

## **Isolating the Racial Component of Symbolic Racism**

Researchers have claimed that symbolic racism is "a new expression of prejudice that has developed in the United States...based on the belief that blacks violate key American values, particularly the idea of individualism" (Henry and Sears 2008: 111). Research has established that symbolic racism predicts white opposition to policies designed to help blacks (Tarman and Sears 2005), white opposition to black political candidates (Ford et al. 2010), and ostensibly nonracial white behavior, such as gun ownership (O'Brein et al. 2013). Since 1986, the American National Election Studies (ANES) has included on its time series surveys four items measuring symbolic racism, with respondents asked to agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with each statement:

1. Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.
2. Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.
3. Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve.
4. It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.

Researchers using these items face an inferential issue because the items conflate anti-black bias with nonracial principles: for instance, a person who agrees that blacks should work their way up without special favors might dislike blacks, dislike special favors for identity groups, or dislike both blacks and special favors for identity groups. This intuition has been corroborated by factor analyses that indicate that "symbolic racism is made up about equally of racial prejudice and general conservatism" (Sears and Henry 2003: 271).

Some researchers have attempted to use statistical control to isolate the racial component of symbolic racism: "...any analyses done with measures of symbolic racism should be done controlling for political conservatism in order to minimize the likelihood of spurious associations being misdiagnosed as effects of racism" (Pasek et al. 2009: 949). The typical symbolic racism research design has thus been to place symbolic racism into a regression along with measures of conservatism and to interpret the residual effect of symbolic racism as anti-black bias. But there is little evidence regarding whether such a research design works and – if so – *which* control measures are necessary to isolate the racial component of symbolic racism.

One way to test whether statistical control sufficiently dilutes the nonracial component of symbolic racism is to test whether symbolic racism correlates with variables that tap conservatism but have no racial component: for example, Rabinowitz et al. (2009) presented evidence from the 1990 and 2000 ANES on the discriminant validity of symbolic racism measures, but the dependent variables used might have been too closely tied to race to provide a meaningful test of symbolic racism's discriminant validity, given that attitudes about nonracial policies included possibly-racialized variables such as opposition to aid to the poor and opposition to food stamps.

Kinder and Sanders (1996) provided a more thorough test of symbolic racism's discriminant validity by using dependent variables that lacked an obvious connection to race; using data from the 1986 and 1992 ANES studies, regressions that included controls for attitudes about limited government and equal opportunity indicated that symbolic racism correlated at a statistically significant level with attitudes about family leave and childcare policies, attitudes about parental consent and spousal notification for abortion, attitudes about gays in the military and gay adoption, attitudes about military spending and military interventions in Central America, and attitudes about the US stance toward the Soviet Union (p. 122). Kinder and Sanders (1996) stated

that "[the effects of symbolic racism on foreign policy attitudes] suggest, once again, that resentment toward blacks is part of a broader system of beliefs and feelings about social difference in general" (p. 124). But an alternate explanation is that symbolic racism correlated to these non-racial dependent variables because statistical control did not eliminate the conservative component of symbolic racism. This possible inability of statistical control to isolate the racial component of symbolic racism invites an experimental solution to (1) assess whether the widely-used research design of symbolic racism research isolates the racial component of symbolic racism, and (2) pilot a more efficient method to measure symbolic racism that permits clearer inferences and does not require surveys to include measures of multiple control variables.

### **Study Design**

Participants in the proposed project will be randomly assigned so that members of one group receive the "standard" symbolic racism items listed above and members of the other group receive equivalent "adjusted" items purged of reference to blacks; each group will receive a fifth item intended to provide a more equivalent comparison for item 2. This type of experiment has already been conducted in a more limited form: Sniderman and Carmines (1997: 136-138) reported results from a survey experiment in which some respondents received the item about blacks working their way up without special favors and other respondents received the same item but with "blacks" replaced by "new immigrants from Europe"; relative response values for white respondents were 79% agreement that blacks should work their way up and 79% agreement that new immigrants from Europe should work their way up. Moore (2012) suggested testing for racial bias using symbolic racism items by replacing "blacks" with "the poor" and "whites" with "the wealthy," but respondents might perceive the distance in outcomes between blacks and

whites to be different than the distance in outcomes between the poor and the wealthy. The proposed replacement for the sample – limited to white non-Hispanic respondents – is to replace "blacks" and "whites" with "poor whites" and "middle-class whites."

I plan to pre-register research design protocols if the proposal is accepted, but a brief description of proposed protocols follows. To assess the degree to which responses are driven by the race of the subject of an item, means for the standard and adjusted symbolic racism items will be compared to each other using a t-test for each item and for a scale of the four items, with alternate symbolic racism item 2 replacing standard item 2 in a second scale. These symbolic racism scales will also be used to predict responses to dependent variable items and to a scale of dependent variable items measuring attitudes toward policies designed to help blacks; the regression coefficient for an adjusted symbolic racism item will be subtracted from the corresponding coefficient for the standard symbolic racism item, to assess the size of the racial bias in responses to these items: suppose that coefficients predicting opposition to affirmative action are statistically different and have respective values of 2.5 and 1.2 for the standard and adjusted symbolic racism scales; this indicates that a one-unit increase on the symbolic racism scale corresponds to a predicted point estimate of a 1.3-unit increase in opposition to affirmative action that is entirely attributable to the variation in the subjects of the symbolic racism statements. Planned comparisons also include subgroups disaggregated by partisanship, ideology, education, and income, provided that observations are available for sufficient statistical power for such comparisons.

