



Defining racism safely: The role of self-image maintenance on white Americans' conceptions of racism

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ABSTRACT

We suggest that the need to maintain a positive self-image motivates White Americans to conceive of racism as a phenomenon rooted in individuals instead of institutions. They do so because an institutional conception of racism, more so than an individual conception of racism, raises their awareness of White privilege, a concept threatening to Whites' self-image. In support of this idea, Experiment 1 found that a self-affirmation manipulation increased Whites' willingness to conceive racism in institutional terms. Experiment 2 found that a self-image threat lowered Whites' willingness to conceive racism in institutional terms. In neither experiment did the self-image maintenance manipulation affect Whites' conceptions of individual racism, suggesting that the individual conception of racism may be a less ego-threatening way for Whites to conceive of racism.

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Introduction

Racism is a sensitive word... how you define it reveals something about you, how you see the world and your place in it. Clarence Page (cited in Mazel, 1998, p. 13)

As the quote above suggests, people have latitude in defining the concept of racism. While most people would probably agree that hostile behaviors driven by racial prejudice are indicative of racism, there is considerably more disagreement regarding whether institutional policies that produce racially disparate outcomes also indicate racism (Brown et al., 2003; D'Souza, 1995). Such disagreement is more than a battle over semantics. The way racism is defined potentially determines both perceptions of who is affected by racism and what constitutes an appropriate response to this problem (O'Brien et al., 2008).

The individual conception of racism suggests that only racial minorities unlucky enough to encounter bigots are affected by racism, and at least tacitly suggests that the appropriate solution to this problem is to identify and educate these bigots. From this perspective, Whites are only implicated in the problem of racism if they personally harbor and act on their prejudiced attitudes. In contrast, the institutional conception of racism suggests that racism is propagated by institutional practices and policies that produce disparate outcomes for different racial groups. According to the institutional conception of racism, all people, regardless of

racial group membership, are affected by racism such that racial minorities are disadvantaged by institutional racism whereas White Americans are advantaged by it.

We argue that White Americans may be motivated to avoid conceiving of racism as an institutional phenomenon because this conception is associated with an increased awareness of the advantages associated with belonging to the dominant racial group. Therefore, accepting an institutional conception of racism may raise Whites' awareness of White privilege—a concept threatening to Whites' self-image (Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007). Consequently, Whites may be motivated to conceive of racism as an individual phenomenon because such a conception allows them to maintain relatively low perceptions of White privilege.

Individual and institutional conception of racism

The individual conception of racism equates racism with discrimination caused by negative attitudes toward members of a discriminated against group (Allport, 1958). Under the individual conception of racism, a discriminatory incident would be considered a racist incident if an individual acted on his or her racially hostile attitudes in order to harm a member of a disliked racial group. For example, if a taxi driver refused to pick up Black customers because he harbored negative attitudes toward Black Americans as a group, this could be considered an act of individual racism (Lueck, 1999).

In contrast, an institutional conception of racism equates racism with institutional rules and procedures that (intentionally or not)

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have a disproportionately positive and negative effect on members of dominant and subordinate groups, respectively (Feagin & Feagin, 1978; Friedman, 1975; Sivanandan, 1976; see also Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Unlike the individual conception of racism, the institutional conception of racism suggests that racism can occur without the deliberately discriminatory actions of prejudiced individuals (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967). For example, if a downtown renewal project inflicted a disproportionate amount of harm on Black Americans by forcing them to relocate from their homes and communities, this could be considered an example of institutional racism.

Whites' conceptions of racism

Past research has shown that White Americans tend to perceive less overall racism than Black Americans (Hochschild, 1995); moreover, this discrepancy is larger when racism is described in institutional as compared to individual terms (Barbarin & Gilbert, 1981; Pfeifer & Schneider, 1974). For example, past work has found that Whites are less likely than Blacks to perceive non-Whites' lack of knowledge about opportunities in an organization as indicative of racism, despite the possibility that the low level of knowledge among minorities could be caused by the institutionalized practice of passing along such information via informal networks from which non-Whites are frequently excluded (Barbarin & Gilbert, 1981; see also Ibarra, 1993). Thus, it appears that Whites are less willing to consider disparate outcomes that fall along racial lines as indicative of racism when such outcomes are caused by institutional practices.

