

Realistic and Symbolic Threats and their Impact on Racial Attitudes

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Abstract

This research has become accidentally timely as society has reached a tipping point on the topic of race relations in this country. This study examined the racial formation, intergroup relations, and integrated threat theory as a catalyst to aid in explaining the racial attitudes Whites and Blacks have toward one another, as well as how those views are formed. Realistic threats, symbolic threats, and comfort zone were the focal points of this research, as the desired outcome depended on these variables having a positive correlation with negative racial attitudes. The hypothesis was not supported; limitations and implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: racism, comfort zone, symbolic/realistic threats

“We condition people in this country...to the myth of white superiority. We are told that we don't have racism anymore... most of the people saying that are white. They think it isn't happening because it isn't happening to them.” (Elliot, PBS, 2002). These words spoken by Jane Elliot in a 2002 interview highlighting her famous “Brown Eye/Blue Eye” experiment, shed light on a subject that the mainstream tends to shy away from in the new millennium. There is indeed a fable that racism is a thing of the past, that our collective ancestors either contributed to it or aided in its abolishment and in 2014 we have nothing to fear because our president is Black. There are other “isms” that plague our culture, such as sexism and ageism; however, it seems as though racism is treated like the red headed step child being kept in the crawl space beneath the house. One in five workers in the U.S. is age 55 or older and 64% of workers claim to have seen or experienced age discrimination in the workplace (Bureau of Labor Statistics). In their first year of work after graduating college, men make \$7,600 more than women on average according to a study conducted by the Congress Joint Economic Committee (Klobuchar, 2014). The other “isms” can come out to play but for some reason, race continues to be a taboo subject; it is either neglected altogether or is addressed in a way as to not make White people feel any discomfort. The great thing about our society is that we have to see to believe; we need cold, hard, empirical evidence of “a thing” in order to say it is indeed a thing, so here are (some of) the facts:

- A 2006 CNN/Opinion Research Poll of United States citizens found that 84% of African Americans and 66% of White Americans believe that racism continues to be a serious problem in the United States (Skin-Deep: Racism in America, CNN 2006).
- Black professors hold less than 5% of faculty positions. Less than 5% of the K-12 teaching force is Black. About 85% of this group is centered in urban areas (Hacker, 2003).

- Most NCAA universities refuse to release attrition rate for athletes. An NCAA study showed that nearly 75% of Division I Black athletes failed to graduate, (Hacker, 2003).
- 51% of Americans now (after Obama's first election) express explicit anti-Black attitudes, compared with 48% in a similar 2008 survey, (Brazile, 2012).
- The rate of violent victimization against Blacks was 26 per 1,000 persons age 12 or older; for whites 18 per 1,000 and for persons of other races, 15 per 1,000; Blacks were victims of rape/sexual assault, robbery, and aggravated assault at rates higher than those for Whites, (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008).

Brief Historical Contexts & Psychological Aspects of Racism

This research will briefly highlight racism as it known in the United States, however, it is conceded that racism exists on every corner of the Earth. "Eighteenth century ethnologists divided human beings into three to five races, usually considered as varieties of a single human species...however, an increasing number of writers, especially those committed to the defense of slavery, maintained that the races constituted separate species." (Fredrickson, 2003, par. 3). That erroneous belief was fundamental in the argument for slavery; the idea was that it is okay to enslave and mistreat anyone who is not White because they are not human. Fredrickson (2003, par. 11) also posited that, "Racism does not require full and explicit support of state and law. Nor does it require an ideology centered on the concept of biological inequality. Discrimination by institutions and individuals...can long persist and even flourish under the illusion of non-racism." There are laws in the United States that are meant to protect the long oppressed from maltreatment and to grant them fair and equal standing with their White counterparts. For instance, the abolishment of slavery in 1865, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the formation of the EEOC in 1965 are just a few of the policies and organizations the government has enacted to

combat the long existing racism in America. However, even with all these provisions and laws, Blacks (and other non-Whites) continue to exist under the suppressive thumb of institutionalized prejudice and discrimination. A Pew Research Poll found that nearly 9 in 10 blacks say discrimination continues to exist and nearly 6 in 10 African Americans reside in segregated neighborhoods (Wolf, 2014, par. 10).

