The Social Context of Racism

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On 4 November 2008, Barack Obama defeated John McCain to become the 44th president of the United States of America and the first African-American elected to that post. This historic event led many to ask whether the United States had finally overcome a long legacy of racial inequality and become a ‘post-racial’ society. However, the virulence of the opposition to the new president and his policies in some quarters since then has raised numerous questions about whether racism continues to influence Americans’ attitudes. In particular, both popular commentators and scholars have noted that the worst vitriol directed at the president – such as the persistent allegations that he was born outside the United States and that he is actually a Muslim – tends to depict him as an ‘alien’ who is outside the American mainstream (Tesler & Sears, 2010). But how can we be sure that this hostility really stems from racism, as opposed to mere partisan or ideological discord? Are there ‘subtle’ forms of racism that still lurk beneath the surface of an ostensibly tolerant culture?

Questions like these have received a great deal of attention from social psychologists interested in the problem of racism throughout the history of the field. In this regard, social psychologists have attempted not only to uncover the psychological bases of racial antagonism and chart the extent of its influence on other attitudes and behaviour, but also to use their findings to develop interventions capable of stemming the tide of racism. In this chapter, I review social psychologists’ continuing efforts to understand and ameliorate racism. In particular, I take a closer look at how
Psychologists have defined and classified various manifestations of the major explanations they have offered for racism, and research factors that may lessen the prevalence and impact of racism.

**In its 'overt' guise**

In everyday terms in the social and behavioural sciences, 'racism' often takes bewildering variety of meanings. In both everyday language and writings of psychologists, the term has often been used interchangeably with other terms or as a mere synonym for *racial prejudice* – that affective component of racial hostility (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010; 1988). Nevertheless, 'racism' is often defined so as to refer specifically to an ideology that posits the superiority of some groups and the inferiority of others, while justifying unequal, discriminatory treatment of those regarded as racial subordinates (Duckitt, 1992). This definition is particularly common among social scientists who focus on racism as a phenomenon of unequal power relations between different groups, and it is adopted by psychologists interested in racism as a device for legitimation of group hierarchy (Bobo, 1999; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; see also Jost, & Nosek, 2004).

According to this definition, the set of attitudes that qualifies most readily as racism has been referred to as 'old-fashioned' racism (Sears & Henry, 1982), 'classical' racism (Sidanius, Pratto & Bobo, 1996), 'blatant' racism (Tajfel & Meertens, 1995), and 'overt' racism (Huddy & Feldman, 1996). This form of racism centres on the perceived biological (or other-herent) inferiority of subordinate groups and support for openly inatory practices and institutions (Sears, 1988). However, research suggests that this ideal-type form of racism has waned in a temporary era. This shift has been studied most thoroughly in the context, where a wealth of public-opinion data indicates that have largely discarded the key attitudes associated with overt racism (2001). Overt racism now exerts a smaller influence on racial-policy formulations and candidate preferences (Kinder & Sears, 1981; Sears, 1988). For example of this, consider several decades' worth of data on Americans' attitudes towards school integration compiled by Bobo (2001, p. 270). Trends in white attitudes are similar for other trappings of racism, such as support for the segregation of public transportation, job discrimination, and beliefs about the inherent inferiority of
non-whites. These changes extend to the political realm as well, to return to the example cited at the outset of this chapter. For example, while majorities of whites rejected the notion of voting for a black president in the late 1950, the percentage of whites who hold this opinion has dropped precipitously since then. By the eve of the 2008 election, the percentage of whites who refused to vote for a black candidate had dropped below 10 per cent. So, in one seemingly clear piece of evidence for a ‘post-racial’ shift, whites had become more open to the idea of a black president even before Barack Obama’s electoral victory (Bobo & Dawson, 2009).

Despite this liberalization in white opinion, other observations suggest that contemporary societies – including American society – are far from being post-racial. Above all, a mountain of data suggests that enormous racial disparities in income, wealth and overall social well-being continue to exist (e.g. Bobo & Dawson, 2009) and that discrimination is far from being a thing of the past (for a review, see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Moreover, public opinion continues to be characterized by a profound ‘racial divide’ (Kinder & Winter, 2001). Compared with members of subordinate racial groups, members of dominant groups are less likely to believe discrimination is a serious problem (Bobo, 2001), more likely to attribute racial inequality to characteristics of low-status group members (e.g. lack of effort) as opposed to structural problems (e.g. discrimination; see Huddy & Feldman, 2009; Hunt, 2007), and more likely to believe society has made progress towards racial equality (Eibach & Ehlinger, 2006). Finally, changes in dominant racial groups’ attitudes towards the principle of racial equality have not been accompanied by increased support for specific government policies aimed at reducing racial inequality in various social domains (Bobo, 2001; Sears, 1988). As such, the decline of overt forms of racism has not brought us to the point where race is a non-issue.

The ‘new’ racisms

The fact that race continues to matter in these respects has presented social psychologists with a puzzling question: if overt racism has indeed waned, then what accounts for dominant racial group members’ tendency to downplay the existence of racism and discrimination and their apparent lack of enthusiasm for efforts to increase racial equality? Researchers have suggested a number of explanations. One argument suggests that perceived ‘realistic’ competition between racial groups – a theme I return to below – may account for the disparity. That is, while support for the principle of racial equality may not be immediately threatening to dominant’s perceived group interests, aggressive efforts to fight discrimination
and inequality may seem more realistically threatening. In turn, this may lead to a denial of discrimination and hostility towards policies designed to help racial minorities (Bobo, 1999). A second argument suggests that the disparity may stem from politics rather than race. Specifically, dominants’ reliance on individualistic explanations for racial disadvantage and their lack of support for policies such as affirmative action may stem instead from a race-neutral conservative ideological orientation that emphasizes self-reliance, minimal government and meritocracy (Sniderman & Piazza, 1993).