Although past research suggests that White Americans tend not to conceive of racism in institutional terms, this research tends to be descriptive in nature and provides few explanations as to why this is the case. We suggest that self-image maintenance concerns might play a role in accounting for Whites' reluctance to conceive of racism in institutional terms. In support of this idea, recent research suggests that when self-image concerns are allayed by a self-affirmation manipulation, Whites are more likely to see racism across a variety of scenarios (Adams, Tormala, & O'Brien, 2006). Moreover, follow-up analyses of these same data suggest that the effect of self-affirmation on perceived racism is stronger on scenarios describing discrimination caused by institutional mechanisms (Adams, O'Brien, & Nelson, 2006, footnote 3). We argue that because the institutional conception of racism may raise awareness of White privilege, Whites may be motivated to define racism not in institutional terms, but rather as a phenomenon caused by the prejudices of individuals.

White privilege

White privilege refers to the unearned advantages that bestow upon Whites a disproportionate share of economic, social, and cultural capital (Lipsitz, 1998; Rains, 1998). White privilege has been described as an "...invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions..." that afford Whites, but not racial minorities, a myriad of advantages (McIntosh, 1997, p. 291). Typical examples of White privilege include Whites' ability to bequeath wealth acquired during the long period in American history in which racial minorities were prevented (legally and illegally) from acquiring high quality educations, owning property, and working in all but the most menial of professions (Katznelson, 2005; Shapiro, 2004).

We suggest that awareness of White privilege represents a threat to Whites' self-image because of the discomfort associated with the idea that their personal successes were facilitated by unearned group-based privileges. In the parlance of attribution theory (Kelley, 1987), White privilege represents an external attribution for Whites' personal success that threatens to discount

their internal attributions (e.g., talent and effort) for such success. As such, for the benefit of their self-image, Whites may be motivated to downplay the existence of White privilege. In support of this idea, recent research suggests that Whites' perceptions of privilege decrease when motivated (by a self-image threat) to maintain a positive self-image and increase when the motive to maintain a positive self-image is satisfied (by a self-affirmation; Lowery et al., 2007). As such, it appears that perceptions of White privilege pose a threat to Whites' self-image.

The connection between conceptions of racism and white privilege

Although studies of racism typically focus on racism's pernicious effects on racial minorities, racism can also be said to affect Whites—specifically, the unjust impoverishment of minority groups also leads to the unjust enrichment of majority groups (Feagin, 2000). As such, among Whites, there should be a psychological connection between the concept of racism and White privilege awareness. However, the fact that Whites tend to conceive of racism in individual terms may obscure the relationship between racism and White privilege because Whites may be less likely to translate the discriminatory actions of a handful of bigots into an awareness of systemic White privilege. In contrast, if Whites were to conceive racism as a phenomenon caused by institutional policies and practices, then they may be more likely to see how racism, through its institutional mechanisms, privileges them as a group.

Overview of studies

We hypothesize that self-image concerns may motivate White Americans to avoid conceiving of racism as an institutional phenomenon because such a conception increases their awareness of White privilege, a concept threatening to Whites' self-image. In contrast, the individual conception of racism, which centers on the behavior of prejudiced individuals, may not increase Whites' awareness of White privilege. For this reason, the individual conception of racism may be a less threatening way for Whites to conceive of racism.

