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Whites See Racism as a Zero-Sum Game That They Are Now Losing

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Abstract

Although some have heralded recent political and cultural developments as signaling the arrival of a postracial era in America, several legal and social controversies regarding "reverse racism" highlight Whites' increasing concern about anti-White bias. We show that this emerging belief reflects Whites' view of racism as a zero-sum game, such that decreases in perceived bias against Blacks over the past six decades are associated with increases in perceived bias against Whites—a relationship not observed in Blacks' perceptions. Moreover, these changes in Whites' conceptions of racism are extreme enough that Whites have now come to view anti-White bias as a bigger societal problem than anti-Black bias.

Keywords

racism, zero-sum game, bias, affirmative action

> Empathy for one party is always prejudice against another.
> – United States Senator Jeff Sessions (R-Ala), July 13, 2009

Despite the rush in some quarters to anoint contemporary American society as "postracial" in the wake of Barack Obama's election as president, a flurry of legal and cultural disputes over the past decade has revealed a new race-related controversy gaining traction: an emerging belief in anti-White prejudice. Although legal challenges concerning so-called "reverse racism" date back as far as the 1970s (*Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, 1978), such claims have been at the core of an increasing number of high-profile Supreme Court cases in recent years, in domains such as equal access to education (*Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2003; *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003) and employment discrimination (*Ricci v. DeStefano*, 2009)—two of the very issues at the heart of the African American Civil Rights Movement a half-century ago. We suggest that these trends epitomize a more general mindset gaining traction among Whites in contemporary America: the notion that Whites have replaced Blacks as the primary victims of discrimination. This emerging perspective is particularly notable because by nearly any metric—from employment to police treatment, loan rates to education—statistics continue to indicate drastically poorer outcomes for Black than White Americans (e.g., Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Knowles, Persico, & Todd, 2001; Krueger, Rothstein, & Turner, 2006; Munnell, Tootell, Browne, & McEneaney, 1996).

We propose that Whites' belief about the increasing prevalence of anti-White bias reflects a view of racism as a *zero-sum game*, as evident in the comment above by Senator Sessions during a recent Supreme Court nomination hearing, which can be summed up as "less against you means more against me." Indeed, previous research suggests that White Americans perceive increases in racial equality as threatening their dominant position in American society (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), with Whites likely to perceive that actions taken to improve the welfare of minority groups must come at their expense (Eibach & Keegan, 2006). We expected Whites to view racism as a zero-sum game, such that decreases in perceived anti-Black racism over the past six decades would be associated with increases in perceived anti-White racism. Although previous research has not examined whether lower status groups view racism in zero-sum terms, we expected that Blacks might be less likely to perceive gains for Blacks as losses for Whites—perhaps due to a view that the permanent high status of Whites (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004) causes the magnitude of racial disparity to be so great that gains by Blacks do little to affect Whites. Most important, we explored the novel prediction that these changes in Whites' conceptions of racism would be extreme enough that many Whites would view anti-White bias as the bigger societal problem.

