Reports

The effect of Obama saliency on individual-level racial bias: Silver bullet or smokescreen?☆

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A B S T R A C T
President Obama’s election has been construed as a potentially positive force for intergroup relations, but this issue has not been previously addressed experimentally. In experiment 1, conducted 4–5 months after the election, White participants were primed with either President Obama or nature before completing a variety of race-related measures. Results indicated that priming Obama did not influence implicit racial bias or internal motivation to control prejudice. However, consistent with exemplar and symbolic racism theories, participants primed with President Obama expressed greater agreement with the tenets of symbolic racism and were more reluctant to accept the possibility that they personally harbored subtle racial bias. Experiment 2, conducted 21 months after the election, replicated the Obama effects from experiment 1 and showed that priming another Black exemplar (Oprah) also increased symbolic racism. Results suggest that highly successful Black exemplars currently serve as a smokescreen for symbolic and subtle racial biases. © 2010 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Since the election of President Obama, people have debated questions that begged to be asked when the first Black man became president of the United States. What does this mean for race relations in the United States? Will President Obama’s historic achievement encourage positive intergroup attitudes? Many people have expressed hope that his presidency would spur positive intergroup relations (Newport, 2008). However, questions with a different focus have also surfaced. For example, what does Mr. Obama’s election imply about current levels of racism in the United States? Is America now beyond racism, and is President Obama an emblem of our newfound post-racialism? In the event that President Obama triggers this line of thought, attitudes and motivations toward Black people may take a turn for the negative.

The present research investigated what kinds of race-relevant attitudinal and motivational effects follow from making President Obama salient to Whites. Although prior research has investigated levels of implicit racial bias (Plant et al., 2009; Schmidt & Nosek, 2010) and views on race-relevant policies (Kaiser, Drury, Spalding, Cheryan, & O’Brien, 2009) in relation to Mr. Obama’s election, none of this research included experimental manipulations (leaving causal conclusions ambiguous), and all were conducted around election time.

Our aim was to provide an experimental test of the effects of “Obama saliency” across a broad range of individual-level racial measures. In addition, whereas our first experiment (conducted 4–5 months post-election) focused on the effects of priming President Obama only, the second experiment (conducted 21 months post-election) also examined the effects of priming another highly successful Black exemplar (i.e., Oprah). The findings therefore speak more generally to understanding how successful Black exemplars influence racial attitudes and motivation.

Our overarching working hypothesis was that, even as people applaud Mr. Obama’s presidency as a milestone, they will be increasingly prone to judging other Blacks by his standard and to interpret race-linked differences as personal failings of Black people. This working hypothesis derives from the joint consideration of exemplar-based models of information processing and symbolic racism theory, and it leads to predictions that Obama saliency will have unsavory rather than positive outcomes.

Possible paradoxical effects of Obama’s exemplar(y) status?

Exemplar-based models of information processing hold that people’s attitudes toward social groups are based on the subset of exemplars that are salient when attitudes are assessed (e.g., Smith & Zárate, 1992). When extreme and specific exemplars are primed, they are used as comparison standards and result in contrasting rather than assimilative effects (e.g., Herr, 1986; Herr, Sherman, & Fazio, 1983; Schwarz & Bless, 1992; Stapel, Koomen, & van der Pligt, 1997). As president of the United States, Mr. Obama serves as a highly

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successful Black exemplar, and his exemplary status may lead people to evaluate other Blacks negatively in contrast to him.

We expected the negative effects of Obama priming to be manifested in symbolically racist beliefs. Symbolic racism theory (e.g., Kinder & Sears, 1981; Sears & Kinder, 1971; Sears, 1988) was generated to capture continuing antipathy toward Blacks following positive changes that occurred during the Civil Rights Movement and its aftermath. Symbolic racism is manifested in four themes: (1) racial discrimination is now behind us and does not present an obstacle to Blacks, (2) continuing disadvantages among Blacks reflect an unwillingness to work hard enough, (3) resentments toward Blacks for pushing for greater equality, and (4) perceptions of undeserved advantages that give Blacks more than they deserve (e.g., Henry & Sears, 2002; Kinder & Sears, 1981; McConahay & Hough, 1976). We expected that, with President Obama in the oval office, precisely these types of anti-Black beliefs would be fueled.

