

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL LEGACY OF BARACK OBAMA: THE IMPACT OF THE FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES ON INDIVIDUALS' SOCIAL COGNITION

Luis M. Rivera
Rutgers University, Newark

E. Ashby Plant
Florida State University

The election of Barack Obama as the first African American to be President of the United States was a momentous event. Because the U.S. constituency (including its majority, Whites) elected an individual who defied history and negative stereotypes, pundits concluded that the U.S. had entered a new “post-racial” era. Indeed, social cognition scientists adopted the “Obama effect” to classify the beneficial consequences of Obama as a single African-American exemplar on affect, cognition, and behavior, but these effects have been challenged. As we come to the conclusion of Obama’s presidency, this special issue revisits the Obama effect. Six empirical articles collectively examine the factors that create the Obama effect in the first place, and the boundary conditions of the Obama effect ameliorating stereotyping and prejudice and benefiting the social cognition of African Americans themselves. Furthermore, each article provides insight into the potential theoretical and practical implications of Obama’s legacy for psychology.

Keywords: Obama, ethnicity, race, prejudice, self, African Americans

We wish to especially thank all of the reviewers for their thoughtful comments on the articles published in this special issue.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Luis M. Rivera, Department of Psychology, Smith Hall, 101 Warren St., Rutgers University, Newark, NJ 07102; E-mail: luis@psychology.rutgers.edu, or E. Ashby Plant, Department of Psychology, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306; E-mail: plant@psy.fsu.edu.

The history of African Americans in the United States is replete with inhumane treatment, structural disadvantages, and intergroup challenges. The arrival of African indentured servants in 1619, their and their future generations' subsequent enslavement through 1865, and the Jim Crow period that persisted through the 1950s all highlight the unfortunate milestones that African Americans have had to overcome (Takaki, 2008). The need and ensuing desire for social justice have led to significant positive changes at structural, intergroup, and interpersonal levels. One meaningful sign of this progress is the success of prominent African Americans in various professional domains including business, arts and entertainment, politics, science, sports, and social activism. Indeed, if asked to imagine such African Americans, individuals might spontaneously think of Oprah Winfrey, the business and media mogul; Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American justice on the Supreme Court of the United States; Colin Powell, the first African-American United States Secretary of State; Venus Williams, the first African-American (male or female) tennis player to be ranked number one in the world, and her sister, Serena Williams, winner of 22 singles Grand Slams and arguably the greatest athlete (male or female) of all time; and, finally, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was a Baptist minister and the widely respected activist and leader of the Civil Rights movement.

Notwithstanding the collective and powerful presence of these and countless others, perhaps the single and most significant indicator of African Americans' progress to date is Barack Hussein Obama who made history when he became the first African American elected President of the United States. As is the case for virtually every prominent and successful African American, Obama's path to the White House was not an easy one. He grew up with a single parent (a risk factor for poor behavioral outcomes; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2003), struggled with the absence of his father, and experienced the negative effects of interpersonal and institutional racial discrimination on his self and identity (Obama, 2004). Despite these setbacks, Obama received a bachelor's degree in political science from Columbia University, completed law school at Harvard University, was a professor of law at the University of Chicago, and was the United States senator of the state of Illinois. Then, after long hard-fought battles against his opponents, in 2008 Obama was elected and later re-elected in 2012 as the 44th president of the United States. Media exposed the world to the momentous and historical event of a strongly identified Black man who defied all odds to obtain arguably the most influential position in the world. Moreover, because the United States constituency (including its majority, Whites) elected an African American, whose ethnic-racial group has suffered from systematic stigma throughout time, many pundits concluded that the United States had begun to move from its atrocious African-American history to a new "post-racial" era (Dyson, 2016; King, 2012).