Merriam-Webster defines Psychology as the, “the science or study of the mind and behavior, the way a person or group thinks.” (Merriam-Webster, 2014). Psychology so clearly correlates to the way racism is conceptualized, understood, and picked a part; in order to decipher this institution of systematic maltreatment of people certain psychological questions must be asked and answered. Where does the behavior originate? Is it learned or innate? How is it passed down throughout centuries and generations? Why do the people who tend to gravitate towards these beliefs do so? One study stated, “...consider the major social psychological models of prejudice. Most of these models are better suited to understanding White than Black racial attitudes” (Bettencourt, Boniecki, Ervin, Jackson, McNatt, Renfro, Stephan, & Ybarra, 2002, p. 1243). Not only is there work to be done in order to understand racism, but work has to be done in order to change how it is studied. The attitudes of Whites towards Blacks tends to be studied more than the attitudes of Blacks towards Whites; this practice may also lead to some of the social dominance that Whites may feel about their Black counterparts (Bettencourt, et al, 2002).

Theoretical Perspectives: Racial Formation, Intergroup Relations, Integrated Threat

Theory goes a long way in giving some explanation to the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and behaviors of others; for the purpose of this research, Racial Formation Theory (Omi, 1986), Intergroup Relations Theory (Tajfel, 1978), and Integrated Threat Theory (Stephan, 2000) will be employed. Racial Formation theory posits that, “...race is a socially constructed identity,

where the content and importance of racial categories are determined by social, economic, and political forces (Omi and Winant, 1986, p. 61). Unlike frameworks of the past, racial formation proposes the idea that race is not a scientific or genetic entity, contrarily, it exists because people perpetuate it and make it more than what it should be.

Intergroup Relations Theory actually covers a myriad of theoretical approaches to how and why people label and categorize one another; the main idea is that, “Psychologists have long conceded that prejudice may be an inevitable aspect of human life,” (Allport, 1954). In other words, no matter what, groups and individuals will always look for ways to separate themselves from others and to judge people based on those lines of separation; that sort of thinking can breed an air of unhealthy competition in a diverse atmosphere. Steve Handel wrote that, “The human mind has a tendency to categorize people into social groups. And often these social groups can create an “Us vs. Them” mentality toward people who may be different than us in some way...” (Steve Handel, 2013, par. 1). At this point, it becomes easier to explain why racism (and all other forms of discrimination) happens. If self-categorization is unavoidable, it makes sense that throughout history, the most easily recognizable difference between humans has become the focal point of so much intolerance, hatred, and pain.

“Because of the needs they fill, groups are dear to us, and we fear their destruction almost as much as we fear our own. We tend to favor our own group and exhibit hostility toward others, especially during dangerous times,” (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Through the examination of major societal clashes in the United States, the events that have taken and continue to take place in Ferguson, MO, Cleveland, OH, and Staten Island, NY (Breed, 2014) illuminate group identification, attitude, and unity. In all three location Black boys and men were unarmed (i.e., 12 year old Tamir Rice in Ohio had a toy gun) and murdered

by trained officers of the law. Emotions have run high on either side and in times of great strife it is human nature to cling to what is familiar and comfortable. A perceived difference tends to pull people apart due to the notion that, 'I have to stay with my own kind,' whether that "kind" is based on race, sex, sexuality, religion, eye color, etc.

Integrated Threat Theory, or Intergroup Threat Theory as it is now titled is, "focused on the conditions that foster intergroup contact changes in intergroup relations; also focuses on the conditions that lead to perceptions of threat, which have an impact on attitudes and behavior" (Wagner, 2008, pg. 57). In other words, this framework delves into what might frighten one group (or individual) about another group (or individual) and what those fears might produce in the form of perceptions and actions. These threats are said to be present anytime, "one group's actions, beliefs, or characteristics challenge the goal attainment or well-being of another group" (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006, p. 363). To clarify, when the in-group feels that they are in harm's way, they tend to lash out at the out-group; they could do it subtly by ignoring them or in a more overt manner by systematically oppressing them over the course of several generations.