Results by Kaiser et al. (2009) are suggestive with regard to this prediction. They found that, compared to data collected 10 days prior to Obama’s victory, participants surveyed a week after the election reported greater societal progress toward racial equality, greater agreement that people who work hard can get ahead and less support for policies for addressing racial inequality. Although this pattern of findings is consistent with our thinking, our research is designed to go beyond examining what may be a transient afterglow 10 days after the election by collecting data across longer periods of time (i.e., 4–5 months and 21 months following the election). Also, Kaiser et al. compared pre- vs. post-election beliefs, and any number of influences (e.g., media reports at the time) may have played a role. Finally, their focus was on perceptions of racial progress and policy support, whereas the present research focused on individual-level racial attitudes and motivation.

We also examined whether Obama saliency would affect participants’ willingness to recognize subtle racial biases in themselves. A hallmark of contemporary prejudice is its often subtle, nonconscious form (e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995), and a critical first step in reducing the influence of implicit intergroup biases can involve being aware of them (Monteith, Arthur, & Flynn, 2010; Monteith, Mark, & Ashburn-Nardo, 2010). Obama’s presidency may not only lead people to view societal prejudice as a thing of the past, but people may also be reticent to recognize bias in themselves. In other words, Obama saliency may lead people to deny their personal proneness to subtle racial biases.

Possible positive outcomes of Obama saliency?

We also considered the possibility that Obama saliency would inspire people in more positive ways. First, we examined the effects of priming President Obama on people’s self-reported internal motivation to control their prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998) in the event that Obama’s positive example would increase people’s motivation to respond to Blacks in nonprejudiced ways. Second, we assessed participants’ implicit prejudice toward Blacks to determine whether President Obama’s positive example would be sufficient to increase the positivity of implicit racial associations. Two previous investigations are relevant to this point. Plant et al. (2009) found that participants’ implicit racial bias around election time was low (relative to informal comparisons with samples collected prior to Obama’s candidacy), and accessibility of Mr. Obama correlated negatively with implicit bias. This latter finding relates well to studies showing that increasing the accessibility of positive Black exemplars can reduce implicit prejudice (e.g., Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001). However, Schmidt and Nosek (2010) found little fluctuation in implicit racial bias in the analysis of a large, heterogeneous web-based sample across a 2.5 year period surrounding the 2008 election. These authors argued that Obama saliency was insufficient for shifting implicit associations that are established early in life (Baron & Banaji, 2006) and are repeatedly reinforced (Rudman, 2004). Beyond the inconsistent results, note that neither of these prior investigations involved experimental manipulations of Obama saliency, leaving the results open to alternative interpretations. Our experimental research, conducted shortly after the election and nearly two years later, provides a clearer picture of the effect of President Obama on implicit racial associations.

Experiment 1

Method

Participants

One hundred three (65% male, 97% White) non-Black students participated in return for partial fulfillment of an introductory psychology course requirement.

Procedure

Participants were recruited four to five months after Mr. Obama’s election. Up to eight people participated at a time, with each person situated at an individual computer station and randomly assigned to an experimental condition. After signing informed consent, participants were told that the purpose of the study was to create materials for a new college magazine. They would first design magazine covers, and they were given a blank template with a photo and a list of words. Participants in the Obama prime condition were shown a picture of Obama and given the following words: cultivate, innovative, steered, reliable, Black, and President. Participants in the control prime condition received a picture of a canyon and the same word list, except “canyon” and “sandstone” were substituted for “Black” and “President.” Participants were instructed to use the words provided along with any other words to create two taglines that would appeal to a college audience.