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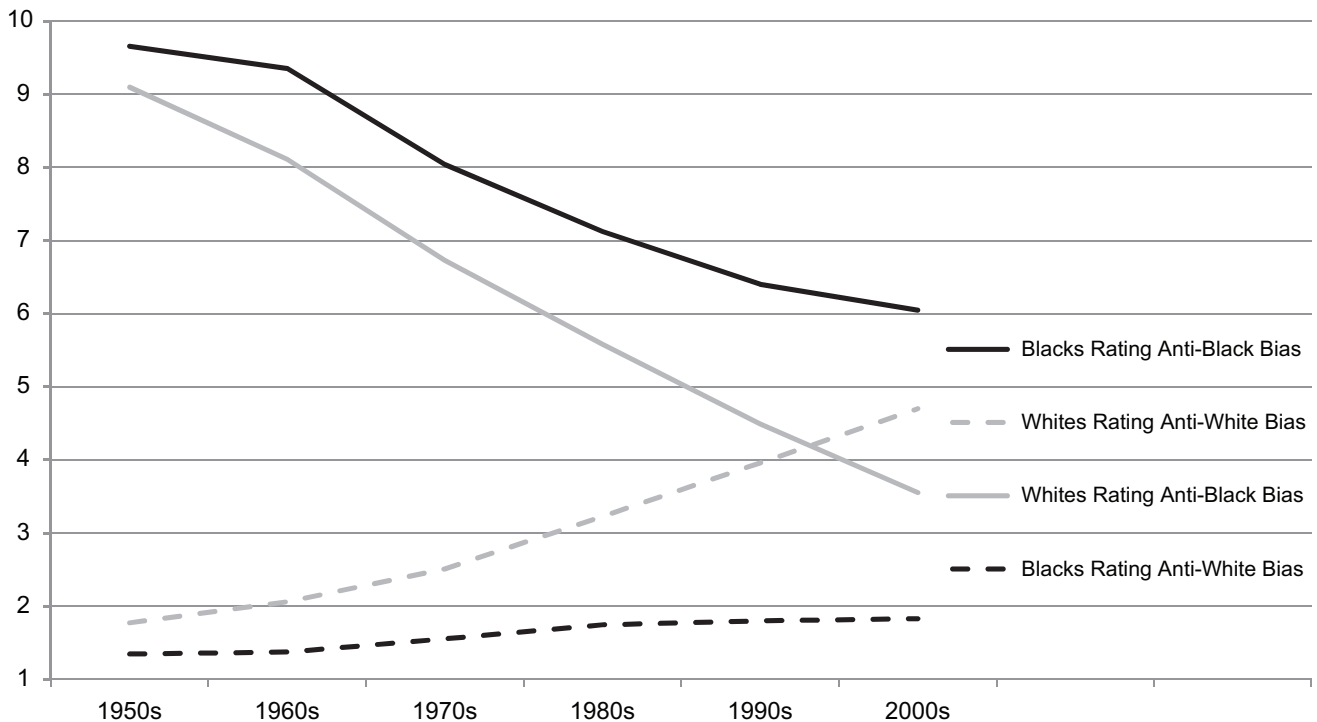
Fig. 1. White and Black respondents' perceptions of anti-White and anti-Black bias in each decade.

To test our hypotheses that many Whites now perceive anti-White bias to be more prevalent than anti-Black bias and that this view is related to Whites' conception of racism in zero-sum terms, we asked a large national sample of Black and White Americans ($N = 417$; $M_{age} = 50.3$, $SD = 13.6$; 57% Female; 209 White, 208 Black) to use a 10-point scale ($1 = not$ *at all*; $10 = very$ *much*) to indicate the extent to which they felt both Blacks and Whites were the target of discrimination in each decade from the 1950s to the 2000s.[1]

Whites See Anti-White Bias as More Prevalent Than Anti-Black Bias

We observed no main effects of respondent race, $F(1, 380) = .14$, $p = .71$, on overall ratings of bias. We observed a significant main effect of decade, such that respondents generally perceived racism to be declining over time, $F(5, 376) = 26.74$, $p < .001$, and a main effect of target race, such that respondents overall perceived greater anti-Black discrimination than anti-White discrimination, $F(1, 380) = 446.38$, $p < .001$. Most important, the three-way interaction between respondent race, target race, and decade was highly significant, $F(5, 376) = 17.39$, $p < .001$. As Figure 1 shows, Black respondents perceived decreases in anti-Black bias over time and relatively nonexistent anti-White bias, but White respondents perceived anti-Black bias as declining even more quickly and anti-White bias as increasing sharply—particularly in recent years. Indeed, we observed a complete reversal over time in White respondents' views of racism. Whereas Blacks saw greater anti-Black bias in every decade, $ts(207) \geq 20.55$, $ps < .001$, this gap reversed in the 2000s for Whites: They perceived more anti-White bias than anti-Black

bias, $t(208) = -3.94$, $p < .001$. By the 2000s, some 11% of Whites gave anti-White bias the maximum rating on our scale in comparison with only 2% of Whites who did so for anti-Black bias.

In contrast to these results for respondent race, there is no comparable significant reversal when examining these ratings across different respondent age brackets or education levels: There was no main effect for respondent age, $F(5, 380) = .71$, $p = .62$, or respondent education, $F(2, 380) = .18$, $p = .84$ (see Figures S1 and S2 in the supporting online materials at http://pps.sagepub.com/supplemental). Indeed, the analyses reported above, including the significant three-way interaction, use respondent age and education as factors, suggesting that the differences in perceptions between White and Black respondents are not driven by other demographic differences between the two groups.[2]

We note that despite this recent divergence in perceptions by respondent race, White and Black respondents' estimates of bias in the 1950s are strikingly similar, with members of both groups acknowledging little racism against Whites but substantial racism against Blacks. These results suggest that rather than having different reference points for racism—which might also account for race-based differences of opinion (Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006)—the racial divergence we observe over time is likely due to recent changes in how bias is conceptualized.