However, perhaps the most influential arguments about the contradictory nature of contemporary racial attitudes come from the various ‘new racism’ theories offered in recent decades (Sears & Henry, 2005). These approaches suggest that new forms of racial antagonism became influential after the decline of overt racism. Importantly, most of these ‘new’ racisms lack two key features of racism in the strict, overt sense: they eschew claims about the inherent inferiority of subordinates and reject overt racial discrimination (Huddy & Feldman, 2009; Pearson, Dovidio & Gaertner, 2009). Nevertheless, they reflect forms of racial animus that account for contemporary political hostility towards subordinate racial groups and policies designed to help them. Below, several of these ‘new racisms’ are discussed.

**Symbolic racism and its cousins**

The first and most influential of the ‘new’ racisms – *symbolic racism* – was identified by David Sears and his colleagues in the 1970s. Symbolic racism consists of a ‘blend’ of negative affect towards African-Americans and concern for traditional individualistic values (self-reliance, hard work, etc.; see Sears, 1988). Symbolic racism usually takes the form of an antipathy towards blacks rooted in the perception that they fail to live up to said values (Sears & Henry, 2003). More specifically, symbolic racism consists of four beliefs: ‘that Blacks no longer face much prejudice or discrimination, that their failure to progress results from their unwillingness to work hard enough, that they are demanding too much too fast, and that they have gotten more than they deserve’ (Sears & Henry, 2005, p. 100). These beliefs are thought to arise over the course of pre-adult socialization, beginning with the early acquisition of negative feelings towards blacks (Sears & Henry, 2003, 2005).

The measurement of symbolic racism has varied considerably over time. However, most of the questionnaire items that have been used to measure it broadly converge on the themes highlighted above, and successive revisions of the scale have resulted in a set of key items. Examples of
items that are used to measure the concept include the following (Sears & Henry, 2005): ‘Over the past few years, blacks have gotten more than they deserve’, ‘Irish, Italians, Jews and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors’, ‘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’, ‘generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class’. Agreement with the first three of these items and disagreement with the fourth indicates a higher level of symbolic racism.

The original theory of symbolic racism has also spawned lines of research on other related forms of new racism, including ‘modern racism’ (McConahay, 1986) and ‘racial resentment’ (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Tesler & Sears, 2010). Both these concepts are similar in content to symbolic racism, and they are measured using similar items. Nevertheless, each construct tends to emphasize some themes more than others. For example, modern racism combines subtle racial animus with a sense of conscious opposition to old-fashioned forms of racial hostility. In comparison, racial resentment focuses primarily on antagonism stemming from the perception that blacks are getting ‘undeserved’ favours (Huddy & Feldman, 2009).

In any case, symbolic racism and its cousins are potent predictors of race-related political preferences. Several decades of research consistently indicate that it is a strong predictor of attitudes towards racial policies, such as affirmative action, busing and economic assistance to minorities; and hostility towards black political candidates, such as Jesse Jackson and – more recently – Barack Obama (Kinder & Sears, 1981; Sears et al., 1997; Tesler & Sears, 2010). These effects hold up even in the presence of controls for other relevant variables, such as party identification, ideology, overt racism and personal self-interest. In fact, the predictive power of symbolic racism often outstrips that of these other variables. Moreover, research suggests that symbolic racism is also a strong predictor of attitudes towards policies that are not explicitly racial but which have become implicitly linked to African-Americans in political discourse, such as welfare spending (Gilens, 1999; Mendelberg, 2001).

Research on symbolic racism has also generated considerable controversy (Huddy & Feldman, 2009). Besides noting numerous inconsistencies in the conceptualization and measurement of the construct across studies, many critics have noted that research on symbolic racism may confuse race-based opposition to policies such as affirmative action with opposition based on race-neutral political values (Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986). In this vein, some have argued that the traditional individualistic content
of symbolic racism items may make it difficult for political conservatives to disagree with them, regardless of their actual feelings about blacks (Sniderman & Piazza, 1993). For example, when faced with a question like ‘the Irish, Italians, Jews and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up – Blacks should do the same without any special favors’, conservatives – who should prefer that all people ‘work their way up’ and reject ‘special favours’ for members of all races – may be unable to express their individualism without giving the ‘racist’ response. Studies have also suggested that symbolic racism may have different meanings to liberals and conservatives, reflecting racial prejudice among the former and a strong preference for self-reliance and minimal government among the latter (Feldman & Huddy, 2005). Thus, despite their explanatory utility, symbolic racism and its relations are susceptible to questions about whether they tap into racism in the strict sense or some other mix of social attitudes.