Then participants were told that the magazine creators were interested in bringing a variety of issues to the attention of college students and they would not shy away from “hard questions.” Participants were informed that they would complete some confidential questionnaires that writers would use in future stories about “what students really think” about various issues. Participants believed that they had been randomly assigned to answer questions related to a particular topic and that other students had other topics.

At this time, participants completed the internal motivation to respond without prejudice scale (IMS; Plant & Devine, 1998), which assesses the extent to which people are motivated to respond without prejudice based on their personal values and standards. 2 Ratings were made on seven-point scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Next participants completed the 8-item Symbolic Racism 2000 scale (SR2K; Henry & Sears, 2002), which taps into the four tenets of symbolic racism.

Next the priming manipulation was refreshed. Participants completed two more taglines using the words “develop,” “remarkable,” “utilized,” “compelling” and also either “Black” and “President” (Obama priming condition) or “canyon” and “sandstone” (control priming condition), along with any other words they chose.

Then the experimenter explained that participants would take a test of unconscious racial attitudes. Participants were told that the magazine writers were interested in making these unconscious attitudes a focus of an upcoming magazine issue but first wanted

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2 We also included Plant and Devine’s (1998) external motivation to control prejudice (EMS) items. Experiment 1 showed marginally lower EMS with Obama than nature priming, p = .09. However, the priming effect was negligible in experiment 2, p = .96. Thus, bringing highly successful Black exemplars to mind does not appear to reliably affect EMS.

3 We modified a few of the original SR2K items so that all used 7-point agreement scales.
feedback on what people thought of the test. Participants then completed the Black/White IAT (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). The standard racial IAT procedure was used (e.g., Greenwald et al., 1998), in which participants’ ease of pairing White faces and pleasant exemplars (e.g., diamond) and Black faces and unpleasant exemplars (e.g., sickness) is assessed relative to the ease of making the opposite pairings. We included a response window of 750 ms to encourage fast responding.

After completing the IAT, participants received fixed feedback via the computer screen indicating that “Your data suggest an automatic preference for Whites compared to Blacks,” and then reactions to the IAT were assessed as indicators of the extent to which participants denied being prone to subtle racial bias. Specifically, perceived validity of the IAT was assessed with three items rated on seven-point scales (e.g., “Do you feel that the test was valid?”), followed by an open-ended item asking participants to explain why they did or did not believe that test was valid.

Finally, participants indicated 1) whether they voted in the recent Presidential election and 2) either who they voted for or who they would have voted for. Participants were probed for suspicion about our cover story (no one was suspicious) and were fully debriefed and dismissed.

Results

Voting preference

Sixty-eight percent of participants indicated that they voted, with fifty-nine percent voting for Obama, 31% for McCain, and 10% for “other.” The distribution was similar among non-voters. We created a Voting Preference variable (0 = for Obama; 1 = not for Obama). Crossing this variable with the priming manipulation created cells including between 16 and 36 participants. We included this variable in analyses to test whether the effects of our priming manipulation depended on participants’ voting preference.

Overview of main analyses

Each dependent variable was predicted a 2 (priming: Obama vs. nature) × 2 (voting preference: Obama vs. not Obama) between-participant analyses of variance. Gender was excluded from the analyses after finding initially that it was not associated with significant effects. Descriptive statistics as a function of priming for all dependent measures is shown in Table 1.

Symbolic racism scores

Analysis of the SR2K index (α = .70) revealed the expected significant main effect for priming, such that participants in the Obama priming condition scored higher than participants in the nature priming condition, F(1,99) = 6.32, p < .05, d = .41 (see Table 1). The voting preference main effect was also significant, such that Obama supporters scored lower on the SR2K index (M = 3.93, SD = .78) than non-supporters (M = 4.35, SD = .89), F(1,99) = 5.85, p < .05, d = .50. Importantly, priming and voting preference did not interact (p = .75), which indicates that bringing President Obama’s success to mind increased symbolic racism among supporters and non-supporters alike.

Internal motivation to control bias

The five items concerning participants’ internal motivation to control prejudice toward Blacks were averaged to create the IMS index (α = .83). The ANOVA yielded no significant effects (p < .19). Of greater interest and as shown in Table 1, internal motivation differed little across the two priming conditions, F(1,99) = .03, p = .86.

