Reflections on American Racism

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In response to Kinder’s critique of our assessment of the symbolic racism research program, we cite both the research procedures and actual writings of symbolic racism researchers, paying particular attention to contradictions between positions previously taken by Kinder and those he now takes in response to our paper. We also maintain the following: (a) there is no persuasive evidence that symbolic racism represents a new, qualitatively different form of racism—one cannot, after all, establish that there is a new kind of racism without demonstrating that it is in fact different from the old; (b) the term “symbolic racism” is logically defensible only if one adopts a definition of the construct that Kinder eschews; and (c) symbolic racism research systematically blurs the distinction between racist and nonracist sources of white opposition to policies to assist minorities and, in the process, politicizes both the concept of racism and the social science research process. We conclude by sketching a constructive agenda for research on racial policy reasoning.

We are not persuaded by Kinder’s defense of symbolic racism and shall try to explain why. But first it may be helpful to the reader—puzzled, perhaps, by the welter of claims and counterclaims of this exchange—to point to some critical issues on which Kinder and we are now close to agreement. Four issues deserve particular note.

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Four Points of Agreement

Traditional Prejudice

The original claim of Kinder and Sears was extremely ambitious. They claimed to have discovered a new kind of racism: symbolic racism. This discovery, if genuine, would be of the first importance, partly because of the claim that symbolic racism is new in the American experience and hence a genuine discovery; still more fundamentally because of their further claim that symbolic racism has replaced traditional forms of racial prejudice.

It is worth appreciating how far-reaching was Kinder and Sears' claim. Traditional prejudice, they contended, had evaporated—an extraordinary contention but one that Kinder and Sears nonetheless advanced explicitly and repeatedly. "Segregationist sentiment," they wrote, "has all but disappeared." They also stated that "the white supremacist view has all but disappeared" and that traditional prejudice "no longer can be a major political force." Finally, to make their position quite unmistakable, they declared that "White America has become, in principle at least, racially egalitarian" (Kinder & Sears, 1981, p. 416).

The original claim, then, was extreme; Kinder has now abandoned it. "We claimed too much," he notes, "when we declared that white America had become, even in principle, racially egalitarian and that traditional forms of racial prejudice had been replaced by symbolic racism... Old-fashioned racism remains alive and all too well" (Kinder, 1986, p. 161).

Symbolic Racism and Affirmative Action

There is a second point, as important as the first, though perhaps less obvious. Opposition to affirmative action, Kinder and Sears originally argued, testifies to symbolic racism. So, too, does opposition to busing. The person who disagrees with court-ordered busing or with racial quotas is a racist. Racism and opposition to busing in Kinder and Sears' original formulation are literally the same thing: symbolic racism may be operationally defined as opposition to busing or as opposition to affirmative action (Kinder & Sears, 1981, p. 420).

Kinder has now modified this extreme formulation. Instead of claiming that opposition to quotas or to busing is the same thing as racism, he advances a more modest claim: "such opposition [to quotas and forced busing]," he now says, "stems in part... from symbolic racism" (1986, p. 152). Or, as he suggests later: "There are a number of reasons to oppose affirmative action; racism, and symbolic racism in particular, is just one" (1986, p. 160).

Kinder's reformulation is a helpful step, but it has serious methodological implications: it has the consequence of impeaching many of the previous mea-

sures of symbolic racism. It is not logical, after all, to say on the one side that symbolic racism is one of a number of causes of opposition to busing, and to say on the other that opposition to busing is the same thing as symbolic racism.

Measurement Deficiencies

Third, it is also helpful that Kinder makes some (qualified) acknowledgment of limitations in measures of symbolic racism (1986, pp. 155–156). Thus, he notes that the content of symbolic racism measures varies somewhat from study to study. And he agrees with at least some of our specific objections (e.g., to brevity, ambiguity, and lack of face validity)—and indeed, goes so far as to describe, for these reasons, the Sears and Citrin (1982) measure as "pre-
sumptuous" (1986, p. 159).

The Label of Symbolic Racism

A final point of agreement deserves mention. Kinder now believes that the term "symbolic racism" is an "unfortunate choice" (1986, p. 155)—unfortunate because it is misleading. We agree. The term "symbolic racism" blurs the distinction between racist and nonracist sources of opposition to policies to assist minorities.