Across two experiments we expected participants whose self-image maintenance motivation is protected by a self-affirmation to endorse an institutional conception of racism to a greater extent than participants in either a control condition (Experiment 1) or participants whose self-image is threatened (Experiment 2). Given that previous research has shown that White privilege is threatening to Whites' self-image, we also expected participants whose self-image is protected by a self-affirmation to report increased perceptions of White privilege. Finally, we expected Whites' acceptance of an institutional conception of racism to mediate the effect of self-image concerns on perceptions of White privilege. In contrast, we did not expect the manipulation of self-image motivation to affect the individual conception of racism, nor did we expect the individual conception of racism to predict participants' perceptions of White privilege.

Experiment 1

Research suggests that affirming individuals of values central to their self-concept reduces their sensitivity to a wide-range of self-image threats (Steele, 1988). Because people are motivated to maintain a globally positive sense of self, specific self-image threats can be dealt with by bringing to mind values that are personally important. In this way, affirming an important personal value can protect individuals from thoughts and information that otherwise would be too threatening to accept (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). For example, self-affirmation makes it easier to persuade

individuals of beliefs that challenge their previously held views (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000). Self-affirmation also makes people more receptive to information suggesting that they are engaging in behavior detrimental to their health and subsequently more likely to discontinue such risky behavior (Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000).

If the institutional conception of racism threatens Whites' self-image, a self-affirmation manipulation, by satisfying the motive to maintain a positive self-image, should make White participants more willing to conceive racism as an institutional phenomenon and also increase their perceptions of White privilege (Lowery et al., 2007). Moreover, if awareness of White privilege is increased when racism is conceived of in institutional rather than individual terms, then we should find that conceptions of institutional racism mediate the effect of self-affirmation on perceptions of White privilege. In contrast, self-affirmation should not affect the degree to which Whites' endorse an individual conception of racism if this conception of racism does not threaten Whites' self-image.

Methods

Participants and procedure

Thirty-four self-identified White participants (24 women, 10 men; mean age = 21.44, $SD = 4.14$) from a public west coast university completed a web-based survey in exchange for \$3.

Manipulated and measured variables

Self-affirmation manipulation. Previous research has shown that allowing individuals to write about an important personal value affirms their sense of self (Cohen et al., 2000). Accordingly, participants were asked to rank 11 values in order of personal importance (1 = most important, 11 = least important). The values were as follows: artistic skills/aesthetic expression, sense of humor, relations with friends/family, intelligence, social skills, athletics, musical ability/appreciation, physical attractiveness, creativity, business/managerial skills, and romantic values. Participants in the affirmation condition were asked to write a few sentences explaining why the value they ranked first was important to them personally. Participants in the control (i.e., no affirmation) condition were asked to write a few sentences explaining why the value they ranked ninth might be important to a typical student from their university.

Conceptions of racism. Participants were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale the extent to which they considered various racially disparate outcomes as indicative of racism (1 = *definitely not an example of racism*, 4 = *may be an example of racism*, 7 = *definitely an example of racism*). These items differed with regard to the location of the mechanism (i.e., individuals or institutions) that produced the disparate outcome.

Items assessing the *individual conception* of racism were: (1) "A car salesman offers lower prices to White customers than to non-White customers," (2) "A teacher is overheard using racial slurs to refer to Hispanic and Black students," and (3) "A taxi driver refuses to pick up African Americans who hail his cab" ($\alpha = .71$).

Items assessing the *institutional conception* of racism were: (1) "A city adopts zoning ordinances that prohibit low-income and multifamily households in predominantly White communities," (2) "A university ends its affirmative action program, resulting in a large drop in Black enrollment," and (3) "A downtown renewal project results in the dislocation of a large number of racial minorities from their homes and communities" ($\alpha = .70$).

White privilege. White privilege awareness was measured using the following items from Swim and Miller's (1999) White Privilege

scale: (1) "White people have certain advantages that minorities do not have in this society," (2) "I feel that White skin in the United States opens many doors for Whites during their everyday lives," (3) "My skin color is an asset in my everyday life," and (4) "I do not feel that White people have any benefits or privileges due to their race" (reverse scored). Participants indicated their agreement with these items on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale ($\alpha = .72$).

