Symbolic Racism: Problems of Motive Attribution in Political Analysis

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Research on symbolic racism attempts to identify the underlying psychological sources of public resistance to policies designed to promote racial equality. This research program has been built on the fundamental idea that, although old-fashioned, overt forms of racism have lost much of their appeal in American politics, new, more subtle and symbolic forms of racism continue to exert a pervasive influence on policy debates, making themselves felt, for example, in opposition to busing, to affirmative action, or even to black candidates running for office. This paper identifies serious empirical, logical, and methodological shortcomings in the case that researchers have advanced to support the symbolic racism thesis. Most serious are (a) the lack of clarity in theoretical definitions of symbolic racism, (b) the major inconsistencies in the operationalization of the construct, (c) the confounding of "independent" and "dependent" variables in the construction of symbolic racism scales, (d) the politically controversial nature of the item content of certain symbolic racism scales, (e) the frequent failures to distinguish the impact of traditional racial prejudice from that of symbolic racism on policy preferences, and (f) the tendency to pose a very restrictive conception of self-interest as the major explanatory alternative to symbolic racism interpretations of policy preferences.

Preparation of this paper was partly supported by funds from the Survey Research Center at the University of California at Berkeley. We appreciate the helpful comments of Susan Clayton and Faye Crosby on an earlier version of the paper. Correspondence regarding this paper should be sent to either author at the Survey Research Center, 2538 Channing Way, University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720.
How racist are white Americans? Has racism in America declined? Or has it just changed its appearance? These are profoundly important questions. We propose, accordingly, to review one of the most sustained efforts to answer them: research on symbolic racism.

Symbolic racism research has been built around a fundamental idea. Simply put, it is this: old-fashioned racism may have disappeared, only to be replaced by a new form of racism—symbolic racism. This new racism, yoking together prejudice and traditional American values, both veils and legitimizes white racism.

This is a provocative idea; also an intuitively convincing one. Who would deny that people can disguise racial prejudice? Or that they can express it covertly, through support for traditional values? But this seemingly straightforward insight, we have become persuaded, has proven to be, in practice, a flawed idea. Specifically, we suggest that symbolic racism theory, by defining racism as a blend of anti-black affect and traditional American values, invites two opposing mistakes. On the one side, it encourages a tendency to label people as racist when they are not. On the other, it encourages a tendency to write off traditional racism as a spent force when it is not.

**Conceptualization of Symbolic Racism**

Racism was once an American habit of mind. Polite and not so polite white society agreed that blacks were inferior to whites, morally and intellectually. Racism could take the form of segregation in the South, paternalism in the North (Williamson, 1984); but North and South agreed on the inferiority of blacks—agreed, moreover, that it was perfectly proper to say so openly, publicly.

Racism, so understood, has declined. Repeated surveys of public opinion have shown, for example, that little more than one generation ago only one of every three white Americans believed white and black students should go to the same schools. Nor were they prepared to accept blacks as neighbors—even blacks whose education and income matched their own. Less than one in every two whites said that blacks and whites should be free to use the same streetcars and buses; less than one half rejected the idea that “white people should have the first chance at any kind of job.” Today, on each of these issues, there is considerable consensus in favor of equal treatment for blacks (Smith & Sheatsley, 1984; Taylor, Sheatsley, & Greeley, 1978).

Old-fashioned racism, with its trinitarian creed of white supremacy, black inferiority, and racial segregation, has fallen out of fashion. The argument of symbolic racism theorists starts at this point. Racism, they suggest, has not disappeared. Rather, it has undergone a transformation. And, in its new, subtle or symbolic forms, it continues to be a pervasive force in American politics and public opinion. This new racism shows itself, for example, in opposition to busing, in opposition to affirmative action, and in opposition to black candidates running for public office. Racism, in short, continues to be influential by a two-step process: on the one side, surrendering the principle of racial segregation; on the other, endorsing mainstream American values.

The new racism is not, symbolic racism advocates, a product of actual personal experience—a loss of a job, a drop in living standards. Nor is the new racism a symptom of individual psychopathology. Rather, it “is based on moral feelings that blacks violate such traditional American values as individualism, the work ethic, obedience, and discipline” (Kinder & Sears, 1981, p. 416). The new racism is, in this sense, rooted in the American ethos itself. And because it is so rooted, symbolic racism is subtle, even respectable. The new racism is, it should be emphasized, still racism. Like the old racism, it is defined by and arises from a dislike of blacks acquired, as a rule, in early childhood and enduring through adulthood (e.g., McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981, p. 565).

Yet the two forms of racism are not the same. Old-fashioned racism presupposes belief in “the desirability of segregation or miscegenation laws or the lack of innate intelligence of black people”; symbolic or modern racism does not (McConahay et al., 1981, p. 564). Put another way: symbolic racism involves “the expression in terms of abstract ideological symbols and symbolic behaviors of the feeling that blacks are violating cherished values and making illegitimate demands on the racial status quo”; old-fashioned or “red neck” racism does not (McConahay & Hough, 1976, p. 38).