Threats: Realistic & Symbolic

Realistic Threats are the types of threats which result from the perceptions, held by the in-group, that the out-group "poses a risk to their safety, economy, politics, health or well-being" (Kendall, 1998, pg. 83). "The idea that realistic threats can cause prejudice is a fundamental premise of realistic group conflict theories" (Bobo, 1988). These fears tend to be more tangible in nature than their counterpart, symbolic threats; throughout history racism against Blacks has been thinly veiled as White's not hating them, but simply protecting what is theirs.

The below graphic depicts the types of realistic threats as detailed by Kendall (1998, pg. 84).



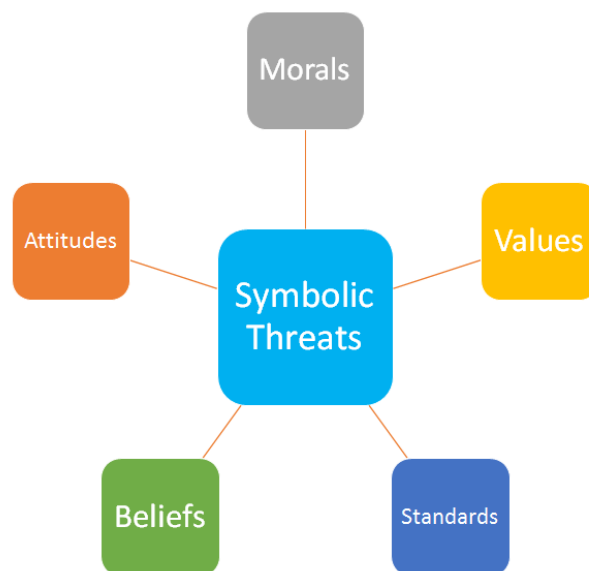
To further expound on realistic threats, Redmond explains:

An example of such a threat is when two groups within an organization are competing for the rights to complete a project for the president of the organization. If one group has more material resources than the other, the group with less resources will feel threatened because it feels there are barriers (the material resources) which will inhibit their ability to compete for the project (2014).

Of course, this model can be flipped to the favor of Blacks as well; the idea of Affirmative Action was first proposed because Blacks do not start in the same position as their White counterparts. Affirmative action means, "...positive steps taken to increase the representation of women and minorities in areas of employment, education, and culture from which they have been historically excluded" (Fullinwilder, 2014, par. 1). Affirmative Action was meant to make the playing field in the education system and workplace more level for disenfranchised groups on the basis that those groups do not have the same assets as the group wielding the power.

Symbolic Threats refer to the beliefs and values of the group which may be at risk. They primarily involve "perceived group differences in morals, values, standards, beliefs, and attitudes" (Oskamp, 2000, p.42). In other words, these fears are not tangible like those of their counterpart, realistic threats. Oskamp (2000, p. 41) stated that the symbolic "threats arise, in part, because the in-group believes in the moral rightness of its system of values" (Oskamp, 2000, p.41).

The below graphic depicts the types of symbolic threats are detailed by Oskamp (2000, p.42)



Redmond stated the following:

For example, if an in-group values a more protectionist approach to business, it might employ labor and materials purchased from its country of origin. As a result, a symbolic threat would involve competing firms that adopt a more globalist approach to business, especially if the costs of going global are substantially lower. This type of threat is found in many aspects of our lives, however, politics is the one that can be used to illustrate this

threat the best. The different parties represent the different groups and typically the major platforms that the politicians run on are based on the morals, values and beliefs of that particular group. (2014)

In other words, a group of people who may classify themselves in one particular category will tend to cling to that identity and reject opposing groups. They may also see themselves as predominately good and others as generally bad; when faced with contradicting ideals and opinions their behavior strongly suggests that they hold a prejudicial view of the “them” group. For instance, “The concept of symbolic threats in the integrated threat theory is conceptually kin to the idea of symbolic and modern racism (Kinder & Sears, 1981; McConahay, 1986; Sears, 1988). That is to say that although racism continues to thrive, it has changed in its form and execution, therefore shifting its effects on the perpetrators and victims.