**Aversive racism**

While the symbolic racism approach focuses on how newer forms of racial antagonism may have displaced overt racism, other new racism models focus on the conflicted nature of contemporary of racial attitudes. The best example of this approach is Pearson, Dovidio & Gaertner's *aversive racism* model (Pearson, Dovidio & Gaertner, 2009). On the one hand, aversive racists – a category which includes many whites – are consciously egalitarian. They genuinely accept the notion of racial equality and do not think of themselves as ‘racists’. This is, of course, consistent with the general observation that most whites have abandoned overt racism. On the other hand, they also have residual and typically unconscious negative feelings about blacks based on feelings of discomfort, fear and anxiety. Taken together with their desire to be egalitarian, this anxiety causes aversive racists to worry about acting inappropriately or seeming prejudiced in encounters with African-Americans. They deal with this conflict and worry by avoiding interracial contact, or by engaging in contact only in tightly regulated situations.

Unlike symbolic racism, which is clearly associated with hostility towards efforts to help blacks, aversive racism is associated with *behavioural instability* (Pearson, Dovidio & Gaertner, 2009). Typically, aversive racists avoid outright displays of bias (e.g. blatant discrimination against members of racial minority groups), due to their consciously egalitarian beliefs. However, since these beliefs coexist uneasily with underlying feelings of discomfort towards African-Americans, aversive racism may lead to bias under certain conditions. In particular, aversive racists tend to display
racial biases (1) when the latter can be rationalized away as having nothing to do with race; (2) when the biases are not easily detected by oneself or others; and (3) when situational norms governing behaviour are unclear (see Pearson, Dovidio & Gaertner, 2009).

For example, in a classic study, Gaertner and Dovidio (1977) showed that white participants did not discriminate against black victims when offering help in emergencies if they were the only witnesses present. However, when participants believed that other bystanders were present and that a failure to offer help could be attributed to a non-racial factor – the perception that the other bystanders might offer help – they were less likely to help black victims. Other studies have produced similar results, revealing that whites are more likely to show bias against black versus white job applicants when both have ambiguous qualifications (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000) and more likely recommend the death penalty for black versus white defendants when they were led to believe that a black juror had also recommended death (thereby discounting the possibility of racial bias; Dovidio et al., 1997). Finally, public opinion research has revealed parallel results. For example, ‘race-coded’ issues like welfare and capital punishment are more likely to be evaluated in terms of racial attitudes when political leaders offer appeals that are covertly racial rather than blatantly racial (e.g. merely showing blacks in a campaign advertisement that mentions welfare-dependency versus a voiceover that explicitly accuses blacks of being excessively dependent on welfare; see Mendelberg, 2001).

Racial ambivalence

Like the aversive racism model, the theory of racial ambivalence focuses on the conflicted nature of contemporary racial attitudes in the United States (Katz & Hass, 1988). Specifically, this approach notes that whites may simultaneously have negative and positive feelings towards blacks, producing a state of emotional ambivalence. The model starts from the assumption that pro-black and anti-black sentiments have different antecedents. Positive attitudes stem from a combination of egalitarianism and humanitarianism. Negative attitudes stem from individualism. While egalitarian concern for the condition of African-Americans should lead to positive emotion in the form of sympathy, individualistic concerns about self-reliance should lead to negative emotion in the form of disapproval. Since American political culture values both egalitarianism and individualism – with political elites typically invoking both considerations in debates about race (Sniderman & Piazza, 1993) – many whites should experience value conflict when considering racial matters. As a result, their feelings about African-Americans should be accordingly ambivalent.
Consistent with these arguments, research suggests that humanitarian and egalitarian values are most strongly associated with pro-black attitudes, while individualistic values are most strongly associated with anti-black attitudes. Priming humanitarianism and egalitarianism increases pro-black sentiment but not anti-black sentiment, whereas priming individualism increases anti-black but not pro-black sentiment (Katz & Hass, 1988). Individuals also differ in the extent to which they experience the racial ambivalence associated with holding pro-black and anti-black attitudes at the same time (Hass et al., 1992; see also Federico, 2006). Finally, studies also suggest that higher levels of ambivalence are associated with emotional discomfort, at least when race is salient (Hass et al., 1992). Thus, for many whites, the wholly negative thrust of overt racism has given way to conflicted—and somewhat troubling—feelings about blacks.

Explicit and implicit racial attitudes

As we have seen, the most common psychological explanations for continued resistance to the acknowledgement of racism and policies aimed at increasing racial equality among members of dominant racial groups invoke some notion of a ‘new’ racism. A related but somewhat distinct approach focuses on the distinction between explicit and implicit racial attitudes (Dovidio et al., 2009; Greenwald et al., 2002). Explicit attitudes are evaluations that are conscious, controlled, and deliberative in nature. They are typically measured using self-report questionnaire items. Most conventional social-psychological measures of racism assess explicit evaluations of subordinate racial groups. In contrast, implicit attitudes are evaluative responses that are relatively unconscious, difficult to control and quickly and automatically activated when an attitude object is brought to mind. They are essentially evaluative associations between an object (e.g. African-Americans) and negative or positive affect (see also Cohrs & Kessler, this volume). Importantly, in the domain of race, the relationship between explicit attitudes and implicit attitudes is often weak and variable. Many individuals who express positive racial attitudes at an explicit level nevertheless show a pattern of negative evaluative associations at an implicit level (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010; Nosek, Banaji & Greenwald, 2002; see also Devine, 1989). This raises the possibility that unconscious negative evaluations may contribute to whites’ low level of enthusiasm for policies designed to help minorities, even in the absence of explicit racial hostility.