Symbolic racism, so conceived, is symbolic in two ways. First, it expresses itself in reaction to certain policies (e.g., affirmative action) that symbolize to some whites unfair demands on behalf of blacks. Second, such reactions are grounded in “abstract principles of justice and diffuse negative feelings,” not mere self-interest or concrete personal experience (McConahay et al., 1981, p. 564). Or, to sum up, symbolic racism is “a blend of antiblack affect and the kind of traditional American moral values embodied in the Protestant Ethic” (Kinder & Sears, 1981, p. 416).

This definition may seem clear at first; less so on reflection. It does not tell us, for example, how to determine whether or not a particular individual is a symbolic racist. Is opposition to particular policy proposals—say, affirmative action—by itself evidence of symbolic racism? Or is more information needed? For example, do we need to know how support for particular policy proposals is conditioned by perceptions of the circumstances of particular racial groups, of the proper role of the federal government, and of the pervasiveness of racial discrimination in America today? What are the most diagnostic indicators of symbolic racism—and what types of plausible counterinterpretations need to be tested and controlled for in designing research on the topic (Cf. Kluegel Smith, 1982, 1983)?
Beyond the need to delineate what is and what is not symbolic racism, key questions concerning the causal relation between the two components of symbolic racism—anti-black affect and traditional moral values—need to be asked. Is the claim that “blacks violate cherished values” a convenient rationalization for anti-black sentiment—that is, does anti-black affect lead to support for traditional values? Or is it perhaps the other way around—does support for traditional values lead to anti-black affect? Or are both anti-black affect and traditional values involved, symbolic racism being an additive combination of the two? Or, yet again, is symbolic racism an interactive combination of anti-black affect and traditional values?

There are, then, at least four theoretical interpretations of the claim that symbolic racism involves a blend of anti-black affect and traditional values, specifically: (1) anti-black affect may be the cause and values may be the effect; (2) affect may be the effect and values may be the cause; (3) both affect and values may be involved, each separately and independently making a contribution; and (4) both may be involved, but interactively rather than independently. These are distinct alternatives, each stipulating a different causal process. Obviously, not all can be correct. The difficulty is that there are three major symbolic racism researchers—Sears, Kinder, and McConahay—and each has taken a different position from the others. Thus, Kinder began with position 3 (Sears & Kinder, 1971) and now holds position 4 (Kinder & Sears, 1981). Sears, similarly, began with 3, moved to 2 (Sears & Allen, 1984), and most recently, has affirmed both 3 and 4 (D. O. Sears, personal communication) while denying 1 (Schuman, Steeh, & Bobo, 1985, p. 239). McConahay, in contrast, has always held to 1 (McConahay, in press). This divergence of views must inevitably occasion confusion. But despite each one disagreeing with the others (or, indeed, sometimes with their own past positions), none has discussed the conceptual differences among them or has even acknowledged their existence.

Measurement of Symbolic Racism

If confusion about symbolic racism exists at the theoretical level, it abounds at the operational level. Table 1 presents a representative selection of measures of symbolic racism.

The first thing to remark is plain: no measure of symbolic racism is the same as any other. Some of the differences are minor, but many are major. Moreover, the testimony of survey research is that even seemingly minor variations in question wording, ordering, and formatting can have major effects (e.g., Schuman & Presser, 1981). So it is to be regretted that the principal researchers on symbolic racism have never discussed the differences, major or minor, among their measures.

All the same, some of the measures appear better than others. Among the

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better ones is the Sears and Kinder (1971) scale. It consists of four items, focusing principally on whether blacks are being favored or not. The measure seems straightforward. All four questions tap resentment and hostility toward blacks, and they do so directly and openly. This scale is in no sense a measure of covert racism—which is to say that it may comfortably fit Kinder and Sears’s conception of symbolic racism, but clashes with McConahay’s, since he maintains that the very hallmark of symbolic racism is that it is covert, disguised (e.g., McConahay, in press).

The Sears and Citrin (1982) measure, in contrast, does not fit any defensible conception of symbolic racism well. It consists of only two items, neither face valid. One item assesses opposition to government assistance for blacks, the other, opposition to mandatory busing. The first item, on its face, is at least as much a measure of conservatism as of racism. Moreover, Sears and Citrin simply assert that it measures racism; they present no evidence whatsoever that the first item taps racism more than conservatism.

Nor do Sears and Citrin justify equating opposition to busing with racism—a common failing of symbolic racism measures (e.g., Kinder & Sears, 1981). Racism and opposition to busing are positively correlated, but the correlation is far from perfect—indeed, it is frequently not especially strong (Kelley, 1974; Stinchembe & Taylor, 1982). If it is not acceptable to say that one variable causes another merely because the two are strongly correlated, how can it be acceptable to argue that one is exactly the same as the other just because they are moderately correlated?