Hypotheses & Operationalized Variables

The following independent variables will be measured by self-reported test items: age, gender, ethnicity, whether the participant grew up in a diverse environment, how comfortable they feel around individuals not a part of their in-group, the influence of parental beliefs, their similarity to parental beliefs, their views on the values of others, and views on the perceived resources of others. The dependent variable (racial attitudes based on realistic and symbolic threats) will be measured using The Thermometer Scale of Attitudes (1993). The hypothesis states that realistic and symbolic threats would predict negative racial attitudes and that the effects of negative out-group contact and perceptions of status inequalities on racial attitudes would be mediated by these threats. It is further anticipated that males, younger people, and Whites will show higher levels of realistic and symbolic threats as well as more negative racial attitudes.

Method

Participants

Ninety-six students from a midwestern university participated in the study; they did not receive any incentive or class credit for their involvement in this research. The main focus for background information was race in relation to realistic threats, symbolic threats, and level of comfort. Breakdown of the 96 participants' ethnicity was as follows: 68.75% Caucasian, 22.91% African American, and 8.33% other. Each participant was properly informed prior to completion of the survey and was adequately debriefed afterwards. Data were collected in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association, 2010).

Materials

A 40-item questionnaire was compiled using questions from the Racial Attitudes Questionnaire (Stephan, 1993), as well as 16 new items. The questionnaire used only the first two sections of the Racial Attitudes Questionnaire which focused on realistic and symbolic threats. The 16 remaining items focused on self-reported background information and data on diversity of upbringing in school and place of worship, as well as feelings of comfort around different races/ethnicities. Sample items include, "My parents instilled racial differences in me as a child," and "My schools taught me about different cultures other than the basic American History." The realistic threats component included 12 items which concentrated on political and economic fears, such as "The tax system favors Blacks," and "Blacks dominate American politics more than they should" (Stephan, 1993). The symbolic threats section, also composed of 12 items examining perceived differences in the values and belief systems between Blacks and

Whites. For instance, two samples are, “Whites and Blacks have very different values,” and “Blacks regard themselves as morally superior to Whites” (Stephan, 1993). Each item was assessed on a 7-point Likert scale that ran from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Procedure

With only a limited number of exceptions, the participants were students in psychology classes (one intro to philosophy class was surveyed) who, as previously stated received no credit or any other incentive for their involvement in this study. They completed the questionnaire in nearly 100% monocultural groups ranging from 12 to 30 people. Due to the overwhelming high population of White students, a confederate (White) was employed in order to avoid any experimenter’s bias; other than a few exceptions, the measures were administered by someone of the same race as the participants.

Results

There were five independent variables (age, gender, ethnicity, whether they grew up in a diverse environment, and influence of parental beliefs) and three dependent variables (level of realistic threat, level of symbolic threat, and how comfortable they feel around individuals not in their in-group). To test the hypothesis that realistic and symbolic threats would predict negative racial attitudes and that the effects of negative out-group contact and perceptions of status inequalities on racial attitudes would be mediated by these threats a one-tailed Pearson-r test was performed. Results indicated no significant difference in attitude based on race (or any of the other independent variables tested). The descriptive statistics for realistic and symbolic threats indicate that overall, people seem to show higher levels of symbolic threats ($m=36.45$) than realistic ($m= 25.54$). When examining the influence of Race only, there is no significant

difference in the realistic threats, symbolic threats, and comfort level – although, the data does trend in that direction ($t(84)=-1.25$, $p=.108$ and $t(85)=1.483$, $p=.071$). The three dependent variables were all higher in Blacks but not high enough to accept the alternative hypothesis. Specific results can be found in Table 1.1 and Table 1.2 follows with group statistics (1 = Blacks and 2 = Whites).

