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The Relationship between Racial Identity and Perceived Significance of the Election of President Barack Obama among **African American Mothers**

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Abstract

African American women's racial identity is a major determinant for how they interpret the world around them, yet there is little research examining how specific aspects of racial identity are linked with attitudes about an event that has been highly significant for African-Americans: the election of President Barack Obama. The current study examined the relationship between African American mothers' racial identity and their perceived significance of the election of President Barack Obama as an indicator of reduced systemic and actual racism for African Americans, using a sample of 110 African American mothers residing in a Northeastern metropolitan area. Results revealed that racial centrality and assimilation positively predicted perceived significance of President Obama's election for diminishing racism. Implications and future directions are discussed.

Keywords

African American mothers; Barack Obama; race; racial identity; racism

The election of President Barack Obama is thought to have major implications for African Americans. At the time it occurred, some Americans viewed the election of the first African American president as signifying the end of racial inequality that has persisted for hundreds of years, allowing America to achieve a society that is "post-racial" (Hero, Levy, & Radcliff, 2013). However, others argued that Obama's election has little to no impact on realities of racism and discrimination aimed toward African Americans (Doherty, 2013). With discourse surrounding Obama centering on the potential for his election to improve outcomes for African Americans, it seems particularly important to investigate whether African Americans, indeed, feel that his election signifies diminishing racial discrimination for their community and factors that might predict whether they may think so. One factor that may shed light on how African Americans interpreted the significance of this election is racial

identity. Thus, the present study investigates the link between racial identity and perceived significance of the election of President Barack Obama as a signal of a reduction in racism towards the Black community.

We propose that racial identity might play a role in predicting whether African Americans perceived Obama's election as racially significant. It may be particularly important to consider whether Obama's election signified attenuated racism among African American mothers since the perceptions of the prevalence of prejudice among members of this demographic may carry a heavy psychological toll. African American mothers face the double jeopardy of being subject to racism, sexism, and also sexist racism in which the racism they experience is decidedly gendered, such as when Black women are assumed to take on the roll of the strong Black women, or the Black mammy (Cole, 2009; Sesko & Biernat, 2009). Yet, also, they face the emotional burden of worrying about discrimination towards their children (Brown-Manning, 2013; Bush, 2000). Black mothers report being in a constant state of fear regarding their sons' safety due to racist social forces (Brown-Manning, 2013). Indeed, addressing racism is so central to African American mothers' parenting experiences that a large body of research exists on how they talk to their children about race and prepare them to deal with the discrimination they may face (see Hughes et al., 2006 for review). Thus, pervasive racism towards the Black community affects African American women directly, and also indirectly by affecting their kin, leaving layers of psychological vulnerability to the effects of systemic racism (Peters & Massey, 1983). Because of the salience of racism for African American mothers, and the potential for the election of Obama to signify a reduction in racism, the current study focuses on whether African American mothers' racial identity predicts their perception of the election of Obama as a significant indicator of a reduction in racism towards African Americans.

We adopt Harrell's (2000) broad, multilevel theoretical definition of racism as the backdrop for framing perceptions of racism following Obama's election because it encompasses systemic, structural, and symbolic forms of racism as well as actual race-based discriminatory acts aimed at African Americans and other people of color. Harrell defined racism as "[a] system of dominance, power, and privilege based on racial group designation; rooted in historical oppression of a group defined or perceived by dominant-group members as inferior, deviant, or undesirable" (p. 43), and is expressed through cultural and symbolic images of African Americans in the news media, entertainment, and literature and also, in American political discourse, policy, and practice. Harrell's (2000) definition allows for an investigation of whether Obama's election might signify decreased racism at a structural and symbolic level.

Because of the history of racism within America, many would argue that Obama's position as leader of the world's most powerful democracy has significant meaning for African Americans (Marable, 2009). Moreover, African American mothers with specific racial identity attitudes may construe the influence of Obama's election on racism in specific ways. To examine this, we focus on mothers' racial centrality and ideology, two dimensions of the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI; 1998). We posit that these dimensions are relevant for assessing African American mothers' perceptions of Obama's election as a signal of a reduction in systemic and actual racism.