Moreover, there is strong evidence that opposition to busing and racism are not the same. Thus, racial intolerance is more common among the less educated, the less well-off, those who live in rural areas, those who were born in the South, those who are older, or those who work in lower status occupations or whose fathers worked in them or whose mothers were not well educated. The social and demographic correlates of opposition to busing are quite different. Specifically, opposition to busing is as common in urban as in rural areas, very nearly as common outside the South as inside it, and as common among the young as among the old (Kelley, 1974, p. 31). Furthermore, opposition to busing is “virtually uncorrelated with status,” whether status is measured in terms of education, occupation, father’s occupation, or mother’s education (Kelley, 1974, p. 31). But if the demographic correlates of opposition to busing and of racism are radically different, how can the claim of symbolic researchers that the two are identical, indeed interchangeable, be correct?

Finally, the inclusion of busing items in symbolic racism scales is questionable for yet another reason. Sears takes the position, on the one hand, that opposition to busing is caused by symbolic racism (Sears et al., 1979) and, on the other, that symbolic racism is defined by opposition to busing (Kinder & Sears, 1981). Symbolic racism researchers cannot have it both ways.

Symbolic Racism

This is only one of several examples of confounding independent and dependent variables. Consider the measure of expressive racism (Kinder & Sears, 1981). Many of its items reflect the notion of symbolic racism in its original conception. Some of the others, however, are quite different. In particular, two items concern college quotas for minority students. A symbolic racist, it appears, is anyone who opposes affirmative action. Now, to equate opposition to affirmative action with racism seems highly contentious. Racial prejudice may be one reason for opposition to affirmative action, but there is no evidence to show that it is the only or even the main reason for it. Of course, it is a person’s overall scale score, not his response to one item, that is decisive. All the same, it is gratuitous to equate opposition to affirmative action with racial prejudice—gratuitous because it would otherwise be possible to examine the actual relation between the two, and thus establish as a matter of fact, and not of definition, how and to what degree the two are connected. Quite simply, defining opposition to affirmative action as racism precludes falsification of the prediction that the two are indeed related, at the cost of making the relation between them a tautology.

The Relation Between Symbolic Racism and Old-Fashioned Racism

The problems of confounding independent and dependent variables raise theoretically difficult—and politically controversial—questions concerning the very meaning of the symbolic racism construct. Equally serious, however, is another problem—the relation between traditional racism and symbolic or modern racism. Symbolic racism researchers conceive this relation in two quite different ways. As noted earlier, one approach is taken by McConahay and his associates, the other by Sears, Kinder, and theirs. Let us examine them in turn.

According to McConahay and his associates (e.g., McConahay & Hough, 1976), racism used to be crude. It was expressed in “support for overt acts of discrimination such as segregation in public schools . . . systematic exclusion of blacks from jobs, housing, and social clubs” (p. 24), and by avowal of negative racial stereotypes, e.g., blacks are lazy. This flagrant racism, McConahay contends, now receives support from Americans who are less educated and more peripheral, but not from the mainstream of white Americans.

In contrast to old-fashioned (or redneck) racism, there is modern, or symbolic, racism. It expresses hostility toward blacks, but in the form of “abstract moral assertions about blacks’ behavior as a group, concerning what blacks deserve, how they ought to act, whether or not they are treated equitably, and so on” (Sears & McConahay, 1973, p. 138).

As old-fashioned racism is crude, so symbolic racism is subtle—hence capable of being expressed openly without necessarily being recognized as racism (McConahay, in press). Table 2 sets out illustrative measures of both old-fashioned and modern racism.
Symbolic Racism are the same, then the two “kinds” of racism are the same. Any differences between their measures would be a matter of degree or measurement error. On the other hand, if their causes plainly differ, then symbolic and traditional racism differ not merely in degree, but more fundamentally in kind.

McConahay’s theory of symbolic racism insists that the two “kinds” of racism do indeed differ in kind. But what does the evidence show? Are the causes of symbolic and of old-fashioned racism different? Symbolic racism, in the view of McConahay and his associates, is the racism of affluence, suburbia, the North; old-fashioned racism is that of the less aware and less enlightened, of the old and of the South (McConahay & Hough, 1976). Unfortunately, empirical analyses by symbolic racism researchers concentrate almost entirely on the consequences of symbolic racism; they have dealt only incidentally with its causes and scarcely at all with its supposedly unique causes. Yet, on the information in hand, it appears that every major cause of symbolic racism is, simultaneously, a major cause of old-fashioned racism; and every major cause of old-fashioned racism is a major cause of symbolic (McConahay & Hough, 1976).