Psychologists have developed several methods for the measurement of implicit racial attitudes. One of the oldest uses affective priming (e.g. Fazio
et al., 1995). In a common version of this paradigm, participants are subliminally primed with black or white category exemplars (e.g. photos) and then asked to indicate whether each of a series of affectively charged words refers to something good or bad. Bias is indicated by quicker responses to ‘good’ words following white primes and to ‘bad’ words following black primes. This pattern indicates a stronger associative link between the category ‘white’ and positive affect and the category ‘black’ and negative affect. A second technique is the well-known Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhee & Schwartz, 1998). In the ‘race’ version of the IAT, participants begin by classifying category exemplars (e.g. black and white faces) according to race by pressing one of two assigned buttons. In a second stage, participants perform a similar task in which they classify positive or negative stimuli according to valence. In the final two phases, participants classify both pairs of stimuli simultaneously. In the ‘compatible’ phase, participants are asked to use one button to identify either white exemplars or positive stimuli and another to identify either black exemplars or negative stimuli. In the ‘incompatible’ phase, the pairings are reversed (e.g. black-positive, white-negative). Bias – and an overall negative implicit attitude towards blacks – is indicated by faster responding to the compatible pairings than the incompatible pairings. Finally, a newer measure is the affect misattribution procedure (AMP; Payne et al., 2005). In the AMP, participants are quickly (but not subliminally) shown a picture of a black or white face. They are then shown a picture of an unfamiliar Chinese character and asked to indicate whether the character is pleasant or unpleasant. A negative attitude towards a particular racial group is indicated by the proportion of ‘unpleasant’ responses to characters presented after pictures of individuals from that group. The AMP has a number of benefits, including high reliability, large effect sizes, and resistance to censoring on the part of participants, potentially making it an attractive option for future work on implicit racial attitudes.

Measured in these ways, implicit attitudes have numerous consequences for race-related judgements and behaviours (Dovidio et al., 2009; Huddy & Feldman, 2009). In particular, implicit attitudes strongly predict judgements and behaviours that are relatively spontaneous in nature, such as nonverbal behaviours in interracial interactions (e.g. eye contact). Explicit racial attitudes more strongly predict deliberate expressions of racial hostility (Blanton & Jaccard, 2008; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010; Dovidio et al., 2009). Moreover, implicit racial attitudes predict hostility towards political candidates from subordinate racial groups (Payne et al., 2010; Schmidt & Nosek, 2010) and social-policy attitudes (Craemer, 2008; Knowles, Lowery & Schauemberg, 2010).

While the study of implicit racial attitudes has had an enormous impact, there is controversy about precisely what a biased response on an implicit
measure means. In particular, psychologists have raised questions about whether implicit measures – like the ‘new racism’ measures discussed above – actually measure racism in the strict sense (Huddy & Feldman, 2009). For example, some have questioned whether mere evaluative associations qualify as ‘racism’ when unaccompanied by conscious acceptance of the proposition that certain groups are inherently inferior or otherwise ‘bad’ (Arkes & Tetlock, 2004). Others have pointed out the arbitrary nature of the measurement scales produced by implicit measures and have cautioned against using them to draw conclusions about individuals’ attitudes (Blanton & Jaccard, 2008). However, even among researchers who accept that implicit measures tap into some form of racial animus, there is disagreement about the nature of the attitude involved (see Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010, for a review). While early treatments sometimes conceptualized implicit measures as a ‘bona fide pipeline’ capable of getting past social-desirability biases to ‘real’ attitudes (e.g. Fazio et al., 1995), most researchers now shy away from this view. More recent approaches have suggested that implicit racial attitudes are overlearned associations reflecting culture rather than personal evaluations (e.g. Craemer, 2008; Karpinski & Hilton, 2001). Other approaches suggest that they are older, more accustomed responses that have been subsequently been written over by conscious explicit evaluations (Wilson, Lindsey & Schooler, 2000). Finally, another argument suggests that implicit attitudes reflect the operation of an automatic ‘associative’ system of evaluation distinct from the ‘propositional’ or true–false system of judgement connected with explicit attitudes (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). Thus, while implicit measures have extended the study of racial attitudes in new directions and revealed consequential patterns, researchers need to remain cautious in offering assessments of their meaning.

Psychological factors underlying racism

Besides defining and classifying manifestations of racism, social psychologists have also devoted considerable attention to why and how people acquire racist attitudes. Almost a century of work on this topic has produced a variety of approaches. The dominant approaches of different eras tended to focus on some themes more than others as a function of broader trends in the discipline and in society as a whole (Duckitt, 1992). The themes themselves have varied enormously, ranging from a focus on personality to a focus on the structure of relations between groups in society as a whole. In this section, I review several key perspectives on the foundations and origins of racism (see also chapter on prejudice by Cohrs and Kessler, this volume).
Dispositional influences: Personality and racism

One of the oldest psychological literatures on racism focuses on the origins of the latter in personality (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). By far, the dispositional characteristics most heavily emphasized in this literature are those connected with cognitive rigidity, close-mindedness, and intolerance of ambiguity. Specifically, decades of research have suggested that rigid individuals with a dislike of cognitive uncertainty and nuance tend to be attracted to racist ideas and ethnocentric thinking. Thus, early work on this relationship focused on the relationship between racism and traits like intolerance of ambiguity and generalized cognitive rigidity (see Allport, 1954; Frenkel-Brunswik, 1948).