Remaining Disagreements

Yet disagreements remain. Specifically, Kinder contends the following: (1) measures of symbolic racism are more standardized than we suggested; (2) we incorrectly classified a measure developed by Sears as a measure of symbolic racism; (3) we erroneously suggested that symbolic racism may be a form of covert racism; (4) we were wrong to contend that symbolic and old-fashioned racism have much in common; and (5) we failed to do justice to the root conception of symbolic racism, specifically to appreciate that it involves a "conjunction" of prejudice and values. We address these criticisms and sketch a constructive agenda for future research on racial policy preferences.

Measurement Volatility

Our critique of symbolic racism measures revealed that different studies had operationalized the construct in highly inconsistent and frequently arbitrary ways. Sometimes symbolic racism refers to covert racism, sometimes not. Sometimes it refers to a cause of opposition to busing; sometimes it is opposition to busing. And nearly all the time it is measured in different ways.
Researchers are, of course, entitled to refine and improve their measures. But these changes should be grounded in empirical analysis, with the advantages of new measures demonstrated, not merely asserted. Even more obviously, researchers are under an obligation to point out when measures have been changed. Otherwise, the unsuspecting reader, seeing the same name—"symbolic racism"—will assume that the measure is the same when in fact it is not.

In the face of these difficulties, Kinder takes a sanguine view, contending that inspection of the content of symbolic racism measures shows that they "share a good bit in common" (1986, p. 158). It cannot, however, be said that a brief appeal to similarity in face content is a compelling defense of measurement validity; there is a warehouse of evidence on the major effects of even minor variations in question wording and ordering (e.g., Schuman & Presser, 1981; Schuman, Steeh, & Bobo, 1985). In addition, Kinder's enumeration of symbolic racism measures is selective. For example, Kinder and Sears (1981) employed two measures of symbolic racism, both described as measures of symbolic racism, but each utterly unlike the other. In his Table 1, however, Kinder presents only one of these measures, the one most similar to previous measures of symbolic racism, but does not acknowledge the other.

Kinder, based on his brief tour of measures, does not feel there are grounds for concern, with the possible exception of the Sears–Citrin measure, and even this measure he feels is fundamentally dependable. It is understandable that a developer of a measure should trust it, but Kinder's attitude may be too trusting. In his judgment, none of the failings of the symbolic racism measures—lack of standardization, ambiguity, confusing of independent and dependent variables—are serious. Is it unreasonable to ask, in light of this position, what weakness a measure of symbolic racism would have to suffer for Kinder to reject it?

A Question of Confusion

For our part, we pointed to a general problem in the measurement of symbolic racism. The problem, briefly described, is that not one measure of symbolic racism differs from all the others, but that virtually all of them differ from one another without any justification or even acknowledgment of the differences. Kinder, for his part, asserts that our critique lacks power, not because we were wrong in our characterization of symbolic racism measures in general, but because we made a mistake about one measure in particular. That mistake was to suppose that the Sears et al. measure (1979) is a measure of symbolic racism. We supposed this, Kinder suggests, because we were "confused" (1986 p. 159). If we were confused, we were certainly in good company; so, too, are Bobo (1983), Kluegel and Smith (1983), McClendon, (1985), Schuman et al. (1985), Stinchcombe and Taylor (1982), among others. Indeed, to our knowledge, every commentator on symbolic racism has read Sears's paper as a study of symbolic racism. And there is a good reason for this: Sears says it is. So he writes:

We have described this combination of prejudice and traditional values as "symbolic racism" (Kinder & Sears, 1981) which along with general political conservatism in turn has been shown to generate opposition to busing (Sears, Hensler & Speer, 1979; Sears et al., 1980). (Sears & Allen, 1984, p. 126)

For that matter, Kinder himself has classified Sears's busing study as a symbolic racism study. Referring explicitly to the 1979 study, he summarizes its argument as follows: "opposition to busing is regarded as an aspect of symbolic racism" (Kinder & Sears, 1981, p. 425, fn. 2).

Moreover, it is worth inspecting Kinder's specific lines of defense. He makes two arguments. One is that Sears, Hensler, and Speer's (1979) study could not be a study of symbolic racism, "since it was not equipped with the appropriate measures" (1986, p. 158). The other is that

Sniderman and Tetlock's indictment rests heavily on the claim that the questions that Sears and his associates (1979) used to measure symbolic racism include the very same questions that McConahay (1982, 1986) used to measure old-fashioned racism, which McConahay, Sears, and I all insist is different from symbolic racism. Were this charge true, it would be devastating—but it is not true. (p. 158)