Moreover, it is argued that symbolic racism differs from the old-fashioned variety precisely by virtue of its subtility: symbolic racists are verbally facile enough to avoid the gross, and socially frowned upon, expressions of traditional racism. If this reasoning is right—and it is the very core of symbolic racism theory as formulated by McConahay—then symbolic racism should appeal especially to the better educated. But it is just the other way round: symbolic racism appeals more to the less educated (e.g., McConahay & Hough, 1976; McClendon, 1985). Perhaps, though, the decisive comparison is not between the symbolic racist and the nonracist, but rather between the symbolic and the old-fashioned racist. If so, it may be both true that the symbolic racist is less educated than the nonracist, yet more educated than the old-fashioned racist.

On reflection, however, this line of reasoning is also problematic. If it were correct, a stylized characterization of the facts would be that the old-fashioned racist is typically an elementary school dropout and the symbolic racist is typically a high school dropout. But this must be wrong, given the symbolic racism researchers’ own findings. Instead of showing a nonmonotonic association, the zero-order correlation between education and symbolic racism is in fact quite large.

There is an additional difficulty. Not only is symbolic racism correlated with the principal causes of old-fashioned racism, but it is strongly correlated with a readiness to express blatantly demeaning, coarse, insensitive, and hostile sentiments against blacks (e.g., saying that blacks “smell different than whites” or refusing to use the same restrooms as blacks). As Jacobsen (1985) has shown, crudely stereotyping blacks and resisting interpersonal intimacy with them is enormously correlated with symbolic racism. This result is telling. There is, it turns out, little that is subtle or distinctive about symbolic racism.

It may sound straightforward to suggest that there are two kinds of racism. But what, it is necessary to ask, should the correlation between old-fashioned and symbolic racism be? Obviously, a very high correlation would show that the two have much in common. A high correlation, then, would undercut the contention of symbolic racism theorists that modern racism is distinctive. Alternatively, a very low correlation between old-fashioned and symbolic racism would demonstrate that the two had little in common—not even a common dislike of blacks; and if symbolic racism does not involve dislike of blacks, it is far from clear in what sense it can be said to be racism at all.

A number of independent calculations of the correlation between symbolic and old-fashioned racism are now in hand, allowing a fairly robust estimate of the overlap between the two. McConahay (1982), analyzing a Louisville, Kentucky, sample, reports that the correlation between the two is .58; McClendon (1985), relying on an Akron, Ohio, sample, reports .65; and Jacobsen (1985), taking advantage of a 1978 Harris national sample, reports .49.

These correlations are all quite high, and would be still higher after correcting for measurement error. These correlations do not prove that symbolic and old-fashioned racism are “the same thing.” But they are a clear warning that the two have much in common and that, in consequence, it may be difficult to distinguish them empirically.

There is a further difficulty. Insofar as the causes of symbolic and old-
In short, McConahay and his colleagues have not yet made a compelling case that symbolic and traditional racism differ in kind rather than in degree. But even if evidence for McConahay’s argument may presently be lacking, its logic is easy to follow.

The position of Sears, Kinder, and their associates, in contrast, is less straightforward. Their position is obscure partly because they say they agree with McConahay, yet it is unclear how this is logically possible. Table 3 sets out the measure relied on by Sears et al. (1979, 1980) in their pioneering analyses of symbolic politics and racism. A symbolic racist is one who believes, *inter alia*, that blacks are, by nature, less intelligent than whites; he or she also supports strict segregation as a matter of principle; what is more, he or she also openly favors residential segregation. But this is puzzling, for such beliefs are the quintessence of old-fashioned racism. What, one must ask, has happened to the distinction between symbolic and old-fashioned racism? McConahay has consistently stressed the importance of keeping the distinction between them clear. In contrast, Sears and his associates have felt it sufficient to assert that the two kinds of racism are analytically distinguishable, without actually distinguishing them operationally. It is very hard, however, to see how Sears can, on the one side, claim to have discovered a new and different form of racism—symbolic racism—and, on the other, claim that it is unnecessary to demonstrate that it is, in fact, different from traditional racism.

This blending, in one measure, of symbolic and old-fashioned racism raises awkward questions about the validity or utility of a distinction between them. At a conceptual level, both McConahay and Sears argue that symbolic racism affords, in American culture, a socially legitimate outlet for racial hostility. But the more plausible this argument, the less plausible is Sears’s particular operational approach: The premise of his measurement approach is precisely that it is unnecessary to distinguish the two kinds of racism.

Moreover, Sears and Kinder claim that symbolic racism has replaced traditional racism (1981, p. 416). But if symbolic racism truly has supplanted old-fashioned racism, why develop a measure of racism based in large part on measures of old-fashioned racism? How do Sears and Kinder know they have discovered a new kind of racism when they have never shown that it is different from the old? How could one conceivably tell the two were different unless both were measured? Suppose, by way of example, we were to claim to have discovered a “new” conservatism. Surely we should be obliged to develop a measure for it, and then compare and contrast it with “old-fashioned” conservatism, in an effort to demonstrate that the new conservatism is indeed new and not merely another expression of the old. But Sears and Kinder have never done this—not in their original analysis (1971), nor indeed in any subsequent analysis over the last decade and a half.