One dimension of racial identity, centrality, represents the degree to which individuals see the world through the lens of being African American and predicts many aspects of psychological functioning among African Americans (e.g., Burrow & Ong, 2010; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Little research exists that directly addresses the relationship between racial centrality and perceived significance of Obama for mitigating racism, yet some preliminary suppositions are forwarded based on racial centrality literature. Identity theory posits that individuals make choices, in part, based on how these choices relate to social identities (Bobo, 1983; Bobo & Charles, 2009). Accordingly, individuals whose race is central to their self-concept are more attuned to race in the processing of events, and would subsequently place more significance on race-related issues (Burrow, & Ong, 2011). Generally, because of the importance of race to their self-concept, individuals with high centrality perceive discriminatory events more frequently and find them more distressing (Burrow & Ong, 2010; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Thus, it follows that they may be more attuned to uplifting racial events and perceive them as having a significant positive impact as well. Thus, individuals with higher racial centrality may be more likely to interpret Obama's election as significant for reducing racism.

Racial ideology can also offer insight into how African American mothers viewed Obama's election. Ideology is defined as perspectives on how African Americans should act in order to advance their social position (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). African Americans' ideologies develop within the context of their experiences of oppression throughout American history (Sellers et al., 1998). Ideologies influence the development of social relationships within and outside the race, as well as political and economic decisions (Sellers et al., 1998). Because ideologies have relevance for perceptions of how African Americans may elevate their social position, it is thought to have relevance for whether Obama's election signifies increased social capital amongst this group by way of diminished racism.

There are four dimensions of racial ideologies according to the MMRI: nationalist, assimilationist, oppressed minority, and humanist ideologies. Higher nationalism scores indicate an emphasis on the uniqueness of being African American and support for separatist Black institutions. Previous evidence indicated that individuals high in nationalism are less likely to support a leader of Biracial heritage (Sullivan & Arbuthnot, 2009); specifically, they may view his heritage as making him an out-group member with no relevance for Black people. Contrastingly, high assimilation scores indicate an appreciation for the commonalities between African Americans and other groups, and as such, assimilation perspectives may be associated with likelihood of identifying with Obama's racially inclusive political narrative and agenda, as he is representative of a mainstream institution, and is in a position to advance the African American community from within. High oppressed minority scores indicate an emphasis on the common plight between African Americans, other racial minorities, and other oppressed groups. Oppressed minority ideology may be related to viewing Obama's election as significant because he is viewed as an ally of oppressed groups due to his political agenda and his status as a racial minority (Augoustinos & De Garis, 2012). A humanist perspective emphasizes a common humanity that transcends racial difference in decisions about social relationships and politics. Research has indicated that individuals high in humanism tend to discount the importance of race, and

racism, and, thus, they may be less attuned to structural or symbolic racism and the pervasiveness of racial discrimination, similar to colorblind perspectives (Outten et al., 2010; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). As such, humanism may be related to views that Obama's election indicates that American is moving towards a "post-racial society," and that his election is a symbol that the U.S. has embraced humanism at a national scale.

In sum, the existing research points to several hypotheses regarding the relationship between Black mother's racial identity and their perceived significance of President Obama's 2008 election. First, we predicted that racial centrality would be positively associated with the perceived significance of Obama. With respect to the racial ideologies, it was predicted that assimilation, oppressed minority, and humanism perspectives would relate positively to the perceived significance of Obama's election though the underlying rationale for each relationship differs for each ideology. It was predicted that nationalism would have the opposite relationship to the perceived significance of Obama's election for diminishing symbolic and actual racism.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through newspaper and magazine advertisements, and through the study's Facebook page. Materials indicated selection criteria, how to enroll, and contact information. Participants contacted researchers via telephone or email. This study uses a subset of data collected as part of a larger study on parenting. A total of 110 African American mothers, residing in a Mid-Atlantic metropolitan area, participated in the study in 2010 and 2011. The average age was 44.2 (SD = 6.55). There was a range of education levels: 6.4% completed some high school, 6.4% completed high school, 24.5% completed some college, 13.6% had an associate's degree, 15.5% had a bachelors degree, 6.4% completed some graduate school, 15.5% had a master's degree, 1.8% had a professional degree, and .9% had a doctoral degree. The median household income was \$60,000 to \$69,000. However, annual household income ranged from less than \$5,000 to \$100,000 or greater per year. Approximately one-third (31%) of the sample reported incomes of \$100,000 or greater. Approximately 94% of the sample identified as African American, followed by 4% as Afro-Caribbean, and 2% as Biracial/Multiracial. Approximately 81% of the sample was employed. The sample was made up of women who were married (39%), never married (32%), divorced (21%), separated (3.6%), and widowed (3.6%).

Procedure

A pair of trained research assistants completed two-hour home videos with African American mother-adolescent dyads, in which they were videotaped discussing a hypothetical instance of discrimination aimed at the adolescent. Each pair had at least one African American member and 86% of the team was African American. Following the video, participants completed paper-pencil copies of study measures. The study addressed several aspects of general parenting, racial socialization, racial identity, parent-child relationship quality as well as adolescent mental health. Additional details about the study method are reported elsewhere (Smith-Bynum, Davis, Anderson, Franco, & English, in

press). These data draw on responses from the mothers in our sample. Families were compensated \$50 for their participation.