Implicit racial bias

Greenwald, Nosek and Banaji’s (2003) scoring algorithm was used to compute IAT scores, with higher D scores reflecting more negative associations with Blacks relative to Whites. Overall, participants showed the usual IAT bias favoring Whites over Blacks (M = .60, SD = .41), t(93) = 14.12, p < .001. The ANOVA predicting IAT scores did not reveal any significant differences, p < .11. Thus, making Obama’s presidency salient was not sufficient for reducing participants’ implicit racial bias.

Denial of personal, subtle prejudice

Our next step was to determine whether priming Obama influenced the extent to which participants believed their IAT performance pointed to racial bias, which was examined in two ways. First, the three IAT validity ratings were combined (α = .75) and analyzed as a function of priming condition and voting preference. We controlled for participants’ IAT D scores because people with greater implicit bias are more likely to believe that the IAT reflects racial bias (Monteith, Voils, & Ashburn-Nardo, 2001). Our results showed a marginally significant effect for this covariate, F(1,89) = 2.95, p = .09. Importantly, the main effect for priming condition was significant, F(1,89) = 4.42, p < .05, d = .46. As shown in Table 1, participants primed with Obama were significantly less likely to view the IAT as a valid indicator of racial bias compared to participants primed with nature.

Written responses (provided by all but three participants) to the open-ended item concerning the validity of the IAT were rated for extent of negative emotion expressed by a judge who was unaware of experimental condition on a scale of 1 (no negative emotion) to 5 (strong negative emotion; e.g., “I think this test is total BS and I would like the creator to go F themselves …”). A second judge rated 15% of the responses, which yielded strong reliability (r = .91). A 2 (priming) × 2 (voting preference) ANOVA using IAT scores as a covariate revealed a significant main effect for priming, F(1,86) = 6.25, p < .05, d = .43. Participants who were primed with President Obama displayed a more fervent dismissal of the IAT’s validity than participants in the nature prime condition. We also obtained a main effect for voting preference, F(1,87) = 3.98, p < .05, d = .18, such that Obama supporters expressed more negative emotion (M = 3.24, SD = .88) than Obama non-supporters (M = 3.08, SD = .89).

Discussion

Experiment 1 indicated that priming President Obama did not increase Whites’ motivation to avoid prejudice or decrease their biased implicit racial associations. Rather, participants who had recently thought about President Obama were more likely to endorse symbolically racist beliefs than participants in the control priming condition. This pattern is consistent with theoretically derived predictions that President Obama serves as a highly successful Black exemplar against which other Blacks are compared negatively in terms of the beliefs captured by symbolic racism. In addition, participants primed with Obama perceived IAT feedback suggesting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent variable</th>
<th>Priming</th>
<th>Mr. Obama</th>
<th>Nature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic racism (SR2K)</td>
<td>4.27 (1.73)</td>
<td>3.92 (95)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal motivation to control Prejudice</td>
<td>5.33 (1.27)</td>
<td>5.15 (1.23)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IAT D scores</td>
<td>.58 (.44)</td>
<td>.61 (.38)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validity of IAT ratings</td>
<td>2.77 (1.60)</td>
<td>3.47 (1.43)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotion</td>
<td>3.33 (.83)</td>
<td>2.96 (.89)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Means sharing a subscript within rows differ significantly at p < .05 or smaller. Means for validity of IAT ratings and negative emotion are adjusted for the IAT D covariate.

4 IAT data were eliminated for nine and six participants in experiments 1 and 2, respectively, because they responded faster than 300 ms on more than 10% of the IAT trials (see Greenwald et al., 2003).
they were prone to subtle racial bias as more inaccurate and invalid than participants in the control condition, and they more passionately denied the suggestion that their IAT performance reflected racial bias.