Sniderman and Carmines (1997: 38-40) reported that the "mere mention" of affirmative action increased white responses agreeing that most blacks are lazy and irresponsible, so dependent variables will be randomly placed before or after the symbolic racism items to test whether the dependent variables items cause increased racial resentment as measured by symbolic racism.

### **Contribution to Science and Society**

Racial bias is an important topic of study for social science because racial bias can harm people's lives. Symbolic racism serves as a common unobtrusive measure of racial bias, but there are legitimate questions whether the standard symbolic racism research design isolates symbolic racism's racial component; moreover, even if researchers produce a list of controls that must be included in a regression to sufficiently dilute the nonracial component of symbolic racism, the inclusion of control variables costs time and money that can best be used on other items. The proposed experimental design can isolate the anti-black component of symbolic racism and can do so in an efficient fashion, using a split ballot instead of statistical control.

### **Benefit to Other Scientific Disciplines**

Research on symbolic racism is common in political science, psychology, and sociology but is also of interest to any discipline that studies bias or groups, such as anthropology or black studies.

### **Request for a Particular Number of Respondent-Items with Justification**

Standard deviations for symbolic racism items ranged from 1.1 to 1.3 for white non-Hispanic respondents in the 2012 ANES Time Series Study, with a standard deviation of 3.8 for the four-item symbolic racism scale. For a two-sided test of independent samples with an alpha of 0.05, a power of 0.80, and a standard deviation of 1.3, 425 observations per sample are needed to identify a 0.25-unit difference in means with a 1.3 standard deviation (producing a  $d$  of 0.19, roughly equivalent to the threshold for a small effect size as cautiously proposed in Cohen 1988). Two samples, 425 respondents per sample, and nine items (five symbolic racism items, and four dependent variables) translate to 7,650 respondent-items among white non-Hispanic respondents.

## References

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## Appendix with Actual Questions and Description of Stimuli

	Sample 1	Sample 2
<p><i>Responses to items 1 to 4 are measured on a five-point scale labeled from left to right: agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly. Labels are randomly reversed for half of respondents in each sample. Bold type is for emphasis in reading the proposal and not for the survey implementation.</i></p>		
1	Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. <b>Blacks</b> should do the same without any special favors.	Irish, Italians, Jewish and many other <b>groups</b> overcame prejudice and worked their way up. <b>Poor whites</b> should do the same without any special favors.
2	Generations of <b>slavery and discrimination</b> have created conditions that make it difficult for <b>blacks</b> to work their way out of the lower class.	Generations of <b>poverty</b> have created conditions that make it difficult for <b>poor whites</b> to work their way out of the lower class.
2a	<b>Blacks</b> face conditions that make it difficult to work their way out of the lower class.	<b>Poor whites</b> face conditions that make it difficult to work their way out of the lower class.
3	Over the past few years, <b>blacks</b> have gotten less than they deserve.	Over the past few years, <b>poor whites</b> have gotten less than they deserve.
4	It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if <b>blacks</b> would only try harder they could be just as well off as <b>whites</b> .	It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if <b>poor whites</b> would only try harder they could be just as well off as <b>middle-class whites</b> .
<b>Whole Sample</b>		
<p><i>Responses to items 5, 6, and 7 are measured on a seven-point scale, with one side labeled "Favor a great deal" and the other side labeled "Oppose a great deal." Labels are randomly reversed for half of respondents in each sample, but the labels will remain on the same side for each respondent for all three items.</i></p>		
5	What about your opinion about a private company giving preferential hiring and promotion to blacks?	
6	What is your opinion about allowing universities to increase the number of black students studying at their schools by considering race as a factor when choosing students?	
7	What is your opinion about the state governments requiring the same amount of money to be spent on public elementary schools with a majority of black students as is spent on public elementary schools with a majority of white students?	
<p><i>Responses to item 8 are measured on a seven-point scale, with one side labeled "Government should help blacks" and the other side labeled "Blacks should help themselves." Labels are set so that "Government should help blacks" is on the same side as "Favor a great deal" from items 5, 6, and 7.</i></p>		

Question sources: All items except item 7 were modified or drawn directly from the ANES 2012 Time Series Study.

Half of the sample receives the "whole sample" items before the "sample 1" or "sample 2" items; the other half of the sample receives "whole sample" items after the "sample 1" or "sample 2" items. The order of the symbolic racism items will be randomized, and the order of the dependent variables will be randomized.

The proposal also requests inclusion of these three profile items from the GfK public affairs unit:

1. pppa0006 Q6: Which candidate did you vote for in the 2008 Presidential election?
2. pppa0013 Q11A: Where would you place Barack Obama on this scale?
3. pppa0017 Q13: Do you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as President?