Results

Preliminary analyses

Descriptive statistics and correlations between the measured variables are provided in Table 1. Replicating previous work (Barbarin & Gilbert, 1981; Pfeifer & Schneider, 1974), a within-subjects ANOVA revealed that the individual discrimination items ($M = 6.47$, $SD = .80$) were seen as more indicative of racism than the institutional items ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.32$), Wilk's $\lambda = .18$, $F(1,33) = 146.00$, $p < .001$. In addition, the institutional racism measure was more strongly associated with White privilege perceptions than the individual racism measure (see Table 2).

Main analyses

Institutional racism. To determine if self-affirmation had an effect on participants' conception of institutional racism, we subjected this variable to a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) using the affirmation manipulation as the between-subjects factor. This analysis revealed a significant effect of self-affirmation, such that participants who were self-affirmed endorsed an institutional conception of racism ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.23$) more than participants who were not self-affirmed ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.27$), $F(1,33) = 4.95$, $p < .05$.

Individual racism. The individual racism variable was subjected to the same analysis. This analysis found that those who were self-affirmed ($M = 6.56$, $SD = .72$) were no different than those who were not self-affirmed ($M = 6.38$, $SD = .89$) in terms of agreement that the individual racism items were indicative of racism, $F < 1$.

White privilege. Perceptions of White privilege were analyzed using a one-way ANOVA. Replicating recent research (Lowery et al., 2007), this analysis revealed that participants in the self-affirmation condition perceived more White privilege ($M = 4.75$, $SD = .70$) than participants in the no affirmation condition ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.02$), $F(1,33) = 5.11$, $p < .05$.

Table 1
Experiment 1 and 2 descriptive statistics and correlations

	Experiment 1		Experiment 2					
	M	SD	1	2	M	SD	1	2
(1) Institutional racism	3.77	1.32			4.20	1.48		
(2) Individual racism	6.47	.80	.32 [†]		6.72	.47	.18	
(3) White privilege	4.43	.92	.49 ^{**}	.20	4.56	1.78	.59 ^{**}	-.06

** $p < .01$.

† $p < .10$.

Table 2
Experiment 1 Results

	B	SE	β	t-value	p-value
Constant	2.66	1.03	—	2.58	.02
Institutional racism	.33	.12	.47	2.87	.01
Individual racism	.05	.19	.05	.27	.79

Dependent variable: Perceptions of White privilege.

Mediation analysis. We predicted that when not affirmed, Whites would be less willing to see examples of institutionally generated disparities as indications of racism partly in order to minimize their perceptions of White privilege. Statistically, this requires that the institutional conception of racism mediate the effect of self-affirmation on White privilege. To test this hypothesis we conducted a mediation analysis in accordance with the procedure prescribed by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, the self-affirmation variable (0 = no affirmation, 1 = affirmation) was found to affect White privilege perceptions, $B = .67$, $SE B = .30$, $\beta = .37$, $p < .05$. Second, participants' conception of institutional racism was also affected by the self-affirmation variable, $B = .95$, $SE B = .43$, $\beta = .37$, $p < .05$. Third, the conception of institutional racism variable and White privilege perceptions were positively related, $B = .34$, $SE B = .11$, $\beta = .49$, $p < .01$. Finally, when the effect of self-affirmation on the institutional conception of racism was controlled, the direct effect of self-affirmation on perceptions of White privilege became non-significant, $B = .40$, $SE B = .30$, $\beta = .22$, $p = .19$. A Sobel test verified that the attenuation of the relationship between self-affirmation condition and perceptions of White privilege was significant, $z = 2.48$, $p < .05$.

Given that the self-affirmation manipulation had no effect on conceptions of individual racism, $B = -.18$, $SE B = .28$, $\beta = -.11$, $p = .52$, no analysis was conducted using this variable as a mediator.