The best way to decide whether our contention is true is to look at the Sears et al. (1979) measure (see our Table 3). Support for antimiscegregation laws is a paradigmatic expression of old-fashioned racism, and the Sears measure includes it. A belief in the innate inferiority of blacks is similarly a telltale expression of old-fashioned racism, and the Sears measure includes it. Finally, support for the principle of segregation is the very quintessence of old-fashioned racism, and the Sears measure includes it. Nor is there any doubt that the Sears measure, in addition to having questions tapping old-fashioned racism, also includes questions tapping symbolic racism. In fact, Kinder himself has made this exact point elsewhere. Responding to Bobo's (1983) factor analysis of the Sears 1979 measure, he declared:

even the fine details of Bobo's factor analysis results recapitulate our own. His first factor [see his Table 1], called segregationism, closely resembles what we and others have variously called "generalized (egalitarianism)" (Sears & Kinder, 1971), "redneck racism" (McConahay & Hough, 1976), or "old-fashioned racism" (McConahay, 1982). His second factor, which he labeled civil rights push, or black political push, was based on the same kind of items that we described as "symbolic racism" or "modern racism" (Kinder & Sears, 1981; McConahay, 1982). (Kinder & Sears, 1985, p. 1143, fn. 2).

We see no reason, therefore, to modify our critique of measures of symbolic racism.
Rationalization and Covert Racism

Symbolic racism, Kinder declares, is not disguised racism (1986, p. 155), and we were wrong to suggest that symbolic racism researchers have said that it is. McConahay, however, takes precisely this position:

In the present context, many whites still harbor negative feelings towards blacks, but it is still not fashionable to express these feelings directly. Hence, the feelings are displaced onto busing and busing has come to symbolize what are perceived to be unfair black demands and unfair black gains in status as well as economics. (McConahay, 1982, p. 716)

Sears has also argued that symbolic racism involves rationalization of anti-black affect:

In short, prior socialization produces symbolic predispositions; these in turn generate affective responses to policy issues (such as busing) symbolically linked to the predispositions; and these new symbolic attitudes about policy issues (such as opposition to busing) in turn generate a series of cognitive rationalizations that provide socially desirable justifications for the policy preferences. (Sears & Allen, 1984, p. 126–127).

It is one thing for Kinder to say that he does not believe symbolic racism is covert racism, and quite another to suggest that McConahay and Sears have not said what they manifestly have said.

For our part, we want to make a strictly logical point: the term "symbolic racism" is appropriate only if one adopts the definition that Kinder eschews—a definition that assigns a secondary or justificatory role to values. Otherwise, symbolic racism researchers place themselves in the untenable position of labeling as racist policy preferences largely rooted in values having nothing to do with race.

It is, accordingly, not surprising that we—and many others, as Kinder acknowledges—have made "the mistake" of supposing that symbolic racism involves policy preferences (e.g., opposition to busing) based on anti-black affect but rationalized in terms of traditional values. McConahay and Sears have made the same mistake.

Two Types of Racism

Old-fashioned and symbolic racism, Kinder insists, are quite different, and we were supposedly wrong to worry about their possible overlap. Here, Kinder reverses his previous position. Only recently he contended that symbolic and old-fashioned racism were not worth distinguishing (Kinder & Sears, 1985). Indeed, this contention has been a hallmark of the Sears–Kinder approach to symbolic racism. In consequence, their approach has been logically flawed: how can one claim to have discovered a new kind of racism without demonstrating that it is different from the old? Kinder’s new position is logically sound, but goes too far in the opposite direction. Kinder now not only claims that symbolic and old-fashioned racism are worth distinguishing; he claims that they have been proven to be different. We do not believe available data warrant this conclusion.

Kinder presents two kinds of evidence to support his claim. The first is factor analysis: the two types of racism are, by this criterion, empirically distinguishable. This kind of evidence, however, is equivocal, as Kinder himself has made plain. On the one hand, when Bobo (1983), relying on factor analysis, shows that these two aspects of racism are empirically distinguishable, Kinder acknowledges that the two are indeed separable dimensions—but insists that they are different dimensions of the same thing and so should properly be combined in a single measure (Kinder & Sears, 1985). On the other hand, when we point out that the two types of racism overlap substantially, Kinder turns to the very same factor analysis and argues that the two are clearly different.