In experiment 2, we sought to bolster our findings by determining whether they could be replicated after nearly two years had elapsed since President Obama’s election. Would our experiment 1 findings be fleeting, suggesting they were tied to the novelty of President Obama’s election? In addition, experiment 2 examined the extent to which our findings were specific to priming President Obama or extended to the priming of another highly successful Black person, Oprah.

Approximately 15 years ago, Bodenhausen, Schwarz, Bless, and Wanke (1995) examined the effects of priming well-known and positive Black exemplars (Oprah and Michael Jordan) on the item “Discrimination against Blacks is no longer a problem in the United States.” Bodenhausen et al. found that participants expressed less agreement with this statement when primed with positive Black exemplars than when control primes were used (e.g., Julia Roberts). Their explanation was that priming positive Black figures produces favorable intergroup attitudes, and these attitudes are used as a heuristic resulting in more favorable group-related beliefs. These results are inconsistent with our theoretical analysis and findings. They raise the question of whether our findings reflect unique “President Obama” effects or whether priming another highly successful Black person like Oprah would have the same effects in contemporary times.

**Experiment 2**

**Method**

**Participants**

Eighty (52% male) White participants participated in return for partial fulfillment of an introductory psychology course requirement. Data from one participant were deleted due to failure to follow instructions.

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited 21 months after Mr. Obama’s election. They were randomly assigned to the Obama, Oprah or nature priming condition. The cover story, procedure and materials were identical to those in experiment 1, except for the addition of the Oprah condition. The unique words provided for the taglines in the Oprah condition were “Black” and “TV host.”

**Results**

**Overview of main analyses**

No significant effects were obtained with participant gender, so we collapsed across gender in the reported analyses. Thus, the dependent variables were predicted in a series of univariate ANOVAs with priming (Obama vs. nature vs. Oprah) as the independent variable. Table 2 provides descriptive information for all dependent variables as a function of priming.

**Symbolic racism scores**

The ANOVA performed on SR2K scores ($\alpha = .69$) revealed a significant main effect for priming, $F(2,76) = 9.10$, $p < .001$. As in experiment 1, participants in the Obama priming condition expressed significantly greater agreement with the symbolic racism items than participants in the nature priming condition, $t(50) = 3.10$, $p < .01$, $d = .87$. In addition, symbolic racism scores were significantly higher among participants primed with Oprah than in the nature prime condition, $t(53) = 3.93$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.05$. The Obama and Oprah conditions did not differ significantly, $t(49) = 1.18$, $p > .20$, $d = .32$.

**Internal motivation to control bias**

Consistent with experiment 1, analysis of the IMS index ($\alpha = .88$) did not yield a significant priming effect, $p = .14$.

**Implicit racial bias**

Analysis of IAT D scores showed the usual racial bias favoring Whites over Blacks, $M = .58$, $SD = .42$, $t(72) = 11.88$, $p < .001$. These scores did not vary significantly as a function of priming condition, $F(2,70) = .05$, $p > .94$.

**Denial of personal, subtle prejudice**

The three ratings relevant to the IAT’s validity ($\alpha = .82$) were submitted to an ANCOVA with IAT D scores as a covariate. There was a marginally significant main effect for priming condition, $F(2,69) = 2.82$, $p = .07$. Replicating experiment 1, participants in the Obama priming condition reported that the IAT was significantly less indicative of subtle racial bias compared to participants in the nature prime condition, $F(1,45) = 5.32$, $p < .03$, $d = .68$. Participants primed with Oprah similarly dismissed the validity of the IAT, with scores comparable to the Obama priming condition, $F(1,45) = 82$, $p < .37$, $d = .28$. However, the comparison between the Oprah and nature priming conditions did not reach significance, $F(1,47) = 2.15$, $p < .15$, although the effect size bordered on medium, $d = .42$.