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
RealThreat	Equal variances assumed	.492	.485	-1.248	84	.216	-4.29011	3.43887	-11.12869	2.54847
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.327	37.809	.192	-4.29011	3.23260	-10.83526	2.25504
SymbolicThreat	Equal variances assumed	2.719	.103	1.483	85	.142	6.20779	4.18515	-2.11341	14.52900
	Equal variances not assumed			1.184	25.381	.247	6.20779	5.24112	-4.57830	16.99388
Comfort	Equal variances assumed	4.063	.047	1.052	83	.296	.94615	.89914	-.84220	2.73451
	Equal variances not assumed			.891	25.508	.381	.94615	1.06167	-1.23818	3.13049

Group Statistics

	Race1	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
RealThreat	1.00	21	22.5714	12.47225	2.72167
	2.00	65	26.8615	14.06222	1.74420
SymbolicThreat	1.00	21	41.5714	22.59994	4.93171
	2.00	66	35.3636	14.41328	1.77415
Comfort	1.00	20	27.7000	4.40215	.98435
	2.00	65	26.7538	3.20659	.39773

So, in keeping a good spirit, further examination and statistical analysis was done beyond what the original hypothesis called for and even then, there were no significant findings. For instance, an Independent T-Test was done using whether or not the participant was from a diverse environment and even then, those who answered “No” showed only slightly higher levels of realistic and symbolic threats. Also, gender was taken into account in a third Independent T-

Test. Again, the data indicated that males had only a tad bit more realistic and symbolic fears than their female counterparts. In addition, the type of area the participant grew up in (suburban urban, rural, and other) was considered as a possible contributing factor. As far as realistic threats, participants from rural areas had only a slightly higher realistic threat; suburban participants were a touch higher than the rest with symbolic threats. They all were nearly equal in the level of comfort.

Discussion

The original hypothesis stated: Realistic and symbolic threats would predict negative racial attitudes and that the effects of negative out-group contact and perceptions of status inequalities on racial attitudes would be mediated by these threats. None of the variables tested yielded significant results, therefore making it impossible for the data to support the hypothesis. The original fear was that participants would not feel free to complete the survey with their own truths unless a person of the same race administered it; however, the use of a confederate in order to avoid experimenters bias did not appear to have the desired effect on the results.

Limitations

Last semester, when the topic was initially selected, race was nowhere near as polarizing an issue as it has become in recent months but only in the United States but also at McKendree University. It appears as though that seemingly racially charged incidents in Ferguson, Ohio, and New York has had a significant influence on U.S. society as a whole. Closer examination of the campus climate at McKendree University indicate a strong divide which may account for the lackluster results of this study. Perhaps participants did not feel comfortable enough to share their true feelings because of all of the things going on. For instance, 10 of the 96 participants of

this study failed to answer key questions posed in the survey; all 10 of those students identified as White or Caucasian. It could be that the tension felt on campus played a role in whether or not individuals felt comfortable enough to even answer survey items, respond to them honestly. Furthermore, there have been clear hate crimes committed against at least one Black student on campus, in the form of verbal threats, vandalism, and anonymous online harassment.

Implications

In the future, this study can be modified in order to receive more accurate data; it is difficult at times when relying on self-reported data and the honesty of participants to be truthful on tough subjects. It would be great if there were more diversity within the population as far as ethnicity and background. The big variable that was not considered was socioeconomic status (SES); classism appears to be just as big if not a bigger determinant in the social standing of an individual. A person's position in society may influence how they see themselves as well as others and it could be beneficial to reexamine the hypothesis by taking SES into account. Nonetheless, the findings have been interesting considering the current climate on campus and the collective upheaval by American citizens; it appears that race will likely always play some part in the way people view the world.

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Appendix

Comfort Zone Survey

Background Information

Gender?

Female

Male

Age?

Where do you live during school?

On Campus?

Off Campus?

What is your race/ethnicity?

- African
- African American
- Asian
- Asian American
- Caucasian
- European
- Native American
- Other

If other, please specify.

What type of area did you grow up in?

Suburbs

Urban

Rural

Other

Do you consider the area you grew up in diverse?

Yes No

Instructions: Use the scale printed below each item to indicate your agreement with each of the following statements.

My parents instilled racial differences in me as a child. Example: They taught you one race was superior to another.

1
strongly disagree

2

3

4

5

6

7

strongly agree

strongly disagree

strongly agree

24. Whites do not get as much respect from Blacks as they deserve.

1
strongly disagree

2

3

4

5

6

7

strongly agree