The standards for judgment seem highly arbitrary. This arbitrariness is partly built into the problem itself: at what point are two variables so closely correlated that they should be regarded, not as different things, but as different measures of the same thing? But it is also possible to aggravate the problem of arbitrariness. For example, racism and opposition to busing are correlated only moderately, from about .2 to .3, yet Kinder takes this correlation as evidence that the two are literally the same (Kinder & Sears, 1981). By contrast, symbolic and old-fashioned racism are correlated quite strongly, from about .6 to about .7, yet Kinder takes this correlation as evidence that the two "are clearly distinct."

Kinder, moreover, now maintains not only that symbolic and old-fashioned racism scales are factorially distinct, but that these scales have "distinguishable effects" (1986, p. 161). When measures of symbolic racism and old-fashioned racism are pitted against one another, the former predicts opposition to busing, for example, better than the latter.

This claim, it should be emphasized, is quite modest. Kinder is not asserting that symbolic and old-fashioned racism have different effects, only that they have impacts of differing strength. Even so, this second line of reasoning is no more compelling than the first. Every study examining both symbolic and old-fashioned racism has shown them to be strongly correlated. And so they should be. Kinder himself has said that "symbolic racism has its roots in early-learned racial fears and stereotypes . . ." (Kinder & Sears, 1981, p. 1141), which is, of course, another way of saying that old-fashioned racism is a cause of symbolic racism, as McConahay (1986), for example, acknowledges. But then the regression results that Kinder reports are necessarily misspecified. For, rather than

1There are at least two kinds of symbolic racism measures—those that assess dislike of blacks directly (e.g., Sears & Kinder, 1971) and those that infer it from policy preferences (e.g., Kinder & Sears, 1981). Here we refer to the first, not the second.
simply pitting a measure of symbolic racism against a measure of old-fashioned racism, it is necessary first to calculate the impact of old-fashioned racism and only then to determine the additional impact of symbolic racism. And, given the correlation between the two forms of racism observed in every study, there is little question that the total effect of traditional racism, properly specified, will be substantially larger than Kinder supposes it to be.

This point deserves emphasis. It is an error simply to throw predictors together in a multiple regression, as symbolic racism researchers have done, ignoring the causal connections among them. It is an error also to ignore the multicollinearity problems that arise when highly correlated predictors are placed together in the same regression equation. These errors have serious consequences, leading Kinder to conclude that “the political impact of traditional forms of racial prejudice pale against those due to symbolic racism” (1986, p. 162). This conclusion is quite misleading; misleading because the impression that traditional prejudice is no longer a political force is created by improperly crediting to symbolic racism a part of the causal impact that should be credited to traditional forms of prejudice. The result is to underestimate the tenacity and potency of traditional race prejudice.

What conclusions, then, can be drawn from the existing evidence? We call attention to two points. First, the two forms of racism are strongly correlated. Second, every observed cause of the one has also been found to be a cause of the other; and every observed consequence of one has been found to be a consequence of the other. Hence it is prudent—indeed, necessary—to ask whether the two “types” of racism differ in kind as Kinder contends, or only in degree as we suspect.

Values and Racism

Symbolic racism, Kinder contends, is a “conjunction” of anti-black affect and traditional values. What does it mean to say this?

A useful place to start is to ask what Kinder means by “traditional American values.” After all, he supposes that they are a great obstacle to achieving racial equality. In contrast, Myrdal (1944) supposed that they were the great enemy of racial prejudice. But by traditional American values Myrdal meant a belief in equality and liberty. Kinder, obviously, has something very different in mind. “Traditional American values,” he contends, include “individualism and self-reliance, the work ethic, obedience, and discipline” (Kinder & Sears, 1981, p. 416). This is a peculiar list. To our knowledge, no one has ever suggested that obedience and discipline are “traditional American values”—Prussian perhaps, but not American.

Kinder’s conception of traditional American values is unusual, in part be-
These questions point to alternative, and empirically distinguishable, ways of conceptualizing symbolic racism. We therefore cannot agree with Kinder that it suffices simply to define symbolic racism as a conjunction of prejudice and traditional values.

Science and Values

We strongly support research that systematically attempts to assess the impact of racist motives on support for government programs to assist minorities. We strongly object, however, to treating opposition to such policies as racist by definition. And symbolic racism researchers have done precisely that. Kinder has no apparent qualms, for example, about operationally defining symbolic racism in terms of opposition to busing, quotas, or special government programs for minorities. He maintains that significant correlations between racial prejudice and positions on these issues justify including such items in symbolic racism scales (1986, pp. 158–159). We reject this position on both logical and epistemological grounds. Such items provide at best a very indirect way of measuring the two assumed components of symbolic racism: racial prejudice and traditional values. A person might oppose busing or quotas for a number of reasons, as Kinder is well aware. Why define one’s explanatory construct in terms of items that one has only weak correlational grounds for supposing to measure the construct? A more reasonable procedure would be to advance a precise statement of the racist and value components of symbolic racism, and to develop items that adequately capture these components. It might then be possible to assess whether it makes sense to create a superordinate explanatory construct that “fuses” racial prejudice and traditional values.