Among social psychologists, the prominence of President Obama led to the main hypothesis that he is a single role model powerful enough to positively influence fellow African Americans and intergroup relations in general. Indeed, social cognition scientists adopted the term the "Obama effect" to classify the benefi-

cial consequences of Obama as a single significant African-American exemplar on self-perception, person perception, the development of social cognition, and the intersection of affect and cognition (Columb & Plant, 2011; Fuller-Rowell, Burrow, & Ong, 2011; Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009; Ong, Burrow, & Fuller-Rowell, 2012; Plant, Devine, Cox, Columb, Miller, Goplen, & Peruche, 2009). For African Americans, Obama is a strong and compelling exemplar because he has defied stereotypes on multiple levels and may serve to buffer the threat of stigma on their self-concept and its subsequent effects on behavior (Fuller-Rowell et al., 2011; Marx et al., 2009). For non-African Americans, the Obama effect can attenuate automatically activated associations between African Americans and negative evaluations, thus leading to lower levels of implicit racism (Columb & Plant, 2011; Plant et al., 2009). However, the Obama effect on social cognition has been challenged by other research (e.g., Aronson, Jannone, McGlone, & Johnson-Campbell, 2009; Schmidt & Nosek, 2010).

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

As the world witnesses the conclusion of Obama's presidency in 2016, this special issue of *Social Cognition* sought to revisit the Obama effect and further understand its consequences on attitudes toward African Americans and the self-concept of African Americans themselves. To this end, the research in this special issue tests the contextual factors that shape the Obama effect, such as media depictions of Obama, as well as the Obama effect's underlying social cognitive processes, such as mental representations and their associative processes. Finally, the special issue tests the limitations of the Obama effect by identifying who does and does not benefit from exposure to Obama as a single positive African-American exemplar. Six articles adopted experimental and large-scale cross-sectional designs, recruited participants at different developmental stages, and measured outcomes resulting from both explicit (controlled) and implicit (automatic) social cognitive processes. Collectively, and more broadly speaking, this special issue represents new directions for research on the roles of in-group and out-group exemplars in influencing social cognitive processes.

MEDIA SHAPES THE OBAMA EFFECT

Consistent with the general hypothesis that mass media influences human thought, affect, and action via social cognitive processes (Bandura, 2001), exposure to portrayals of Obama in the news may be one plausible and important contextual source of the Obama effect. In the first empirical article of this special issue, March, Kendrick, Fritzlen, and Olson argue that, like any attitude object, attitudes toward Obama can be influenced by depictions of him presented with contextually positive or negative texts or images in news media. Thus, they posit that incidental exposure to valenced news content is automatically associated with Obama

via evaluative conditioning mechanisms. However, this effect was expected to be moderated by the strength of a perceiver's attitude toward Obama *prior to* news exposure. Individuals with relatively strong Obama attitudes were predicted to be less likely to misattribute the source of their affective evaluations of Obama as a function of how he is portrayed (because they are already aware of the source of their affect). Therefore, media depictions should be more likely to influence individuals with relatively weak and less-developed Obama attitudes. They provide support for their ideas across two experiments with high ecological validity by exposing participants to real-life portrayals of Obama found in two popular news websites, namely FoxNews.com and CNN.com, and examining the differential effects of these media representations on implicit associations between Obama and positive versus negative stimuli. This research has clear implications for one contextual factor that influences the existence and nature of the Obama effect in the first place (at least for some individuals). Specifically, the Obama effect itself is likely highly affected by Obama's portrayal in media outlets, regardless of his actual accomplishments. These findings also suggest that frequent negative representations of Obama could create negative associations with Obama that could result in a different type of Obama effect.

OBAMA EFFECT ON ATTITUDES TOWARD AFRICAN AMERICANS

The literature on the effect of out-group exemplars on attitudes toward those out-groups is predicated on the assumption that exposure to *multiple* exemplars via primary (e.g., frequent intergroup interactions) or secondary experiences (e.g., media outlets) is sufficient to alter group-attribute mental associations. Indeed, individuals with high intergroup contact and those who complete an intervention in which they read about counter-stereotypical out-group members exhibit lower levels of implicit and explicit prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Dasgupta & Rivera, 2008). However, what is particularly compelling about the Obama effect is that Obama may serve as a *single* exemplar sufficient to influence group-based social cognitive processes. Indeed, the Obama effect was largely established in the social cognition literature when researchers demonstrated that both subtle and overt cues about Obama and/or his successes ameliorate negative perceptions and judgments of African Americans (Columb & Plant, 2011; Fuller-Rowell et al., 2011; Marx et al., 2009; Ong et al., 2012; Plant et al., 2009). The next three empirical articles in this special issue extend this research.