Discussion

Experiment 1 provides evidence for the idea that conceptions of racism are related to Whites' motivation to maintain a positive self-image. Specifically, this study found that Whites are more willing to conceive of racism in institutional terms when the motivation to maintain a positive self-image is satisfied by a self-affirmation manipulation. In addition, the effect of self-affirmation on White privilege perceptions was mediated by Whites' conception of racism as an institutional phenomenon. This mediation suggests that Whites may be motivated to avoid conceiving racism as an institutional phenomenon in order to manage their awareness of White privilege.

Conversely, Whites' conception of individual racism was not affected by the self-affirmation manipulation. This null effect suggests that racism conceived in individual terms, unlike racism conceived in institutional terms, is less threatening to Whites' self-image because an individual conception of racism does not raise awareness of White privilege. In support of this idea, we did not find a significant correlation between White privilege and the individual racism conception. Moreover, White privilege perceptions were better predicted by White's institutional conception of racism than their individual conception (see Table 2). In all, these findings are consistent with the idea that the manner in which White Americans conceive of racism is at least partly determined by self-image maintenance concerns.

Experiment 1 suggests that the individual conception of racism, relative to the institutional conception of racism, may be the less threatening way for Whites to conceive of racism. However, this conclusion needs to be made with caution. Since participants perceived the individual racism items as being highly indicative of racism (6.47 on a 7-point scale across condition), the effect of the self-affirmation manipulation on the individual conception of racism may have been concealed by a ceiling effect on the individual racism variable. Experiment 2 addresses this limitation by including a condition in which participants' self-image is threatened. If the individual conception of racism, like the institutional conception of racism, is sensitive to self-image concerns, then a threat should lower participants' willingness to endorse the individual racism measure relative to those in the self-affirmation con-

dition. In this way, Experiment 2 allows us to more confidently assess if, in fact, the individual conception of racism is a less threatening way for Whites to conceive of racism.

In addition, it is possible that the institutional and the White privilege items were more closely related to one another because they are all part of the same underlying construct—i.e., it is possible that the institutional items are actually measuring perceptions of White privilege. To verify that our variables are each separable constructs, we conducted a factor analysis on the data from Experiments 1 and 2 combined.

Experiment 2

In Experiment 2, White participants' motivation to maintain a positive self-image was manipulated by exposing them to either affirming or threatening feedback on a bogus intelligence test. Consistent with Experiment 1, we expected to find that affirmed participants, relative to those in the threat condition, would express a more institutional conception of racism and an increased awareness of White privilege. Moreover, if the individual conception of racism is, in fact, a less threatening way for Whites to conceive of racism, then we should find no effect of the self-image manipulation on Whites' conceptions of individual racism. In addition, in Experiment 2 we draw from a non-student sample to extend the generalizability of this effect.

Methods

Participants and procedure

Sixty-nine self-identified White participants (5 men, 63 women, 1 gender unreported) participated in this experiment in exchange for a \$5 gift certificate to an online retailer. Participants were recruited from an online participant database maintained at a private west coast university. Mean age was 35.13 ($SD = 10.77$).

Participants were emailed a website URL linking to the study materials. Instructions to the study led participants to believe that they would complete two unrelated surveys. The first survey was described as a project designed to collect psychometric data on a test commonly used by organizations in selecting employees. Participants were informed that such data were needed because little empirical research had been conducted on the properties of the test. In reality, of course, the test was the self-image manipulation. After completing the test, participants were randomly assigned to receive either positive (affirming) or negative (threatening) feedback.

The second part of the study was described as a survey of social issues. Included in this survey were the individual racism items, the institutional racism items, and the White privilege scale used in Experiment 1. Finally, participants were asked to report demographic information.

Manipulated and measured variables

Self-affirmation manipulation. The test administered to participants consisted of 15 items taken from the verbal and logic sections of various Graduate Record Examination (GRE) practice tests. After completing this test, participants in the negative feedback (threat) condition were informed that their score ranked in the 11th percentile. In contrast, participants in the positive feedback (affirmation) condition were told their score ranked in the 89th percentile. This test has been used successfully in previous research as a manipulation of self-image threat (Unzueta, Lowery, & Knowles, 2008; Lowery et al., 2007).

