was low and PEU was high (B = .075, SE = .093, p = .425, *95% CI:* [-.109; .258]), or when both SDO and PEU were low (B = .084, SE = .087, p = .332, *95% CI:* [-.087; .255]). The results of the slope difference test (Dawson & Richter, 2006) are reported in Table 3. These comparisons showed that the slope observed when both SDO and PEU were high differed significantly from each of the other slopes.

Tab. 3. Test for difference between slopes.

			95% CI	
Pair of slopes	Slope difference	p-value	LL	UL
(1) and (2)	.274	.007	.075	.473
(1) and (3)	.283	.002	.102	.465
(1) and (4)	.274	.046	.006	.539
(2) and (3)	.009	.946	-.262	.281
(2) and (4)	-.002	.983	-.183	.180
(3) and (4)	-.009	.912	-.210	.187

Note: Slope (1) = High SDO, High PEU; Slope (2) = High SDO, Low PEU; Slope 3 = Low SDO, High PEU; Slope 4 = Low SDO, Low PEU

Fig. 2. Slope analysis of three-way interaction



Furthermore, essentialism was negatively and significantly associated with support for workplace diversity (see Table 2). To test the mediating role of essentialism, we examined the conditional indirect effects. The negative indirect effect of BJW on diversity support was statistically significant only when both SDO and PEU were high (B = -.121, *Boot SE* = .036, *95% Boot CI:* [-.196; -.057]). The indirect effect was not significant when SDO was high and PEU was low (B = -.028, *Boot SE* = .033, *95% Boot CI:* [-.094; .034]), when SDO was low and PEU was high (B = -.025, *Boot SE* = .034, *95% Boot CI:* [-.095; .042]), or when both SDO and PEU were low (B = -.029, *Boot SE* = .032, *95% Boot CI:* [-.096; .027]). The index of moderated mediation further supported the conditional indirect effect (*index* = -.015, *Boot SE* = .008, *95% Boot CI:* [-.034; -.002]).

Discussion

The significance of the three-way interaction between BJW, SDO, and PEU highlights the theoretical importance of examining how motivated belief systems dynamically respond to contextual threats, particularly when such threats take the form of employment-related uncertainty. Consistent with previous findings, BJW appears to provide psychological comfort under threatening conditions by framing social outcomes as orderly and deserved (Hafer & Sutton, 2016).

However, this motivational function becomes especially salient when individuals also hold hierarchy-legitimizing ideologies (i.e., SDO).

High-SDO individuals tend to endorse beliefs and narratives that justify and naturalize social inequalities; they are sensitive to threats to the hierarchical system (Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), and even when they belong to low-status groups, they may support hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths as a way to assert the stability of the social system (Kunst et al., 2017). Consistently, when SDO co-occurs with system-justifying beliefs, individuals are more likely to support existing social hierarchies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Prior studies have also identified SDO as a central predictor of employees' support for inequitable relations in organizational contexts (Aiello et al., 2013; Tesi, 2025). As supported in the present study, PEU appears to provide the epistemic condition under which reliance on essentialist interpretations becomes more pronounced. This result is consistent with previous studies conducted in organizational settings (e.g., Tesi et al., 2020) that highlight how SDO promotes hierarchy-enhancing myths (e.g., the endorsement of coercive power tactics) when contextual social norms promote equality rather than inequality, thereby stressing contextual instability versus stability. Our findings extend this literature to organizational settings by showing that workplace instability is associated with greater essentialist thinking among individuals whose ideological beliefs favor hierarchy and system legitimacy. This supports the view that essentialism may function as a context-dependent mechanism, potentially triggered by the interplay of epistemic and ideological motives (Morton et al., 2009; Brescoll et al., 2013).

Although BJW and SDO have been independently linked to biased intergroup outcomes (Baldner & Pierro, 2024; Contu et al., 2023), in the present study, among the interaction terms, only the three-way interaction significantly predicted essentialism. A theoretically grounded explanation may account for this pattern. Essentialism is not always chronically activated: despite being influenced by ideological motives, it is context-sensitive and tends to emerge under conditions that threaten stability, control, or predictability (i.e., Brescoll et al., 2013; Haslam et al., 2000; Jost et al., 2004; Morton et al., 2009). This means that even when individuals are high in BJW and SDO, they do not necessarily rely on essentialist narratives unless situational threats activate a need for order, structure, or epistemic closure. On the other hand, as we found, PEU alone is insufficient to elicit essentialism without pre-existing ideological frameworks that legitimize inequality. According to threat-compensation models (Morton et al., 2009; Vescio et al., 2025), individuals under threat rely on whatever ideological tools are available to make sense of instability. Therefore, this pattern suggests that essentialist reasoning does not arise from a single motivational source, but from the alignment of distinct ideological functions that jointly address contextual epistemic uncertainty. Notably, neither of the two-way interactions between ideological beliefs and PEU (BJW × PEU and SDO × PEU) was associated with essentialism. This pattern is consistent with the view that BJW and SDO represent distinct motivational systems involved in preserving the social status quo, and that each alone may be insufficient to activate essentialist reasoning under threat. BJW reflects a motivation to perceive the world as orderly and predictable (Lerner, 1980), whereas SDO reflects a preference for maintaining group-based dominance (Pratto et al., 1994). Research on motivated social cognition suggests that system-justifying responses, including essentialist interpretations, arise most robustly when multiple ideological motives converge with contextual threats, rather than when one ideological belief is activated in isolation (Jost et al., 2004; Brescoll et al., 2013). Essentialism serves both epistemic and social functions, restoring order and reinforcing hierarchy, and therefore may require the simultaneous activation of both motives to become a compelling coping strategy.