The research procedure that Kinder advocates also risks politicizing the social science research process. To label someone a racist, or to label support for a particular viewpoint as racist, is to pass moral—political judgment on that individual or viewpoint. Standards of evidence need to be exceptionally clear in passing such judgments—and if our critique has brought out nothing else, it is the conceptual and empirical confusion within symbolic racism research.

It is useful, in this connection, to return to the parable of the “symbolic Marxism” scale (Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986, p. 148). Symbolic racism scales are intended to identify people who dislike blacks and are conservative. One can imagine, correspondingly, a symbolic Marxism scale to identify people who dislike businessmen and are liberal. We asked, in our original paper, how the social science community would react to conservative researchers who operationalized their concept of symbolic Marxism with items that focused on support for the civil liberties of American communists or on opposition to aid to right-wing governments. Such a research undertaking would be scandalous. And the scandal would not be mitigated by insisting that one’s item selection procedure was grounded in definitional choices. Nor would the scandal be mitigated by invoking the existence of a positive relation between left-wing political orientation (liberalism) and support for the constitutional rights of American communists. Thus the symbolic Marxism scale would be a clear-cut example of what C. Wright Mills (1940) called “motive-mongering”—in this case, the use of social science research methods to cast aspersions on political viewpoints with which the researchers disagree.

We are not suggesting that symbolic racism researchers deliberately set out to engage in such motive-mongering. But we do want to state emphatically that their approach lends itself to such abuse. What is objectionable is partly what has been done, especially the labeling of particular policy positions and values as racist by definition. But what is still more objectionable is what has not been done—i.e., the failure to call attention to the dangers inherent in this approach. Kinder’s approach raises the risk of branding people as racists who are not in fact racist but merely conservative. It is not within Kinder’s power to eliminate this risk—all social science measures are imperfect. But he has the means to call attention to the danger. We have been unable to find any expression of concern on his part about this danger, any warning of the risk of branding people as racist because they are conservative. Even in this exchange, he has chosen to ignore it.

A final point deserves note. The failure to guard against such abuse has intellectual costs. For instance, Kinder correctly points out that in our own work we have accepted the role of conservative values as a source of resistance to efforts to achieve racial equality (Sniderman & Hagen, 1985; Sniderman, Hagen, Tetlock, & Brady, in press; Sniderman, Brody, & Kuklin斯基, 1984). Our conclusion, Kinder (1986, p. 6) implies, is very similar to his own. Kinder is mistaken. True, we have demonstrated a connection between commitment to individualism and opposition to achieving racial equality, but we would certainly not conclude that individualism therefore is racism.

A Research Agenda

What can we learn from this exchange on symbolic racism? How should future research differ from that of the past? Kinder makes a number of valuable suggestions on directions that future research should take. We especially agree with his emphasis on the importance of taking into account a broad range of explanatory factors—ideological, cultural, cognitive, and the like. Here, we limit ourselves to noting two additional sets of issues that deserve attention in research on racial policy reasoning.

Most fundamentally, researchers need to be clear about the nature of the dependent variable. What exactly are we trying to explain? Considerable evidence has accumulated showing that Americans take quite different positions on racial equality, depending on whether they confront it at the level of principle or
of policy. And the difference is not merely one of magnitude, of offering more support for equality as an abstract principle than in a concrete situation; the casual factors underlying support for equality as principle and as policy may differ. For instance, education is a major source in promoting support for the principle of racial equality, but it is apparently of minor importance in encouraging support for actual government efforts to achieve racial equality (e.g., Jackman & Muhe, 1984; but see Sniderman et al., 1984).