Now, no one doubts that socially standardized expressions of prejudice change with time—this is a familiar charge leveled against “stereotype” measures of prejudice (Apostle, Glock, Piazza, & Suelzel, 1983). It used to be common to say that “blacks had rhythm”; no longer. Does this mean that prejudice has disappeared, or that its character has fundamentally altered? Obviously not. Pejorative expressions can go out of style without prejudice going out of existence. By the same token, there is not a “new” prejudice every time a new pejorative expression wins currency. Sears and Kinder are not, however, merely claiming that prejudice changes its forms of expression with time, or alternatively, that some expressions of prejudice are stronger and more extreme than others. Rather, they are arguing that racism has changed in a definite and fundamental way; specifically, that it now “represents a form of resistance to change in the racial status quo based on moral feelings that blacks violate such traditional American values as individualism and self-reliance, the work ethic, obedience, and discipline” (Kinder & Sears, 1981, p. 416).

Sears and Kinder may be correct in supposing this. But they have the burden of proof: to demonstrate empirically that symbolic racism does indeed involve

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Table 3. Sears et al.’s (1979) Operational Definition of Symbolic Racism

1. **Less intelligent.** Which of these statements (about the relative intelligence of black and white people) would you agree with?
   - a. On the average, black people are born with more intelligence than white people.
   - b. On the average, white people and black people are born with equal intelligence.
   - c. On the average, white people are born with more intelligence than black people.

2. **Segregation.** Are you in favor of desegregation, strict segregation, or something in between?

3. **Keep out.** Which of these statements would you agree with?
   - a. White people have a right to keep black people out of their neighborhoods if they want.
   - b. Black people have a right to live wherever they can afford to, just like anybody else.

4. **Civil rights push.** Some say that the civil rights movement has been trying to push too fast. Others feel they haven’t pushed fast enough. How about you? Do you think that civil rights leaders are trying to push too fast, are going too slowly, or are they moving about the right speed?

5. **Actions hurtful.** Do you think the actions black people have taken have, on the whole, helped their cause or, on the whole, hurt their cause?

6. **Actions violent.** During the past year or so, would you say that most of the actions black people have taken to get the things they want have been violent, or have most of these actions been peaceful?

7. **Access to accommodations.** As you may know, Congress passed a bill that says that black people should have the right to go to any hotel or restaurant they can afford, just like anybody else. Some people feel that this is something the government should support. Others feel that the government should stay out of this matter. Have you been interested enough in this to favor one side over another? (IF YES: Should the government support the right of black people to go to any hotel or restaurant they can afford, or should it stay out of this matter?)

8. **Fair job treatment.** Some people feel that if black people are not getting fair treatment in jobs, the government in Washington ought to see to it that they do. Others feel that this is not the federal government’s business. Have you had enough interest in this question to favor one side over the other? (IF YES: Should the government in Washington see to it that black people get fair treatment in jobs or leave these matters to the states and local communities?)
"a blend of antiblack affect and the kind of traditional American moral values embodied in the Protestant Ethic" (Kinder & Sears, 1981, p. 416). So it is sobering to realize that Kinder and Sears have failed altogether to investigate "traditional" American values—a startling omission considering they define symbolic racism in terms of such values.

Furthermore, by measuring symbolic racism as they have, Sears and Kinder may have debarred themselves from obtaining the very evidence they need to make their case. Their argument must be that symbolic racism is bound to traditional values in a way that old-fashioned racism is not; otherwise, their contention that a new variant of racism has replaced the old would fail. It is logically impossible, however, for them to demonstrate this claim without developing two measures of racism—one of the "new", the other of the "old"—and placing them side by side and showing that the new racism is indeed connected with traditional moral values in a way the old is not. But the very trademark of the Sears-Kinder approach, as distinct from McConahay’s, is to have only one measure of racism, not two.

There is a final difficulty, and it puts Sears and Kinder in danger of contradicting, not McConahay, but themselves. Bobo (1983), reanalyzing Sears’s (1979, 1980) measure, demonstrates through factor analysis that the measure is multidimensional. Sears and Kinder (1985, p. 1143, fn. 1), in response, contend that Bobo’s findings actually corroborate both their results and McConahay’s. Specifically, Bobo’s first factor corresponds, in their judgment, to old-fashioned racism; the second, to symbolic or modern racism. But in conceding this, have Sears and Kinder not impeached their own approach? For surely if they believe the two forms should be distinguished on theoretical grounds, and can also be distinguished on empirical ones, then the last thing they should do is to lump them together.