However, the most influential early work of this sort was the landmark volume The Authoritarian Personality (Adorno et al., 1950). Drawing on classic psychoanalytic ideas, Adorno and his colleagues argued that a general syndrome of conventionalism and submissiveness to authority – a stable ‘authoritarian personality’ – may account for individual differences in attraction to racist or ethnocentric ideas and movements. Specifically, authoritarianism was thought to be rooted in harsh childrearing, resulting in a rigid, defensive style of thinking characterized by the repression of hostile impulses and their projection onto outgroups. While this model became enormously influential in the years following the publication of The Authoritarian Personality, theoretical and methodological criticisms of the approach eventually piled up (Hyman & Sheatsley, 1954) and interest in personality and racism faded for several decades.

However, interest in the topic has picked back up in recent decades, often driven by improvements in the measurement of personality constructs long associated with intergroup hostility. For example, individual differences in a variable related to cognitive rigidity, the need for cognitive closure, has been generally implicated in racism and other forms of intergroup bias (Kruglanski, 2004). Individuals who are dispositionally high in the need for closure crave certainty and ‘seize’ on information in order to attain it as quickly as possible; once they have reached a state of subjective certainty, they firmly ‘freeze’ on their conclusions in order to maintain closure (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). Flewhing out older arguments, Kruglanski and his colleagues (2006) argue that high levels of ingroup identification, bias in favour of the ingroup, and bias against outgroups is attractive to those high in the need for closure, given the certainty provided by closing ranks around a valued social identity. Not surprisingly, this logic commonly plays itself in the context of race, with numerous studies suggesting that individuals with a high need for closure tend to be more prone to racial stereotyping and racist beliefs (Jost et al., 2003; Kruglanski et al.,
Research on authoritarianism has also been revitalized in recent decades by Altemeyer’s (1996) work on right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). Altemeyer replaces The Authoritarian Personality’s psychodynamic framework with a social learning account and defines the construct in terms of submission to ingroup authorities, aggression towards outgroups, and conventionalism. Confirming earlier findings on authoritarianism, a large body of research indicates that high RWAs are more likely to exhibit racism and ethnocentrism more generally (Altemeyer, 1996).

Another individual-difference predictor of racism that has received a great deal of attention in recent years is social dominance orientation (SDO), a crucial element of social dominance theory (SDT; Pratto et al., 1994; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). SDT is a general model of the factors that promote intergroup hierarchy in human societies. In the context of this model, SDO is an individual difference corresponding to one’s general orientation towards group hierarchy; those high in SDO are accepting of group inequality and the domination of some groups by others. It predicts a variety of beliefs that legitimize group inequality and provide support for institutions and policies that further inequality. Importantly, these beliefs include both overt racism and ‘new’ forms of racism like symbolic racism. All of the latter are highly correlated with SDO, especially among members of dominant racial groups (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Importantly, both RWA and SDO have traditionally been conceptualized as stable personality variables. However, in light of research suggesting that RWA and SDO are less situationally stable than originally believed (e.g., Schmitt, Branscombe & Kappen, 2003), recent scholarship has reconceptualized the two variables as ideological dimensions (Duckitt & Sibley, 2009). According to this model, deeper personality dimensions predispose people to different worldviews, which are differentially associated with RWA and SDO. Finally, RWA and SDO ultimately produce support for racism – the first through processes that encourage an aversion to social difference and the second as a result of processes that emphasize the subjugation of other groups. In other words, while RWA and SDO may indeed predict racism, they are best understood as ideological variables that intervene between personality dimensions and racism, as opposed to personality variables in and of themselves (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008; see also Cohrs & Kessler, this volume).

**Social influences on the acquisition of racist attitudes**

Perhaps the most durable assumption about the acquisition of racist attitudes is that they are socially learned or moulded in the context of relationships, typically with parents or peers (Allport, 1954; Sears &
Levy, 2003). To cite but one key example, Sears and his colleagues argue that symbolic racism is learned from parents and others during pre-adult socialization, with the transmission of negative affect towards minorities occurring early on and the absorption of individualistic values and the widespread cultural belief that blacks violate those values taking place somewhat later (e.g. Sears, 1988). Nevertheless, research has not subjected this argument to detailed empirical scrutiny (Sears & Henry, 2005).

More generally, evidence racist attitudes are learned from parents is mixed (Duckitt, 1992; Sears & Levy, 2003). Estimated correlations between parents’ and children’s racial attitudes are quite variable and often weak (Aboud & Doyle, 1996). Nevertheless, some patterns do emerge. In particular, the transmission of racial attitudes from parents to children appears to be stronger in majority racial groups, and parents’ attitudes typically have a stronger impact on younger children’s attitudes than on older children’s attitudes (Carlson & Iovini, 1985; see also Duckitt, 1992). The effect of age finds an echo in other lines of research. In this vein, Doyle and Aboud (1995) note that racism and other hostile intergroup attitudes emerge as a default by preschool, but then decline starts around age seven as a result of key milestones in cognitive development. These developmental changes include an enhanced ability to understand that individuals belong to multiple groups, greater skill in attending to counter-stereotypic information, and an improved ability to realize that not all outgroup members are identical. Nevertheless, recent work suggests that these developmental changes may be more pronounced with respect to explicit racial attitudes than implicit racial attitudes. On this score, Baron and Banaji (2006) examined the implicit and explicit racial attitudes of American six-year-olds, ten-year-olds and adults. Their results indicated a clear decline in explicit racial hostility with age, as the older children and adults showed considerably less explicit racial bias than the younger children. However, implicit racial attitudes – as indexed by the IAT – were remarkably similar across all three age groups, showing a pro-white/anti-black bias at all ages.