First, Columb and Plant revisit their previous work conducted when Obama was first elected and where they demonstrated that exposure to Obama reduced implicit anti-Black evaluative bias (Columb & Plant, 2011; Plant et al., 2009). They examine whether this Obama effect on implicit bias persists toward the end of his second and final term as president. This is a compelling goal because Obama's performance throughout his two-term presidency can shape perceivers' evaluations of him as president and, in turn, of him as a positive and counter-stereotypical African-American exemplar. If Obama as president is evaluated negatively, then

Obama may no longer act as a positive and counter-stereotypical group exemplar, and thus, exposure to Obama may be ineffective for reducing implicit prejudice. Columb and Plant's argument, however, is that regardless of his individual accomplishments (or lack thereof), his re-election and persistent presence as a powerful leader in the world are signs of significant and positive success and, thus, maintain his status as a positive exemplar of African Americans. Two experiments tested if Obama's perceived stereotypicality and perceived valence underlie an Obama effect on implicit racism, consistent with their prior research, but also on a new outcome, implicit racial stereotyping. Furthermore, they test the unique roles of valence and stereotypicality as factors underlying exemplar effects by including a second exemplar, Kobe Bryant, a well-known American basketball player who, like Obama, is perceived to be positive, but, unlike Obama, is perceived to be stereotypical of African Americans. They present findings indicating that exposure to both Obama and Bryant has a positive influence on implicit racial prejudice and stereotyping, which points to the importance of the positivity or valence of an exemplar for influencing social cognition. Altogether, their contribution to the special issue is particularly important because they experimentally decompose two dimensions linked to the social cognitive processes underlying group exemplar effects on person and group perception.

In the article that follows, Skinner and Cheadle challenge the hypothesis that the Obama effect necessarily constitutes a benefit on attitudes toward African Americans by demonstrating the conditions under which exposure to Obama may *increase* implicit prejudice against African Americans. Consistent with group threat theory, they argue that Obama as U.S. president may represent a threat to White Americans who have enjoyed relatively high status and, thus, may feel that they have something to lose after being reminded that an out-group member holds a position of power. To test their hypothesis, the authors examined White Americans' implicit racial bias following a *power threat*, which reminded participants of Obama's election as a racial milestone and thereby highlighted out-group power, a *majority threat*, which highlighted the shift in demographics by which White Americans would become the quantitative minority, or no prime (i.e., control). Their general hypothesis was that when White Americans experienced a threat to their power and status, they would express heightened implicit prejudice against African Americans relative to control. However, the authors posited that individuals who are internally motivated to respond without prejudice should be less threatened by group threats to power or status, and thus less responsive to the presented threats. Consistent with predictions, when exposed to a power threat, only participants with lower internal motivation to respond without prejudice responded with increased implicit racial prejudice relative to those in the control condition. Skinner and Cheadle's contribution to the special issue highlights the limitations of the Obama effect. Although exposure to Obama may generally benefit intergroup relations, when he is framed in terms of his relative status and power (and presumably African Americans in general are perceived as increasing in status and power), he may signal a threat to the privileged position of Whites in

the United States, at least among those who do not strongly hold egalitarianism as a deeply rooted value.