Self-Interest

Symbolic racism researchers have concentrated on one particular theoretical question: whether race-related political attitudes are a product of direct personal racial threat or of symbolic attitudes. Symbolic attitudes are "political predispositions which are largely the residue of an earlier political socialization that was ignorant of present self-interest" (Sears et al., 1980, p. 671). Which matters more, symbolic racism researchers have asked, objective conditions and short-term material self-interest on the one side, or racism and conservativism on the other? Their answer: "with rare exceptions, we find that direct personal racial threats have only the faintest impact on whites' race related political attitudes" (Kinder & Sears, 1985, p. 1141). This, they claim, is a "stunning result" (1985, p. 1141). It is an important result, fitting comfortably, for example, with the findings of research on the political impact of personal problems (Brody & Sniderman, 1977; Kinder & Kiewiet, 1979; Sniderman & Brody, 1977). All the same, it is worth examination.

A "self-interested" attitude, according to symbolic racism researchers, "is directed toward maximizing gains or minimizing losses to the individual's tangible private well-being" (Sears et al., 1979). This may sound like a reasonable conception, yet it is actually a very restrictive way to think of self-interest. An example will make clear why. Consider blacks over 30, who favor affirmative action quotas for college admissions. They will not themselves benefit from such a quota. So, on the symbolic racism approach, their support for quotas is not self-interested. It does, however, seem excessive to describe their support as disinterested.

Or consider a hypothetical voter, interviewed several months before an upcoming presidential election. This particular voter is out of work, and has been for several weeks. Should she frame her voting choice in terms of her personal problem? She may do so because she is disgruntled and wishes to express her frustration against the incumbent. Nonetheless, there is no reason that she should do so, at any rate no instrumental or "self-interested" reason for her doing so. How can she sensibly suppose that the vote is a useful way to deal with her problem? After all, even if the candidate she backs does win, it will be two months before the winner is sworn in. By then she will have been out of work for four months. And then the "chain" of calculation only starts: for how close can the connection be between the general economic policy of a new administration and a specific payoff for a particular individual—can they, in any straightforward sense, be said even to be connected?

The symbolic racism researchers' conception of self-interest is restrictive because it is so extremely individualistic. Politics is collective action; political choices are collective choices. Elections characteristically do not offer voters distinguishable alternatives to maximize tangible, personal utilities. Rather, elections offer, as is commonly understood, opportunities to maximize the well-being of aggregations of individuals. It is reasonable to speak of a person voting for a candidate or party because she calculates it will help women, or more broadly, to help a distinct group with a distinguishable stake. The calculus of self-interest in politics is a calculus of group, not individual, benefits—certainly from the perspective of the mass public.

There is a second difficulty. In a symbolic politics analysis, the analytic question is posed in either-or terms: Do race-related political attitudes reflect self-interest or, alternatively, symbolic politics? We disagree that the two are mutually exclusive. Consider ideology, a prime example of a symbolic attitude. It is odd to insist that a conservative manufacturer who supports Republicans is doing so out of either self-interest or conservatism. Likewise, it sounds odd to
insist that a liberal trade unionist supports Democrats out of either self-interest or liberalism. Ideology and self-interest are not completely divorced; indeed, they often complement and reinforce one another.

Perhaps because of their penchant for reducing complex theoretical questions about self-interest to dichotomous, either-or terms, symbolic racism researchers have concentrated on simple self-interest effects (for an important exception, see Kinder & Sears, 1981). It is instead more useful, we believe, to ask under which conditions a particular variable is most important, and under which it is least important. This is surely true in general, and perhaps especially so in the case of self-interest. For example, according to Kluegel and Smith (1983), there is no zero-order relation between attitudes toward affirmative action and competitive self-interest (as measured, for example, by the percentage of blacks in an individual's occupation or by the respondent's perceived risk of being laid off). Control for age, however, and the picture changes: self-interest, it turns out, is significantly related to attitudes toward affirmative action among young workers—that is, among workers with less seniority.

Self-interest may thus be important without necessarily (or characteristically) producing simple, "across-the-board" effects. If so, the characteristic approach of symbolic racism researchers acts as a straitjacket from which we need to escape. So Green (1985) shows that self-interest effects are greater for a "bread-and-butter" issue like unemployment than for a "style" issue like ERA. The importance of self-interest, he also shows, varies with personal characteristics of individuals—the impact of self-interest more evident in the policy preferences of those who are not religious than of those who believe in the value of self-reliance. Precisely because self-interest refers to particular incentives, it is necessary, when assessing its impact, to specify exactly who wants what from whom.

The American Dilemma

Many white Americans, according to symbolic racism theory, oppose assistance for blacks ostensibly out of a commitment to certain values—the work ethic, for example—but actually out of a dislike of blacks. Symbolic racism theory is, in this sense, a pessimistic theory, deeply skeptical of the apparent erosion of popular prejudice over the last four decades. For our part, we think that symbolic racism theory may go wrong, not in being too pessimistic, but in being too optimistic.