Measures

Racial Identity—Racial identity was measured using selected subscales of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity-Revised (MIBI; for a full description, see Sellers et al., 1997): centrality (8 items), and nationalist (9), assimilationist (9), oppressed minority (9), and humanist (9) ideologies. Regarding ideologies, nationalism measures the degree to which an individual perceives being Black as unique and important. Assimilationist ideology measures the degree to which an individual perceives commonalities between African Americans and members of other racial groups. Oppressed minority refers to the degree to which individuals perceive commonalities between African Americans and other racial minority groups. Humanist refers to the degree to which an individual perceives commonalities between all humans and sees race as generally unimportant. Racial centrality measures the degree to which being Black is important to one's self-concept. To score each of these subscales, values across subscale items were averaged, with scores ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Reliability estimates for each subscale presented by Sellers et al. (1997) and in the current sample were: centrality (.77 in original publication; .76 in current study), assimilation (.73; .71), nationalism (.79; .66), oppressed minority (.76; .69) and humanism (.70; .65). The validity of the measure is supported by expected relationships between levels of centrality, nationalism, and likelihood of taking a Black studies class. Also, assimilationist, humanist, and oppressed minority ideology scores were higher for Black students at predominately White institutions than for those at historically Black universities, whereas nationalism scores were lower (Sellers et al., 1997).

Significance of President Obama as a symbol for reduced racism—Five items, created for the present study, were used to measure the degree to which participants perceived the election of President Barack Obama as a symbol of reduced structural and symbolic racism towards African Americans ($\alpha = .83$). Example items are "The election of President Barack Obama will break down new racial barriers for African Americans in my lifetime," "American society has a more positive view of Black Americans because of Barack Obama," and "The election of President Obama will not change my life in a meaningful way (reverse scored)". Responses were measured on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). An average score was used in analyses. Factor loadings ranged from .67–.83.

Demographic Questionnaire—The demographic questionnaire assessed mother's age, educational background, employment, income, marital history, and race/ethnicity.

Results

Descriptive statistics and bivariate relationships among the variables are presented in Table 1. On average, the sample reported high levels of centrality, assimilationist, and humanist beliefs, whereas oppressed minority and nationalist beliefs were centered around the

midpoint of the scale. Participants perceived Obama's presidency as highly significant for diminishing racism towards African-Americans. At the correlational level, higher rates of centrality and assimilationist ideology were related to increased likelihood of perceiving Obama's election as significant for diminishing structural and actual racism.

To examine relationships between racial identity and significance of Obama, a hierarchical regression was run (see Table 2). Control variables, mother's age, income, and education, were entered as the first step to partial out the influence of these variables. The racial identity predictor variables, including racial centrality, assimilation, nationalism, oppressed minority, and humanist ideologies were entered together in the second step. With all variables entered, racial centrality and racial assimilationist ideology scores uniquely and positively predicted perceived significance of Obama's election, whereas the other ideologies had no effect. Thus, there was partial support for our hypotheses regarding the predicted role of mothers' racial identity variables for the perceived significance of President Obama's election.

Discussion

Findings indicated that, as identity theory predicts, centrality is associated with African American mothers perceiving President Obama's election as significant for diminishing structural and symbolic racism aimed at the Black community (Bobo, 1983). High centrality scores might have predicted perceptions of Obama's election as significant because individuals high in centrality may generally perceive race related events as significant and impactful (Burrow & Ong, 2010; Sellers & Shelton, 2003), as race is an important aspect of their identity. Additionally, higher assimilationist scores related to increased likelihood of perceiving Obama's election as a signal of reduced racism towards African Americans. High assimilationist scores indicate a desire to integrate into mainstream society, and Obama's presidency may signify the ultimate integration of African Americans into the mainstream, and subsequently, a symbol of diminished barriers of discrimination that obstruct integration.

Non-significant relationships with ideologies and significance of Obama might underlie complex reactions to Obama as a racial in-group or out-group member within the African American community. If Obama were perceived as an in-group member, one would expect that African Americans would evaluate his election as significant for signaling reduced racial prejudice for the Black community, as they may perceive his election as a way to ameliorate negative stereotypes of being African American; if Obama was perceived as an out-group member then African Americans might feel that his election has no relevance for racial discrimination within the Black community. There seems to be a lack of consensus over whether Obama is perceived as an in-group or out-group member, and research has not yet clearly determined how racial identity may influence his categorization as either (Sinyangwe, 2012). Obama's clear roots in the African American community, his mobilization of African American voters, and his casting as the "Black" candidate might credit his Black identity, of which his mixed race heritage and inclusive political agenda might serve to discredit (Bobo & Charles, 2009). Thus, initial exploratory hypotheses that nationalism might contribute to perspectives of Obama as an out-group member, and

oppressed minority ideologies might work in the opposite way, might warrant further investigation to better explain non-significant relationships. As for humanism, this ideology may contribute to beliefs that Obama's race is not important in the first place, or that Black people no longer have any significant racial barriers to overcome, and thus, Obama's election has a neutral impact.