Conceptions of racism. Conceptions of individual ($\alpha = .59$) and institutional racism ($\alpha = .75$) were assessed using the same items used in Experiment 1.

White privilege. White privilege perceptions were assessed using the same items used in Experiment 1 ($\alpha = .92$).

Results

Preliminary analyses

To determine if the individual, institutional, and White privilege items loaded on separate factors, we combined the data from Experiments 1 and 2 ($N = 103$) and conducted a principled component analysis with a Varimax rotation. This analysis revealed that the items measuring individual racism, institutional racism, and White privilege did, in fact, load on three separate factors (see Table 3). This analysis provides an empirical basis for treating these three measures as separate variables.

Replicating Experiment 1, a within-subjects ANOVA revealed that the individual discrimination items ($M = 6.72$, $SD = .47$) were seen as more indicative of racism than the institutional items ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.48$), Wilk's $\lambda = .25$, $F(1,68) = 203.60$, $p < .001$. In addition, like in Experiment 1, institutional racism was more strongly associated with White privilege perceptions than individual racism (see Table 4). Table 1 provides descriptive statistics and correlations between the measured variables.

Primary analyses

Institutional conception of racism. To determine if the self-affirmation manipulation affected participants' conception of institutional racism, we subjected this measure to a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) using the affirmation manipulation as the between-subjects factor. Replicating Experiment 1, this analysis revealed a significant effect of self-affirmation, such that participants who were affirmed endorsed a more institutional conception of racism ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.33$) than participants who were threatened ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.60$), $F(1,68) = 4.01$, $p < .05$.

Individual conception of racism. In contrast to the analysis reported above, a one-way ANOVA found no effect of self-affirmation on participants' conceptions of individual racism, $F(1,68) = .03$, $p = .86$. That is, participants who were threatened ($M = 6.73$, $SD = .43$) were no less willing to label the individual discrimination items as indicative of racism than participants who were self-affirmed ($M = 6.71$, $SD = .52$).

Table 3

Factor analyses with varimax rotation of the individual, institutional, and White privilege items from Experiments 1 and 2

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
% of variance	43.08	17.49	8.30
Ind1	.02	.02	.78
Ind2	.01	.12	.68
Ind3	-.04	.11	.83
Inst1	.40	.65	.15
Inst2	.11	.83	.07
Inst3	.35	.71	.15
Priv1	.86	.29	-.08
Priv2	.75	.47	.04
Priv3	.77	.30	.11
Priv4	.91	.18	.04

Note. Ind = individual racism items 1–3 (see text); Inst = institutional racism items 1–3; Priv = white privilege items (see text). Highest loadings per factor are in bold text.

Table 4

Experiment 2 results

	B	SE	β	t-value	p-value
Constant	2.66	1.03		2.58	.02
Institutional racism	.74	.12	.62	6.23	.001
Individual racism	-.68	.38	-.18	-1.79	.08

Dependent variable: Perceptions of White privilege of White privilege.

White privilege. Next, perceptions of White privilege were analyzed using a one-way ANOVA. Replicating previous research and Experiment 1, this analysis revealed that participants in the self-affirmation condition perceived more White privilege ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.57$) than participants in the threat condition ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.92$), $F(1,68) = 5.56$, $p < .05$.

Mediation analysis. We hypothesized that institutional racism may be threatening to Whites because this conception of racism, relative to the individual conception of racism, raises Whites' awareness of White privilege. To determine if this hypothesis was supported by the present data, we tested to see if conceptions of institutional racism mediated the effect of the self-affirmation manipulation on perceptions of White privilege.