According to Kinder and Sears, explicitly segregationist sentiment has "all but disappeared." Traditional racism, they assert, "no longer can be a major political force." Still more emphatically: "White America has become, in principle at least, racially egalitarian" (1981, p. 416).

The Kinder--Sears thesis that traditional racism is a spent force is insuppor-

Symbolic Racism

table. It is one thing to observe that old-fashioned racial prejudice has decreased since the World War II (e.g., Taylor et al., 1978). It is quite another thing to say that it has disappeared. It is simply not true that white Americans have become racially egalitarian, even in principle. To be sure, many accept aspects of racial equality. But much racial prejudice remains. Consider a classic equal opportunity issue, a good example of the idea that overt segregation sentiment has disappeared: housing. According to the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) General Survey, one in every four Americans agreed in 1984, that "white people have a right to keep Blacks out of their neighborhoods if they want to, and Blacks should respect that right." Moreover, when the principle of racial equality is pitted against the freedom of the homeowner to sell or not as he chooses, then fully 47% support racial discrimination and segregation (General Social Surveys, 1972–1984: Cumulative Codebook, 1984).

It would be nice to think that substantial numbers of Americans no longer are willing to express openly deprecatory remarks about blacks, but it simply is not so. For example, according to a 1978 Harris national survey, one half of Americans agree that "blacks tend to have less ambition than whites"; one third, that blacks "breed crime"; one quarter, that blacks "have less native intelligence than whites"; one third, that blacks "want to live off the handout"; one third, that blacks "are more violent than whites"; and one fifth, that blacks "care less for the family than whites."

The Kinder--Sears thesis that flagrant racial prejudice has disappeared is mistaken. A final example illustrates the point. There remains substantial support for laws to prohibit blacks and whites from marrying one another (Schuman et al., 1985, p. 82). Notice that it is not merely a question of whether one approves or disapproves of racial intermarriage; racial intermarriage is to be prevented altogether, to be made illegal. There is nothing modern or symbolic about support for antimiscegenation laws—even symbolic racism researchers recognize this and treat it as a defining sign of old-fashioned racism (McConahay et al., 1981, p. 554). Yet one quarter of Americans presently favor such laws.

Symbolic racism researchers, particularly Kinder and Sears, dismiss traditional racism as vestigial. So it is worth estimating how many Americans are ready to express racial hostility openly, crudely. Perhaps the easiest way to convey their size is through the following comparison: Approximately one fifth of Americans, in 1978, identified themselves as Republicans (Shanks & Miller, 1985). The number who are racially prejudiced is not less than this, and possibly half again as large. No one supposes that support for the Republican Party "no longer can be a major political force." Why, then, suppose that traditional prejudice is a spent force?

There is a further respect in which symbolic racism researchers discount the strength of traditional prejudice. They suggest that racists tend to conceal their racism out of fear that an overt expression of racial hostility will excite disap-
proval. But are racists, in fact, likely to believe others disagree with them, to believe theirs is a minority view?

Only a minority of Americans favor strict racial segregation, but they exaggerate how many other Americans favor it, often by a factor of two or more. For example, in 1968 only about one in seven in the central Northeast supported segregation—but one in two believed it had the support of a majority of whites (O'Gorman, 1979). In short, a majority may be perceived to support old-fashioned racism, even though only a minority do.

The point is not merely that many white Americans misperceive the racial attitudes of their fellow whites. It is rather that their misperceptions are asymmetrical, in two respects. First, they overestimate the number who are racially intolerant, while underestimating the number who are racially tolerant (Breed & Kitsanes, 1961; O'Gorman, 1975, 1979; O'Gorman & Garry, 1976/1977). Second, the kind of mistake people make—whether they over- or underestimate how many agree with them—hinges on their own racial attitudes. Thus, the racially intolerant overestimate—while the racially tolerant underestimate—how many agree with them (O'Gorman, 1979).

The asymmetry in preference estimation—pluralistic ignorance, as it is commonly called—suggests how the American dilemma is enduring. Not only does racial intolerance resist change, but even when it does diminish, the change often goes unnoticed, especially by the racially intolerant, with the result that they continue to believe they are in the majority while the tolerant continue to labor under the belief that they are in the minority.

Research on pluralistic ignorance undercut the presupposition of symbolic racism researchers that social pressure against overt expression of anti-black affect is now widely effective in American society. Many bigots are not ashamed of their bigotry. It is not, from their point of view, bigotry at all; it merely a factual description of the world, and of certain kinds of people as they really are—indeed, as any open-minded person would acknowledge they are. Of course, some will feel inhibited from open expression of racial hostility. But many will not. If racists were as quick to dive for cover as symbolic racism theory suggests, racism would be a less serious problem than it is in fact.

Symbolic racism researchers also may have been too optimistic in their analysis of values. Race is the American dilemma, as it seems to us, in part because resistance to assuring equality for blacks (in addition to being rooted in racism) may still more fundamentally be grounded in the American ethos itself.