Participants’ responses (minus two who wrote nothing) to the open-ended item concerning the validity of the IAT were coded as in experiment 1 (interjudge $r = .92$). An ANCOVA, covarying participants’ IAT scores, did not reveal a significant effect for priming condition, $F(2,67) = 1.80$, $p > .18$. However, as shown in Table 2, participants in the Obama priming condition reacted with stronger negative emotion about the IAT than participants in the nature prime condition. This effect was marginally significant, $F(1,43) = 3.75$, $p = .059$, with an effect size that was larger than in experiment 1 ($d = .43$ and $d = .52$ for experiments 1 and 2, respectively). Participants primed with Oprah expressed comparable levels of negative emotion compared to the Obama priming condition, $F(1,44) = 48$, $p > .49$, $d = .21$. However, the comparison between the Oprah and nature priming conditions was not significant, $F(1,46) = 1.38$, $p = .25$, $d = .30$.

**Discussion**

Our replication of experiment 1, nearly two years after the election, suggests that even after people had time to become accustomed to having a Black president, his image continued to foster agreement with the tenets of symbolic racism and reluctance to see one’s responses as indicative of subtle racial bias. Priming Oprah also resulted in an increased endorsement of symbolic racism. These findings run contrary to the results of Bodenhausen et al. (1995) and imply that, in
contemporary times, highly successful Black exemplars encourage people to believe that lack of personal initiative and hard work—rather than discriminatory influences—explain racial disparities.

The effect of priming Oprah was less conclusive for the measures concerning denial of personal, subtle prejudice, as participants' scores fell between the Obama and nature priming conditions but did not differ significantly from either comparison condition. Although necessarily speculative, a plausible explanation relates to the focus of the measures. Symbolic racism focuses on beliefs about Blacks, and finding that both President Obama and Oprah exacerbate these beliefs is consistent with the idea that their success is contrasted with Blacks as a group. The measures concerning reactions to the IAT focused on beliefs about the self and the nature of President Obama's connection to American people may play a role here. Specifically, the fact that Mr. Obama is president may be taken as evidence that American people, including the self, do not harbor prejudiced biases in relation to Blacks. In contrast, Oprah has a less direct link to people's self-images.

General discussion

The present research tested the effects of Obama saliency on a variety of individual-level racial measures. Experiment 2 also included an Oprah priming condition to examine the extent to which our findings generalized to another highly successful Black exemplar. Our results indicated that priming President Obama was not sufficient to reduce the level of implicit racial bias favoring Whites over Blacks (i.e., IAT bias) or to increase participants' internal motivation to control their prejudice, nor did priming Oprah have these favorable intergroup outcomes. Rather, bringing both President Obama and Oprah to mind increased participants' agreement with symbolically racist beliefs. In addition, Obama saliency caused participants to be less open to the possibility that they personally harbored subtle racial biases.

The rise in symbolic racism associated with priming President Obama and Oprah is consistent with our hypothesis that highly successful Black exemplars nowadays are contrasted with Blacks as a group, which fosters symbolically racist beliefs. Symbolic racism theory was initially designed to explain racial attitudes following the Civil Rights Movement (e.g., Sears & Kinder, 1971; Kinder & Sears, 1981). As Henry and Sears (2002) summarized, “If the civil rights era had ended discrimination, blacks’ continuing disadvantage had to be due to shortcomings among blacks themselves; and if that were true, both their demands for special attention and any special gains were illegitimate” (p. 256). Our findings suggest that symbolic racism may now be on the rise again, with examples of highly successful Blacks leading to beliefs that discrimination is a bygone and persisting inequities can only be explained by personal weaknesses of Blacks.

Importantly, harboring such sentiments can have ripple effects, such as opposition to programs and policies aimed at increasing equality in outcomes. Along these lines, we believe that Kaiser et al.’s (2009) findings are telling: participants were less supportive of policies addressing racial injustice just following Mr. Obama’s election than just prior to it. Our finding that priming President Obama increased symbolically racist beliefs 21 months after his election suggests that these results are unlikely to be uniquely tied to the election context but rather that a similar ripple effect on policy attitudes would likely be observed at present.