The mediation analysis was conducted in accordance with the procedure prescribed by Baron and Kenny (1986). First, White privilege was regressed on the self-affirmation variable (0 = threat condition, 1 = affirmation condition). This analysis uncovered a significant relationship between these variables, $B = .99$, $SE B = .42$, $\beta = .28$, $p < .05$. Second, participant's conception of institutional racism was regressed on the self-affirmation variable. This analysis found a significantly positive effect of the self-affirmation manipulation on participant's conception of institutional racism, $B = .71$, $SE B = .35$, $\beta = .24$, $p < .05$. A third analysis found that conceptions of institutional racism and White privilege were positively related, $B = .71$, $SE B = .12$, $\beta = .59$, $p < .01$. Finally, the direct effect of self-affirmation on perceptions of White privilege became non-significant when the conception of institutional racism was controlled, $B = .52$, $SE B = .36$, $\beta = .15$, $p = .15$. A Sobel test verified that the attenuation of the direct relationship between self-affirmation and perceptions of White privilege was significant, $z = 1.92$, $p = .05$.

Given that the self-affirmation manipulation had no effect on conceptions of individual racism, $B = .02$, $SE B = .41$, $\beta = .02$, $p = .86$, no analysis was conducted using this variable as a mediator.

Discussion

Experiment 2 found that Whites were more willing to conceive of racism as an institutional phenomenon when the motivation to maintain a positive self-image was appeased by a self-affirmation relative to when this motivation was increased by a self-image threat. This study also supported the idea that the institutional conception of racism may threaten Whites' self-image because this conception raises their awareness of White privilege.

In addition, Experiment 2 replicated the null effect of self-affirmation on conceptions of individual racism found in Experiment 1. Experiment 2, however, provides stronger evidence for the idea that the individual conception of racism may be a less threatening way for Whites to conceive of racism. Specifically, in Experiment 2, the self-image threat manipulation made it possible for agreement that the individual discrimination items indicate racism to decrease, yet this did not occur. This suggests that the null effect of self-affirmation on individual racism reported in Experiment 1 was not simply the byproduct of a ceiling effect on the individual racism measure. Therefore, the result of Experiment 2, coupled with the results from Experiment 1, suggest that conceiving of racism in individual terms may be a psychologically "safer" way for Whites to conceive of racism.

General discussion

The reported studies suggest that Whites' conceptions of institutional racism, but not individual racism, are sensitive to shifts in the motivation to maintain a positive self-image. The present studies also suggest that the institutional conception of racism is

associated with Whites' awareness of White privilege, whereas the conception of racism in individual terms is not.

If one evaluates the results of Experiments 1 and 2, it appears that the institutional conception of racism threatens Whites' self-image because the institutional conception of racism increases their awareness of White privilege, a concept that threatens to discount Whites' internal attributions for personal success. In both studies, the individual conception of racism is insensitive to manipulations of self-image maintenance motivation; neither self-threat nor self-affirmation affects the individual conception of racism. However, an alternative explanation for Experiment 2 might be that threat failed to affect conceptions of individual racism and that an increase in agreement with the individual racism items was obscured by a ceiling effect. Although previous use of the threat manipulation points to its effectiveness (Lowery et al., 2007; Unzueta et al., 2008), future research should include a control condition to rule out this possibility.

The findings presented in this paper are important for several reasons. First, the definition of racism is likely to determine who is thought to be affected by racism. That is, Whites who think of racism as an individual phenomenon may come to believe that only minorities unlucky enough to encounter an occasional bigot are affected by racism. Without an institutional understanding of racism, Whites may come to see racism simply as "scattered acts of bigotry" (Feagin, 2004, p. 205; see also O'Brien et al., 2008). The fact that Whites tend to think of racism in individual terms may explain why many Whites believe that racism is no longer a serious problem and that racial minorities have the same (if not more) opportunities as Whites in the present-day (Hochschild, 1995; see also Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006).