Other perspectives have focused on how racism may be rooted in norms associated with particular social networks. This suggestion follows from a general line of research indicating that peers, social networks and ‘reference groups’ have large effects on individuals’ attitudes (Alwin, Cohen & Newcomb, 1991; Crandall, Eshleman & O’Brien, 2002; for a more detailed review, see Cohrs & Kessler, this volume). Along these lines, a variety of studies have reported correlations between individuals’ racial attitudes and those of their peers (e.g. Bagley & Verma, 1979) or significant others (Silverman, 1974). Other studies have pointed towards large subcultural differences in racial attitudes that cannot be explained by other factors. For example, Pettigrew (1959) famously observed that whites from the American South had far more negative attitudes towards blacks
than whites from elsewhere in America, despite having similar levels of authoritarianism. This suggested the operation of regional social norms regarding ‘appropriate’ racial attitudes – an argument bolstered by the additional finding that anti-black prejudice was strongly related to a measure of conformity among Southern whites.

Thus, evidence suggests that racism may be embedded in the views characteristic of one’s social network. Nevertheless, like findings regarding the influence of parents, the utility of these results are limited in certain respects (Duckitt, 1992; Sears & Levy, 2003). Above all, the data they rely on are largely correlational, making it difficult to determine whether the correlations are due to a causal influence of social networks on racial attitudes rather than self-selection into ‘agreeable’ social networks on the basis of prior attitudes. Moreover, they do not allow researchers to distinguish between effects due to social learning – in which racial attitudes are learned from peers and internalized – and effects due to mere conformity. As such, much work remains to be done with respect to this question (see Sears & Henry, 2005, for further discussion; but see also Cohrs & Kessler, this volume). That said, it is worth noting that experimental manipulations of perceived norms about intergroup attitudes in one’s social network can influence the extent to which people actually express racial hostility in the form of discrimination (Blanchard et al., 1994; Sechrist & Stangor, 2001).

Moving beyond the context of concrete relationships, a variety of analyses have looked how racial attitudes may be shaped by a more impersonal socialization agent: the mass media. Analyses of this sort have often focused on the role of mass entertainment – especially entertainment aimed at children – in conveying the racial attitudes that are ostensibly normative for society as a whole (Milner, 1983). Unfortunately, much of this work focuses more on documenting biases in the media than on the effects of these biases on individuals’ attitudes (Duckitt, 1992). However, recent studies have filled this gap somewhat by looking at how racially biased attitudes – and the stereotypical beliefs that go along with them – may be reinforced by news-media coverage of certain social and political issues, particularly crime and poverty. For example, a number of studies have shown that news coverage that represents the criminal population and the persistently poor as overly black may reinforce racial resentment and increase its impact on policy judgments (Gilens, 1999; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Mendelberg, 2001).

**Intergroup relations and social identity**

Other perspectives focus on the general psychology of intergroup relations, as opposed to the dispositions and learned attitudes of individuals (Bobo, 1988; Hogg, 2003). A key premise of these approaches is that racism is not
merely an attitudinal characteristic of individuals; rather, it is situated in and derives from the context of identification with racial groups and structural relationships between racial groups. While many of the theoretical models that fall into this category were developed in part to shed light on racism, most of them are general in nature and attempt to make sense of intergroup relations in a variety of contexts.

One of the earliest of these models, realistic conflict theory, focuses specifically on the consequences of material competition between groups. According to this approach, hostility between groups will arise when they are in real or perceived zero-sum competition for valued resources or positions of power (LeVine & Campbell, 1972; Sherif et al., 1961; see also Cohrs & Kessler, this volume) This effect should be especially pronounced when individuals believe that their own outcomes are connected with how well their group as a whole fares. Conversely, when this state of negative interdependence is removed and groups must cooperate to achieve some mutually valued goal, hostility will subside. The logic of realistic conflict theory has been fruitfully applied to the study of racial attitudes. For example, Bobo (1988, 1999) has developed survey measures of perceived zero-sum resource competition between racial groups (e.g. over jobs, etc.). Consistent with the theory, whites who perceive zero-sum competition between blacks and whites are more likely to express negative feelings about blacks and oppose policies aimed at dealing with racial inequality (e.g. affirmative action). Recent studies have refined this conclusion somewhat, indicating that perceptions of harm to the dominant ingroup – apart from corresponding consequences for subordinate outgroups – are sufficient to produce hostility towards policies aimed at helping subordinates (Lowery et al., 2006).