Our findings are inconsistent with Bodenhausen et al.’s (1995) findings that priming successful Black exemplars led to a greater recognition of continued discrimination (Bodenhausen et al., 1995). What is activated in connection with particular exemplars may well change depending on the larger social and political context at the time. Perhaps the ascent of a Black man to the presidency resulted in a shift such that other highly successful Black exemplars now fuel symbolically racist attitudes. Although the present research cannot isolate what factors are responsible for the “Oprah shift,” the present findings clearly point to the anti-egalitarian attitudes that currently result from priming highly successful Black exemplars.

Our findings also underscore that what is activated by particular exemplars depends upon unique qualities of the exemplars (see also Bodenhausen et al., 1995). Whereas Obama saliency caused participants to be significantly more likely to deny personal, subtle prejudice relative to control priming, this effect was not significant for Oprah priming. Future research is needed to pinpoint why this occurred, but we suspect that Oprah was less likely to reinforce participants' non-prejudiced self-image. Mr. Obama's link to our participants is that he is their president, and having a Black president seems likely to convince participants that they are not prejudiced. This reasoning bears resemblance to moral credentialing, whereby behaving in nonprejudiced ways subsequently reduces people's concerns with appearing prejudiced (Monin & Miller, 2001).

The finding that making President Obama salient decreased people's willingness to recognize subtle racial bias in themselves is very important given the current “age of implicit bias.” Rather than being expressed blatantly, contemporary prejudice often results from subtle racial biases (e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004) that lead to discriminatory outcomes (Dovidio et al., 2002; Penner et al., 2010). Being aware of subtle racial bias is important for attempting to control its deleterious effects (e.g., Monteith, Arthur, & Flynn, 2010). Our findings suggest that, rather than facilitating this process of prejudice reduction, President Obama's image is likely to thwart prejudice reduction by convincing people that they do not harbor subtle racial biases.

Moreover, we did not find that exposure to highly successful Black exemplars reduced implicit racial bias. Our findings provide stronger conclusions about the effects of Obama saliency on implicit racial associations than past research. Whereas Plant et al. (2009) argued that Obama saliency was associated with relatively low levels of implicit racial bias around election time, Schmidt and Nosek (2010) found no significant fluctuation in implicit racial associations surrounding the election. Perhaps the social context of the election had the power to temporarily shift implicit racial associations in Plant et al.’s samples (but see Schmidt and Nosek, 2010, alternative explanations); nonetheless, our findings indicate that Obama’s saliency alone does not have this effect. Our findings are more consistent with the argument that a single exemplar's positive attributes are unlikely to override seasoned race-based associations (Baron & Banaji, 2006; Rudman, 2004; see also Joy-Gaba & Nosek, 2010).

Whether the present results would generalize beyond our college sample is important to examine. We suspect that the results would be even more pronounced in the general population, where liberal values and an emphasis on diversity are not typically as salient as in college settings. Determining whether the observed effects are maintained as time goes on will also be important. Perhaps they will persist only as long as Mr. Obama is president. Alternatively, the fact that America has had a Black president may become a default disclaimer that discourages the recognition and rectification of bias. Regardless, awareness of this phenomenon and remedies for it are needed.

In conclusion, the present findings suggest that the saliency of President Obama promotes the idea that Blacks' progress is tied to individual striving and not discrimination and it causes people to be more likely to deny personal, subtle racial bias. We recognize that the election of a Black president represents a pivotal step and serves as a major historical marker of racial progress. However, our findings have the disturbing implication that rather than being a silver bullet for

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6 In Effron, Cameron, and Monin (2009), participants who had just expressed support for Obama appeared less concerned about appearing prejudiced, relative to control participants, but merely seeing a picture of Obama did not have this effect. Although we observed Obama priming effects even though participants had not just expressed support, note that Effron et al.’s (2009) research was conducted prior to Obama's election. We maintain that, after Obama became president, he can reinforce people's non-prejudiced self-image regardless of expressed support.
improving racial attitudes and motivations. Mr. Obama's election may—at least in the short run—serve as a smokescreen for the continued and perhaps even heightened practice of societal and personal discrimination.

References