How should one interpret this principle-policy puzzle of racial attitudes? No shortage of theoretical accounts exists. Jackman and Muhe (1984) have offered a social desirability explanation: white Americans—especially the educated—are willing to offer rhetorical support for equality but shy from doing anything to achieve it. In contrast, Margolis and Hacque (1981) propose that substantial numbers of Americans sincerely support the principle of equality, but oppose efforts to realize it because they believe the federal government has grown too large and intrusive (see also Kuklinski & Parent, 1981). Sniderman and his colleagues have stressed the role of political conservatism as a source of resistance to specific policy proposals, particularly among the educated (Sniderman et al., 1984; Sniderman et al., in press). Levine (1971) has suggested that citizens really object to the "coerciveness" of efforts to assure racial equality. For that matter, the principle-policy puzzle may be tailor-made for a symbolic racism analysis. Symbolic racism may take precisely the form of supporting the principle of equality, but resisting implementation of it.

Whatever combination of explanatory tactics proves most enlightening, we see the principle-policy puzzle as a key to understanding current psychological and political sources of resistance to reducing racial inequalities. But the principle-policy puzzle is not the only problem worth considering. Of the many others, we single out one for particular emphasis: the problem of motive attribution.

**Motive Attribution**

We have already noted that labeling an individual or viewpoint as racist is a serious matter. In response, it is reasonable to ask of us the following: When would such a motive attribution be justified? What standards of proof is it reasonable to expect of researchers who seek to assess the importance of racist beliefs or motives as determinants of policy preferences? No general guidelines can be offered. On the one hand, the dichotomous "either-or" theory testing strategy of symbolic racism researchers ("is it the buses or the blacks?") raises the risk of concluding that racist motives are at work when investigators have controlled only for tangible, immediate self-interest, itself only one of a number of possible explanatory alternatives. On the other hand, it is easy to go too far in the opposite direction. Insisting on the need to control for all possible explanatory alternatives—cultural and political values, causal attributions, perceived group interests, ideology—would make it extremely difficult to identify the operation of racist motives even when such motives are at work. People may sometimes use values, attributions, and group perceptions to justify racist-motivated policy preferences; statistically controlling for these variables would, from this viewpoint, obscure the influence of racism.

We see at least two possible solutions to this dilemma. One approach is to turn to more sophisticated forms of correlational analysis—to develop a new generation of models that specify the causal relations among the wide range of explanatory constructs for racial policy preferences (e.g., Sniderman, et al., in press). Careful development of operational indicators and conceptual analysis of these constructs are promising avenues to building a cumulative body of knowledge on determinants of racial policy reasoning.

A second, complementary approach should also be identified. Researchers have developed experimental techniques for unobtrusively assessing the impact of racist motives on social behavior (Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980). It is possible to transplant key features of this experimental approach—controlled manipulation of independent variables and random assignment of respondents to conditions—into survey settings. Sniderman (1984), for example, has combined experimental and survey techniques to explore the extent to which citizens' intuitive theories of political entitlement are universalistic or particularistic. Universalistic theories maintain that the honoring of claims to a public benefit should not be contingent on features of the claimant such as race. Conversely, particularistic theories maintain that the legitimacy of claims to benefits should often depend on who the claimant is. To explore these natural theories of justice, interviewers pose deliberately varied forms of policy questions to respondents empanelled in a conventional, cross-sectional sample. To take a simplified hypothetical example: half the respondents are asked whether the government in Washington should help people who are poor; the other half are asked precisely the same question except for one difference—the claimants are poor blacks.

In principle, a number of claimant attributes—race, gender, socioeconomic class, and so on—can be varied simultaneously to identify the interactions of characteristics responsible for honoring or rejecting claims to a variety of public benefits. Neither the respondent nor the interviewer is aware of question variation; so, to the extent responses vary, attribution of racial bias will be on firmer ground than hitherto possible.

In conclusion, we should emphasize that no one method eliminates the possibility of error in motive attribution. We should also emphasize that it would be wrong to permit such interpretive problems to inhibit research on the sources of resistance to programs to assist minority groups. Kinder portrays us as more pessimistic about research on policy reasoning than we are. We do not believe, and did not say, the "task of determining the sources of public opinion on racial matters is so Formidably difficult . . . that . . . research on the topic should be
abandoned" (Kinder, 1986, p. 168). We do believe, however, the task is very difficult. We also believe current research on symbolic racism is so fraught with conceptual and empirical ambiguities that it makes an already difficult task even more problematic.

In the end, the research program on symbolic racism amounts to a recommendation to change the meaning of the concept of racism. The change, we have become persuaded, would be a change for the worse because it would weaken the meaning of racism. Racism used to refer to genuine prejudice—a deep-seated, irrational insistence on the inferiority of blacks, and contempt and hostility toward them. It still does. It is a mistake to leech away the meaning of racism, to diminish it, by making it merely a synonym for political attitudes with which one happens to disagree.

References