The perceived significance of the election as a symbol for reduced symbolic and actual racism aimed at African Americans may have a number of implications on African American mothers' lives. The psychological toll of weariness and vigilance for racial discrimination for themselves and their children may be somewhat allayed (Clark, Anderson, Clark & Williams, 1997; Outten et al., 2010). African American mothers high in centrality or assimilation who were foregoing opportunities and environments because they expected prejudice may be more open to pursuing these opportunities. However, perceiving Obama's election as a significant indicator of reduced symbolic racism may also have negative implications. Perceiving Obama's election as forecasting changes in the American racial system may make African American mothers lower their guard in environments that continue to be racially unsafe for them and their children (Brown & Tracy, 2012; Neblett, Rivas-Drake, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012). Mothers high in centrality or assimilation may have been less vigilant about racially socializing their children to navigate racist social environments, leaving Black families more vulnerable and unprepared for discriminatory experiences (Lesane-Brown, 2006; Neblett et al., 2012).

The current study possessed some limitations. The sample was cross-sectional and directionality cannot be addressed. The sample included higher household income for African American women, compared to national averages, perhaps because many participants inhabited dual income households (Economic Policy Institute, 2011). Findings cannot be generalized to childless African American women, or those of a lower socioeconomic status. Consistent with past research, the reliability of the MIBI was somewhat low (Sellers et al., 1997; Smalls, White, Chavous & Sellers, 2007). The outcome measure of interest, significance of Obama for decreasing racism, did not go through an instrument development process, and thus, may possess issues of validity. An additional limitation is that the lag time between Obama's election and the data collection may have left the election less salient in people's minds or else, tertiary events, happening in the interim, may have influenced participants' appraisal of Obama's election.

Considering Obama's gender, future research might address implications of Obama's election for perceptions of racism amongst childless Black women and men or amongst Black fathers given their role in racial socialization (McHale, Crouter, Kim, Davis, & Dotterer, 2006). Furthermore, it would be interesting to investigate how Black people's racial identity predicts perceptions of other events impacting the community, such as recent publicizing of instances of police brutality towards Black boys (Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta & DiTomasso, 2014). Future studies could further unravel the complicated reactions to Barack Obama within the African American community and discern the degree to which he is perceived as a racial in-group or out-group member. Additionally, it would be worthwhile to investigate how gendered racial identities might predict appraisal of Obama,

as an intersectional approach might better reflect participants' lived realities (Cole, 2009; Gay & Tate, 1998).

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Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among key variables (N = 110)

Variable	M	M SD 1	-	7	8	4	w	9
1. Centrality	5.05	5.05 1.09						
2. Nationalism	3.97 .87	.87	.27					
3. Assimilation	5.17 .86	98.	.23 *	05				
4. Oppressed Minority	4.64 .88	88.	.29**	26** .32**	.32**			
5. Humanism	5.34 .82	.82	17	29	.29** .38** .05	.05		
6. Significance of President Obama $$ 5.36 $$ 1.25 $$.40 ** .10	5.36	1.25	.40	.10	.32** .15 .01	.15	.01	

Note. * p < .05. * p < .01

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Table 2

Summary of hierarchical regression analysis of racial identity as a predictor of significance of President Barack Obama (N = 110)

Variable	В	SE B	Ð	t	đ	R	R^2	F	\mathbb{R}^2	\boldsymbol{F}
Step 1					3, 93	.12	.01	.43	.01	.52
Age	02	.02	11	98						
Income	03	90.	08	63						
Education	.04	.07	.07	.54						
Step 2					8,88	.51	.26	3.86**	.25	3.43
Age	01	.02	07	67						
Income	07	.04	22	-1.93						
Education	.00	.07	.07	.59						
Centrality	4.	.13	.37	3.51*						
Nationalism	01	.15	00	04						
Assimilation	.45	.16	.31	2.75*						
Oppressed Minority	01	.02	08	75						
Humanism	01	.02	04	33						

Note. $\label{eq:potential} \begin{array}{l} * \\ p < .01 \end{array}$