Whites—But Not Blacks—See Racism as a Zero-Sum Game

As in previous investigations, our results revealed that Whites see racism in zero-sum terms. For White respondents, ratings of bias against Whites and Blacks were negatively and significantly

Table 1. Demographics by Respondent Race

Variable	White	Black
Education (%)		
Some high school	1	1
High school graduate	21	16
Some college	37	50
College graduate	18	20
Some graduate school	6	2
Graduate school degree	17	11
Gender (%)		
Female	55	58
Male	45	42
Mean age (*SD*)	51.4 (14.8)	49.1 (12.1)

correlated for each decade ($-.30 \leq r \leq -.21$, all *p*s < .005; average $r = -.26$), suggesting that, within each decade, Whites linked lower levels of anti-Black bias with higher levels of anti-White bias. Perhaps most important, the change over time in perceived anti-White and anti-Black bias from the 1950s to the 2000s was negatively correlated for White respondents, $r(209) = -.28$, $p < .001$, suggesting that Whites also linked the decrease in anti-Black bias over the last half century to an increase in anti-White bias over the same time period. Ratings for Black respondents were less tightly linked within each decade ($-.25 \leq r \leq .04$, with only three decades, the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, significant at $p < .05$; average $r = -.13$), and changes in perceived racism over the decades were not correlated for Black respondents, $r(208) = -.05$, $p = .48$. Both within each decade and across time, White respondents were more likely to see decreases in bias against Blacks as related to increases in bias against Whites—consistent with a zero-sum view of racism among Whites—whereas Blacks were less likely to see the two as linked. Of course, our results are correlational in nature, and as such, they do not necessarily reveal that Whites believe that decreases in anti-Black bias cause increases in anti-White bias; future research should explore the causal nature of the robust link we observe.

Conclusion

In 2003, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote that, "we expect that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary" (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003). In contrast to popular notions of a postracial America after Barack Obama's 2008 election, our data suggest that many Whites believe that the moment O'Connor foresaw has already passed, and that the pendulum has now swung beyond equality in the direction of anti-White discrimination. Although a number of previous surveys have explored differences in White and Black Americans' perceptions of progress toward racial equality (e.g., Hochschild, 1995; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Sigelman & Welch, 1991), as well as Whites' desire to explain away disparities in racial outcomes (e.g., Esses & Hodson, 2006; Federico & Sidanius, 2002; Lowery, Knowles, & Unzueta, 2007), our data are the first to demonstrate that not

only do Whites think more progress has been made toward equality than do Blacks, but Whites also now believe that this progress is linked to a new inequality—at their expense.

Although our data do not speak directly to the mechanisms underlying Whites' view of racism as a zero-sum game, it is likely that this belief has both practical and symbolic components. On the practical side, affirmative action policies designed to increase minority representation may focus Whites' attention on the impact of quota-like procedures on their own access to education and employment, in effect threatening their resources (Haley & Sidanius, 2006). On the symbolic side, Whites may fear that minorities' imposition of their cultural values represent an attack on White cultural values and norms, as evidenced by Whites' resentment of norms of political correctness (Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006) and the belief of many Whites in a "War on Christmas" (Gibson, 2005). In sum, our findings situate specific claims of persecution by White Americans in a broader belief in a new, generalized anti-White bias. That Whites now believe that anti-White bias is more prevalent than anti-Black bias has clear implications for public policy debates and behavioral science research in the years to come.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Editor's Note

In accordance with our policy, as a condition of publication, the authors have agreed to make their full data set available to others.

Notes

1. Respondents were recruited by an online survey research company and paid $5 for participation. They were randomly selected from a panel of 2.5 million respondents matched to the 2000 United States Census on gender, age, and education level. Mirroring national trends for White and Black Americans, the two samples differed on age, $t(414) = 1.71$, $p = .09$, and education, $\chi^2 (5) = 11.43$, $p < .05$, such that the White sample was slightly older and more educated (see Table 1). The two groups did not differ on gender composition. Respondents were asked to "indicate how much you think Blacks [Whites] were/are the victims of discrimination in the United States in each of the following decades." They began with the 1950s and proceeded through the 2000s, rating racism against Blacks in each decade and then racism against Whites in each decade.

2. Although our analyses do not reveal differences based on age and level of education, the potential moderating role of other demographic factors such as respondents' state of residence and income, as well as psychological factors such as respondents' political ideologies and race-related attitudes (e.g., Henry & Sears, 2002; Plant & Devine, 1998; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), merit further attention.

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