In the last of three articles on the relation between the Obama effect and attitudes toward African Americans, Schmidt and Axt follow up on an early large-sample investigation of racial attitudes immediately following Obama's election (Schmidt & Nosek, 2010). Schmidt and Nosek (2010) did not find evidence of substantive changes in explicit or implicit racial attitudes seven months after Obama was initially elected (including four months into his presidency). In their current article, Schmidt and Axt examined whether there were changes in racial attitudes during the first seven years of Obama's presidency, a timely period in which Americans should have had frequent exposure to Obama's leadership and his position on the world's stage. Following a thorough review of the mixed correlational and experimental evidence of the Obama effect on explicit and implicit racial biases, they re-examine explicit and implicit racial attitudes using a large convenience but diverse sample of American visitors to the Project Implicit website (*N*s up to approximately 2,200,000). Furthermore, they investigated changes in implicit and explicit attitudes toward Obama and if such attitudes account for variance in attitudes toward African Americans in general. Across their analyses, they account for the possible impact of meaningful demographic variables such as political orientation, ethnic-racial identification, and age. Their findings indicated no substantive change in implicit evaluations of African Americans or of Obama during this time. Schmidt and Axt's article is an important contribution to the collective work in this special issue because it provides a naturalistic test of population-level changes in racial attitudes while the first African American serves as president of the United States. However, their data paint a different picture from the other articles on the relation between the Obama effect and implicit racial bias and implicit responses to Obama. The authors discuss reasons for the varying findings across the different approaches to examining the Obama effect and how the present work relates to other findings regarding the malleability of implicit attitudes.

OBAMA EFFECT ON THE SOCIAL COGNITION OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

The final two articles in the special issue shift the focus of the Obama effect target to African-American youth and adults. Exposure to Obama as an admired African American may be sufficiently influential to shape African Americans' self and person perceptions. Obama's remarkable and counter-stereotypic successes in academia and politics, particularly his ascendancy to the United States presidency, qualify him to be a potentially particularly effective role model. Role model studies have demonstrated that the real or imagined presence of a single positive role model can ameliorate stigmatized individuals' self-perceptions and performance behaviors (Lockwood, 2006; Marx & Goff, 2005; Marx & Roman, 2002), particularly when the role model is perceived as competent in the stereotyped domain and when his or her achievements are perceived as personally relevant and attainable (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Marx & Roman, 2002). To the extent that Obama meets

these conditions, he may attenuate negative stereotype effects and even improve intergroup relations by altering mental representations of the self and groups and their underlying associations.

Consistent with these ideas, Ong, Burrow, and Cerrada adopt a social broadening perspective to examine the idea that the cognitive broadening effects produced by positive emotions may extend to social perspective taking. Given the link between positive emotions and increased self-other overlap, they argue that Obama may be a source of positive emotions that in turn influence how African Americans view themselves in relation to others. That is, to the extent that Obama increases the overlap between mental representations of the self and others, African Americans should be more likely to see themselves and others as part of a larger whole. Moreover, they argue that African Americans with strong cultural socialization (i.e., experiences that promote knowledge about and pride in one's ethnic-racial heritage) should be most susceptible to an Obama effect on social broadening because they have a stronger sense of belonging with their group, higher collective self-esteem, and racial pride, which are all sources of positive emotions. Two studies provide evidence that exposure to Obama elicits positive emotions, which contribute to perceiving a greater overlap between the self and people of other races. The second study demonstrates that this effect is only observed among African Americans who are high in cultural socialization. Their research is particularly compelling because it highlights the role of affect in social cognitive processes that in turn can have downstream beneficial consequences for intergroup closeness and peaceful relations.

In the final article of the special issue, Rivera and Benitez integrate theories of social categorization and social identity to demonstrate that the Obama effect extends to changing African-American youth and adults' mental representations of the self and group stereotypes, thus reducing self-stereotyping associations. One way to change the mental representations of groups and its organization around a prototype is by introducing a group exemplar, which is a group member who separates himself or herself from the prototype. Exposure to exemplars facilitates change in existing mental representations, which then affects subsequent group perceptions and judgments. Rivera and Benitez apply these social cognitive principles to test the effect of in-group exemplars on African Americans' self-perceptions. Furthermore, they argue that the effect of in-group exemplars is contingent upon African Americans' subjective ethnic-racial identification. Specifically, because the group is more central and important to strongly identified group members, they are more likely than weakly identified group members to be sensitive to the beneficial effect of exposure to Obama as a single exemplar or multiple in-group exemplars (Obama, Oprah, etc.) on self-stereotyping judgments. Their data from two experiments suggest that Obama's historical success may prove over time to chronically inspire African Americans to look to their own group and its members when needing a buffer against the impact of stigma-based threats. In this way, structurally based interventions intended to reduce stigma and its effects may also consider the powerful impact of the mere presence of inspirational fellow in-group members.