Second, seeing racism as an individual phenomenon may prevent Whites from seeing the ways in which they benefit from racism and other forms of racial inequity. Were Whites to believe that they benefited from such inequity, perhaps they would be more supportive of redistributive social policies like affirmative action. Absent the belief that Whites are benefited by the existing social arrangement, however, Whites may view affirmative action policies and other attempts to address racial inequity as deviations from a colorblind and meritocratic norm (Crosby, 2004; Feagin, 2004; White, 2005). In support of this idea, recent research has shown that framing racial inequity in terms of the advantages bestowed to Whites evokes greater support for affirmative action than inequity framed in terms of the disadvantages encountered by minorities (Lowery et al., 2008).

Third, the manner in which racism is defined may determine what constitutes an appropriate response to racism. It might be that White support for race-based policies like affirmative action depends on the way Whites conceive of racism. Since affirmative action is a collection of social policies adopted at the level of the institution, it might be that only Whites who think of racism as an institutional phenomenon support affirmative action. Whites who think of racism in individual terms may feel that affirmative action policies do not address what they believe to be the root of racism—i.e., the prejudiced attitudes of individuals. Accordingly, Whites who conceive of racism in individual terms may be more in favor of instituting individual-level interventions like diversity management training programs that attempt to change individuals' attitudes and beliefs (see Wrench, 2005). Thus, if proponents of affirmative action wish to increase support for race-based policies like affirmative action that operate at the institutional level, it may be necessary to first convince Whites that racism can emerge from institutional practices and policies, and not just individuals' attitudes.

Finally, the results of the reported experiments are consistent with recent research linking self-image concerns to Whites' views on race-related matters. Specifically, self-image concerns have been linked to Whites' motivation to frame racial inequity in terms

of minority disadvantage instead of White advantage (Lowery et al., 2007). Other work suggests that White men may be motivated to maintain the erroneous belief that affirmative action policies entail the use of illegal quota procedures because such quota beliefs buffer them from self-image threats (Unzueta et al., 2008). As such, the present paper is part of a growing body of literature suggesting that self-image concerns play a role in affecting the manner in which White Americans think about race-related matters.

Future directions

The reported experiments inspire several possible avenues for future research. First, in this paper participants were asked to indicate the perceived level of racism of individual acts of discrimination in which they were not personally involved. Such acts were not linked to Whites' self-image. If participants were accused of personally engaging in individual acts of racism, then perhaps the individual conception of racism would become threatening. In such a situation, a self-affirmation manipulation would probably enable participants to see their own, individual-level acts of discrimination as more indicative of racism. As such, future research should examine the possibility that participants' level of involvement in individual acts of racism can make the individual racism conception increasingly ego-relevant for White Americans.

Second, in the present work we focus on different conceptions of racism, but treat perceptions of privilege as a less complex construct. It might be the case that, just as racism can be conceived in multiple ways, privilege may also be conceived in either individual or institutional terms. Future research should examine this possibility.

Finally, the present work focuses on race, but the same processes might affect individuals' experience of inequity along other dimensions of the social hierarchy. For example, men might be motivated to think of sexism as rooted in individuals' attitudes as opposed to institutional policies and practices. However, the effect of the self-image maintenance motivation on men's conceptions of individual sexism may be further complicated by the fact that many individually sexist acts are benevolently sexist and thus thought to be chivalrous, proper, and in the interest of women (Glick & Fiske, 2001). As such, appealing the motivation to maintain a positive self-image may make men willing to accept that many supposed acts of chivalry are actually instantiations of benevolent sexism. An exploration of the role self-image maintenance motivation plays in men's conceptions of sexism may be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the reported experiments suggest that the motivation to maintain a positive self-image affects Whites' conceptions of racism. Specifically, it appears that an institutional conception of racism threatens Whites' self-image because this conception of racism raises Whites' awareness of White privilege, a concept that threatens to discount Whites' internal attributions for personal success. In contrast, the individual conception of racism may be the "safer" way for Whites to conceive racism because this conception does not increase their awareness of White privilege. As such, White Americans' tendency to conceive of racism more as an individual as opposed to an institutional phenomenon may be motivated by the desire to maintain a positive self-image.

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