Other lines of research reveal similar patterns. For example, research suggests that fraternal relative deprivation – a perception that one's group is losing out relative to other groups (Runciman, 1966) – among American whites is strongly related to negative attitudes towards blacks (Vanneman & Pettigrew, 1972). Moreover, studies on the sense of group position suggests that racism is likely to be strongest among dominant-group members who feel that subordinates are attempting to 'usurp' a position of social superiority that only the ingroup's characteristics entitle it to (Blumer, 1958; Bobo, 1999). Similarly, social dominance theory argues that racism should be strongest among dominant-group members with high levels of social dominance orientation, who should be more strongly motivated than others to pursue their groups' interests (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Material competition between groups may thus play a key role in explaining racial hostility. However, other theories suggest that
psychological identification with a group may be sufficient to cause intergroup biases even in the absence of conflict over actual resources. This was most famously demonstrated in the ‘minimal group studies’ conducted by Henri Tajfel and his colleagues (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, for a review; see also Cohrs & Kessler, this volume). In these studies, participants were divided into completely arbitrary groups – or minimal groups – on the basis of trivial procedures. Tajfel’s studies demonstrated that individuals allocated more resources to members of their own group than members of other groups. In an effort to explain this ‘ingroup favoritism,’ Tajfel and Turner (1986) introduced social identity theory (SIT). Like other perspectives, SIT assumes that individuals want to enhance their self-esteem. However, in doing so, the theory notes that self-esteem can derive from both personal identity, or parts of the self which relate to unique individual characteristics; and social identity, or parts of the self that stem from group memberships. As such, the desire for self-esteem implies that individuals will compare favourably to other groups when social identity is salient, leading to ingroup favouritism.

While some researchers have minimized the potential role of social identity concerns in the real world of racial attitudes (e.g. Sears & Henry, 2005), reviews of the literature suggest that ingroup favouritism plays itself out frequently in the context of race. For example, ingroup favouritism in allocations of resources and in feelings about ingroups versus outgroups is rampant not just in minimal groups but in real-world groups as well, including racial groups (Mullen, Brown & Smith, 1992; see also Hogg, 2003; Kinder & Kam, 2009). Moreover, among members of dominant racial groups, higher levels of ingroup identification are reliably associated with a variety of racist attitudes (Levin et al., 1998; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Finally, other studies suggest that the denial of racial inequality among members of dominant racial groups may result from a need to defend one’s social identity against the implications of a belief that it benefits from unjust privileges. Along these lines, Lowery, Knowles and Unzueta (2007) find that white Americans are more likely to deny the existence of white privilege when threatened with negative feedback. Thus, in a variety of respects, social identity may account for variation in racial attitudes.

Psychological approaches to fighting racism

As noted above, social psychologists have not merely tried to understand racism. They have also actively considered strategies for combating it. Many of these strategies have been developed not only with an eye to
confronting racism, but with a focus on reducing intergroup conflict more generally. In this section, I review factors that may reduce racial hostility.

**Education**

One of the variables most frequently cited as an antidote to racial hostility is education. In fact, its solvent effect in the domain of racial attitudes is celebrated not just in social psychology but throughout the social and behavioural sciences (Duckitt, 1992). Indeed, a vast empirical literature indicates that higher levels of educational attainment are associated with more positive attitudes towards racial minorities and greater tolerance more generally (Greeley & Sheatsley, 1971; Lipset, 1960; McClosky & Zaller, 1984; Sniderman & Piazza, 1993). This effect is usually attributed to several changes associated with education. These include: (1) improved learning of democratic norms, especially the norm of tolerance; (2) improved cognitive skills, which makes it easier for people to realize the logical implications of the norm of tolerance; and (3) greater exposure to and comfort with diverse perspectives and ways of life.

Despite these positive findings, other studies indicate that the effects of education on racial attitudes may be more complex than this traditional view suggests. Specifically, numerous analyses demonstrate that education has two distinct effects. On one hand, it does reduce absolute levels of racial hostility, as noted above. On the other hand, education also appears to strengthen the impact of racism on policy judgements (Federico, 2004; Federico & Holmes, 2005; Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Sidanius, Pratto & Bobo, 1996). For example, while white Americans who have completed a college degree show lower levels of symbolic racism than those with less education, the relationship between symbolic racism and attitudes towards welfare are actually stronger among college-educated whites. So, while education may very well reduce overall levels of racism, it also boosts the political impact of whatever racism ‘survives’ the educational process.

**Intergroup contact**

Of course, variables like education – however helpful – are difficult to actively manipulate and use as practical tools for reducing racism. Social psychologists have considered a number of other approaches that might be more useful as direct interventions. Perhaps the most storied approach of this sort is intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). The earliest formulations of contact theory suggested that contact with disliked racial outgroups might be sufficient to reduce racism via simple learning. Subsequent developments of the theory concluded that contact may
need to occur under certain conditions in order to be effective. In this spirit, Gordon Allport (1954) famously described four conditions needed for the successful reduction of intergroup hostility via contact: (1) equal status within the contact setting; (2) cooperative interaction between members of different groups; (3) superordinate goals; and (4) support from legitimate authorities. Later iterations of the approach have also emphasized other important conditions, such as the formation of intergroup friendships (Pettigrew, 1998).

A wealth of data has provided support for contact theory across a variety of intergroup contexts. For example, a recent meta-analysis by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) indicated that intergroup contact does generally reduce hostility between groups – an effect which is stronger when more of Allport’s original four conditions are met. Importantly, 51 per cent of the datasets reviewed by Pettigrew and Tropp focused on racial or ethnic contact, and independent analysis of these studies indicated effects that were as strong as those observed in non-racial/non-ethnic contexts. However, quality of contact – as indexed by Allport’s four conditions – was particularly important in improving racial attitudes via contact.