FINAL THOUGHTS

When we first proposed to edit this *Social Cognition* issue on the Obama effect, our research goal was to further understand the role of Obama as the first African American elected President of the United States in the social cognitive processes of African-American and non-African-American individuals. In considering the impact of Obama on social cognition we believed that it was important to examine factors specific to the individual as well as the individual's broader social context because both factors (independently or jointly) can add complexity to the Obama effect. Our practical goal was to share research that can provide insight into the potential long-term implications of Obama's presidency. This goal was driven by the belief that building empirical scientific research on the role of a single exemplar in social cognitive processes is a critical antecedent to developing strong and effective policies and intervention programs. Therefore, each contribution in this special issue provides an explicit discussion on how their empirical research relates to the legacy of Barack Obama for both psychology and society in general. As Obama concludes his final year in office, our hope is that the publication of this special issue makes a valuable contribution to the analysis of Obama's legacy.

REFERENCES

- Aronson, J., Jannone, S., McGlone, M. S., & Johnson-Campbell, T. (2009). The Obama effect: An experimental test. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 45*, 957-960.
- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory of mass communication. *Media Psychology, 3*(3), 265-299.
- Columb, C., & Plant, E. A. (2011). Revisiting the Obama effect: Exposure to Obama reduces implicit prejudice. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 47*, 499-501.
- Dasgupta, N., & Greenwald, A. G. (2001). On the malleability of automatic attitudes: Combating automatic prejudice with images of admired and disliked individuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 81*, 800-814.
- Dasgupta, N., & Rivera, L. M. (2008). When social context matters: The influence of long-term contact and short-term exposure to admired out-group members on implicit attitudes and behavioral intentions. *Social Cognition, 26*, 112-123.
- Dyson, E. M. (2016, June 24). Barack Obama, the president of Black America? What the haters and the hagiographers get wrong. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Fuller-Rowell, T. E., Burrow, A. L., & Ong, A. D. (2011). Changes in racial identity among African American college students following the election of Barack Obama. *Developmental Psychology, 47*, 1608-1618.
- King, R. (2012). Obama and race [Special issue]. *Patterns of Prejudice, 45*.
- Lockwood, P. (2006). "Someone like me can be successful": Do college students need same-gender role models? *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 30*, 36-46.
- Lockwood, P., & Kunda, Z. (1997). Superstars and me: Predicting the impact of role models on the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 73*, 91-103.
- Marx, D. M., & Goff, P. A. (2005). Clearing the air: The effect of experimenter race on target's test performance and subjective experience. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 44*, 645-657.
- Marx, D. M., Ko, S. J., & Friedman, R. A. (2009). The "Obama effect": How a salient role model reduces race-based performance

- differences. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45, 953-956.
- Marx, D. M., & Roman, J. S. (2002). Female role models: Protecting women's math test performance. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28, 1183-1193.
- Obama, B. (2004). *Dreams from my father: A story of race and inheritance*. New York: Crown.
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (2003, April). *Risk and protective factors of child delinquency*. Child Delinquency Bulletin Series. Washington, DC: United States Department of Justice.
- Ong, A. D., Burrow, A. L., & Fuller-Rowell, T. E. (2012). Positive emotions and the social broadening effects of Barack Obama. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 18, 424-428.
- Plant, E. A., Devine, P. G., Cox, W. T., Columb, C., Miller, S. L., Goplen, J., & Peruche, B. M. (2009). The Obama effect: Decreasing implicit prejudice and stereotyping. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45, 961-964.
- Schmidt, K., & Nosek, B. A. (2010). Implicit (and explicit) racial attitudes barely changed during Barack Obama's presidential campaign and early presidency. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 46, 308-314.
- Takaki, R. (2008). *A different mirror: A history of multicultural America*. New York: Little, Brown.