Taken together, these findings support the view that essentialism is better understood as a context-dependent cognitive response than as a stable individual disposition (Ryazanov & Christenfeld, 2018). The observed three-way interaction illustrates how ideological motivations and employment uncertainty jointly activate this mechanism, reflecting the kind of complex motivational alignment predicted by theories of system justification and threat compensation (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). These findings also contribute to a growing body of research demonstrating that resistance to diversity and inclusion efforts arises not merely from isolated psychological factors, but from configurations of ideological and situational influences that jointly reinforce hierarchy-enhancing interpretations of social differences (Lee, 2023; Tesi et al., 2026).

Limitations and future directions

Despite its contributions, the present study has several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design restricts causal inference. Although our findings generally align with theoretical models of ideologically and uncertainty-driven essentialism, longitudinal or experimental designs could determine whether PEU prospectively intensifies the essentializing effects of BJW and SDO. Such designs would also allow researchers to disentangle whether essentialism precedes changes in diversity-related attitudes emerging as a downstream cognitive response to ideological and contextual pressures. Second, despite controlling for gender, age, and contract type, future studies could investigate intersectional effects by exploring whether members of low-status groups respond differently to PEU when they endorse system-justifying beliefs. Previous research suggests that low-status individuals sometimes internalize hierarchy-enhancing ideologies for system-threatening reasons (Levin et al., 2002). Examining such dynamics within workplace hierarchies would enrich our understanding of how essentialism spreads among employees. In particular, future research could clarify whether essentialist beliefs serve different psychological functions for high- versus low-status group members under conditions of PEU. Third, the study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to social desirability biases, particularly in the context of diversity-related attitudes. Implicit measures or behavioral indicators of inclusive behaviors would provide stronger ecological validity.

Finally, future research could explore organizational-level moderators, such as diversity climate, leadership style, or perceived organizational justice. This would be particularly relevant given that the employees in our sample came from different organizational contexts. The heterogeneity of the sample does not allow conclusions to be drawn within specific organizational settings. Therefore, we focused on individual perceptions of support for workplace diversity. Future research may benefit from examining these relationships within specific organizational contexts, accounting for contextual variability (i.e., shared social norms). Indeed, contextual norms substantially shape the impact of epistemic and ideological motivations (Di Santo et al., 2025; Tesi et al., 2023). For example, employees contribute differently to maintaining inequalities depending on whether they operate in hierarchy-attenuating or hierarchy-enhancing organizational environments (Haley & Sidanius, 2005). From this perspective, organizational-level variables may buffer or amplify the motivational processes identified here, offering further insight into how organizational cultures can amplify or disrupt the ideological-essentialist pathways that undermine inclusion (Tesi, 2025).

Implications for workplace inclusion

Our findings suggest that employees who simultaneously endorse system-justifying and hierarchy-legitimizing beliefs may be particularly inclined to rely on essentialist interpretations when they experience high levels of employment-related uncertainty. These essentialist beliefs, in turn, diminish the perceived value of workplace diversity. From an applied perspective, these patterns highlight the critical role of organizational stability and psychological safety. When organizations experience restructuring, downsizing, or heightened uncertainty, employees may gravitate toward simplified and stereotyped interpretations of social groups (Selenko et al., 2017), especially if they hold ideologies that already legitimize unequal structures. Efforts to promote inclusion may therefore be accompanied by initiatives addressing employees' perceptions of employment-related uncertainty. Reducing such uncertainty may weaken the motivational link between ideological beliefs and rigid social categorization, thereby supporting more inclusive attitudes. Beyond assurances aimed at enhancing employment stability, workplace initiatives may focus on structural and contextual levers such as participatory decision-making processes and the promotion of cooperative intergroup interactions. Although ideological orientations such as SDO and BJW are relatively stable, normative influence (e.g., reinforcing or mitigating inequalities; Haley & Sidanius, 2005), also interacting with epistemic motives (Tesi et al., 2020), may shape workers' behaviors toward inclusiveness (Contu et al., 2023). Finally, our findings show that organizations may benefit from interventions that challenge essentialist assumptions, although these are seldom considered in organizational culture analyses (Nathan, 2015). Research shows that growth mindsets about social categories, emphasizing malleability rather than fixed differences, can reduce stereotyping and improve intergroup relations (Rattan & Dweck, 2010). Incorporating such perspectives into leadership practices may help foster more inclusive organizational environments by promoting the idea that social categories are dynamic and socially constructed rather than natural and immutable.

Conclusion

The present study advances the literature by demonstrating that essentialism, a cognitive lens often overlooked in organizational research, plays a central role in how individuals interpret workplace diversity. By showing that social essentialist beliefs emerge when BJW, SDO, and PEU converge, the present study highlights a multifaceted motivational mechanism through which ideological and contextual forces combine to reduce openness to diversity. These results reinforce the importance of integrating just-world theory, social dominance theory, and threat-compensation frameworks to explain resistance to inclusion under conditions of employment-related uncertainty in organizational contexts.

Ethical Approval
The research was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Committee on Bioethics of the University of Pisa, n. 24/2024.

Data Availability Statement
Data are available upon request from the corresponding author.

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Conflict of Interests
The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Author Contributions
Antonio Aiello: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft preparation; Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Supervision; Alessio Tesi: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft preparation; Writing – review & editing, Project administration; Daniela Di Santo: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft preparation; Writing – review & editing, Project administration.

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During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with language editing, grammar

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