Changes in categorization

Other strategies for reducing racism – among other forms of intergroup hostility – have focused specifically on variables related to categorization. The shared premise of these approaches is that racial hostility can be reduced by minimizing the extent to which individuals think in terms of relevant racial categories. For example, the decategorization approach does this by encouraging members of different groups to think of themselves primarily as distinct individuals rather than members of various social categories and to form personalized impressions of outgroup members (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Miller, 2002). Other strategies that fall into this category focus on emphasizing the fact that individuals often belong to multiple groups that result in different, non-overlapping ingroup/outgroup distinctions (Crisp et al., 2003). Studies provide supportive evidence for the efficacy of both of these decategorization strategies (see Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010).

On the other hand, the recategorization approach focuses on promoting the formation of a common ingroup identity that encompasses both the ingroup and outgroup (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). The aim of this strategy is to turn former outgroup members into new members of an expanded ingroup without forcing them to forsake their original (subgroup) identities. While this strategy has been applied successfully in numerous
Intergroup contexts, evidence specifically suggests that it is effective in reducing racial hostility (Gaertner et al., 1996; Nier et al., 2001; Sidanius et al., 2008). For example, in a large field study conducted at a multi-racial high school, Gaertner and his colleagues (1996) found lower levels of hostility towards racial outgroups among students who perceived themselves to be ‘on the same team’ or part of a unified student body. Despite these benefits, studies suggest limits to the recategorization strategy. For example, individuals may project the standards of their own subgroup onto the common ingroup, leading other subgroups to be seen as substandard members of the superordinate group (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999). Similarly, superordinate identities may become ‘owned’ by high-status racial groups, leading to a situation in which low-status racial groups perceive a tradeoff between their subgroup and superordinate group identities and disidentify with the common ingroup (Sidanius et al., 1997).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to provide a broad overview of social psychology’s contributions to our understanding of racism. Importantly, social psychologists’ efforts in this area provide some of the best examples of how basic scientific work and a practical interest in confronting major social problems can work in tandem with one another. As noted near the beginning of this chapter, the persistence of racial inequality – despite positive changes like those discussed at the beginning of this chapter, such as the election of America’s first black president – has been a spur to action for social psychologists for much of the field’s history. Some of social psychology’s most important steps in understanding racism have been driven by a practical desire to find remedies for racial conflict. For example, the pressing need to identify variables that might reduce racial hostility has repeatedly led to basic advances in our understanding of the factors that contribute to more or less negative intergroup attitudes. One can clearly see this dynamic at work in the development of contact theory, where successive refinements of the original contact hypothesis were often driven by practical experience with less-than-successful efforts to bring racial groups together (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). As such, the area is definitely one where Kurt Lewin’s suggestion that ‘there is nothing so practical as a good theory’ would appear to ring true.

Moreover, efforts to make sense of and confront the problem of racism have also spurred important developments in our understanding of the psychology of intergroup conflict more generally. For example, two perspectives that were originally advanced in large part to explain racism and racial prejudice – realistic conflict theory and social identity theory – have
in turn made basic contributions to our understanding of intergroup dynamics and the psychology of collective identity in many other domains, including work on international relations, partisan and ideological conflict in the domestic political realm, and conflict between religious groups (Bobo, 1988; Hogg, 2003).

Looking to the future, a critical challenge for social psychologists interested in racism is one of theoretical and empirical integration. Research in this area has pointed not just to a wide range of explanations for racism, but also to many different types of racism. As such, research in this area would benefit from efforts to simplify and consolidate thearranging body of work that has emerged over the decades. Recent work has already taken important steps in this direction, such as social dominance theory's efforts to integrate individual-difference and intergroup analyses of intergroup attitudes (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and ongoing efforts to clarify the relationship between implicit and explicit racial attitudes (e.g. Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006; Wilson, Lindsey & Schooler, 2000). If history is any guide, integrative work of this sort should open new avenues for the field's joint mission of understanding and combating the problem of racial hostility.

### Practical task for readers

President Barack Obama's popularity fell noticeably over the course of his first two years in office, from highs in the 70 per cent range in January 2009 to levels in the 40 per cent range in January 2011. This chapter has been largely about what social psychologists have discovered regarding contemporary racism and its influence on other attitudes and behaviour. What findings from this body of work suggest that we might be able attribute the decline in President Obama's approval ratings—at least in part—to racial hostility on the part of American whites? Based on what we know from the social-psychological literature on racism, do you think a white president with a similar political agenda—facing similar economic conditions—would enjoy higher approval ratings? Why or why not?

### Suggested readings

For up to date additional readings on the social psychology of racial antagonism, please see the chapter in the handbook of social psychology by
Dovidio and Gaertner (2010) and the annual review article by Huddy and Feldman (2009).

References


**Notes**

1. Some researchers have suggested that the weakness of the estimated correlation between implicit and explicit racial attitudes may be due to measurement error (see Huddy & Feldman, 2009). Common implicit measures – such as those based on affective priming – contain considerable measurement error. Studies which have used latent-variable modelling to correct for this error have found stronger positive relationships between implicit and explicit attitudes (Cunningham, Preacher & Banaji, 2001). Moreover, implicit measures that are known to be more reliable show larger, more stable relationships with explicit measures (e.g. Payne et al., 2005).

2. Other recent approaches have attempted to measure authoritarianism using childrearing values as a proxy for respondents' orientation towards authority and convention (e.g. Stenner, 2005). These measures have proven to be reliable, valid, and less confounded with political beliefs than other measures (especially the RWA scale), and they too are strong predictors of racial hostility (e.g. racial resentment; see Hetherington & Weiler, 2009; Stenner, 2005).
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