Symbolic racism researchers have pointed to the importance of such traditional values as self-reliance and the work ethic. But these values come into importance, on a symbolic racism analysis, only insofar as they are allied or conjoined with racial prejudice. But there is another, more sobering possibility: values such as individualism may undercut support for efforts to achieve racial equality, even when these values have nothing whatever to do with racism. For example, suppose a woman opposes government assistance for blacks. Then she confronts a request for assistance for women similar to that requested for blacks. If she opposes assistance for women, just as she opposes it for blacks, should she be described as a racist?

There are many Americans like this hypothetical woman. They oppose government assistance for blacks, not out of aversion to blacks, but rather out of a set of normative beliefs defining the propriety both of asking for, and providing, public assistance. And these normative beliefs, a growing volume of research suggests, tap values central in the American ethos, especially individualism (Feldman, 1983; Kluegel & Smith, 1982, 1983; Sniderman & Hagen, 1985).

Just how does this analysis suggest that a symbolic racism analysis may be overoptimistic? Quite simply, even supposing prejudice were to disappear completely, there would in all probability remain substantial popular opposition to government efforts to achieve racial equality. From this perspective, the American dilemma may involve a deep paradox: resistance to efforts to achieve racial equality may be rooted precisely in a commitment to a distinctively American conception of equality (Sniderman & Hagen, 1985; Sniderman, Hagen, Tetlock, & Brady, in press).

**Attribution of Motives in Political Analysis**

At what point is one justified in concluding that racist motives determine a policy preference? Not surprisingly, different groups set different thresholds of proof. Some civil rights activists view opposition to affirmative action quotas as inspired in large part by racism. Some conservatives see the same programs as threats to fundamental (nonracial) values such as equality of opportunity. Disagreements of this sort, of course, are the stuff of politics. One person's reason is frequently another's rationalization (cf. Mills, 1940, Tetlock, 1985).

Symbolic racism theory, in its fundamental sense, is an attempt to apply the methods of social science to the problem of political motive attribution. It is therefore important to consider an especially basic question: to what extent are political debates over the "true motives" underlying racial policy preferences resolvable through the techniques of causal analysis available to the social sciences?

The answer to this question is by no means obvious. Problems of political motive attribution may roughly be divided into "easy" and "hard" cases. An example of the former is old-fashioned racism; of the latter, symbolic racism.

Consider old-fashioned racism: what analytical tools might the investigator draw upon to determine whether traditional racism underlies opposition to quotas? The classical strategy is to locate attitudes toward quotas in a nomological network of relevant constructs—constructs that should theoretically relate to
attitudes toward quotas (cf. Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). Thus, one would explore the relations among affect toward blacks, crude stereotyping of blacks, policy stands that contemporary American political culture would label as unambiguously racist (e.g., support for segregation), and policy stands whose meaning is politically controversial (e.g., minority job quotas).

Now a case such as this, though easy in principle, may in practice be quite hard. (What “third variables” moderate the relation between traditional racism and opposition to quotas? To what extent does the relationship hold when one controls for alternative explanations such as traditional values or attitudes toward the federal government?) Even so, a hard case, such as symbolic racism, represents a quite different order of difficulty. The difficulty is as follows: There is no nomological net in the case of symbolic racism. Many of the motive attributions are contestable, not merely by the person to whom they are attributed, but also by other analysts generally. And they are inherently contestable because the symbolic racism approach begs the question—how, after all, is one to tell whether opposition to affirmative action is racist or not when, in the case of symbolic racism, racism is not related to an agreed-on sign of racism, for example, crude stereotyping?

Lacking positive evidence of racist motivation, one might turn to negative evidence. Perhaps one could infer racist motivation by a process of elimination—by ruling out other plausible motives for, say, opposing affirmative action. Thus, an investigator might propose that because the well-being of the individual respondent is not directly threatened by quotas, the individual is not driven by concern for his or her self-interest.

Negative arguments, however, are inherently weak ways to resolve problems of motive attribution (cf. Tetlock & Manstead, 1985). The variety of alternative motives for taking a particular policy stand is practically endless. How exactly should one go about operationalizing “self-interest”—objective life circumstances (the presence or absence of a quota system in one’s place of work), perceived life circumstances (do the respondents believe, in competing for scarce societal resources, they are at a comparative disadvantage by virtue of being white?), or the perceived life circumstances of individuals or groups with whom the respondent identifies (e.g., friends, family, neighbors)? Moreover, self-interest is only one class of motivational counterhypothesis. Perhaps the respondent objects out of belief that color-blind decision-making procedures provide the fairest method of guaranteeing equality of opportunity (or social harmony) in the long run. Or perhaps the respondent perceives quota systems as one more manifestation of an increasingly intrusive and legalistic federal bureaucracy that restricts individual freedom and market efficiency.

Symbolic racism researchers have only skimmed the surface of such potential motivational counterhypotheses. But, supposing they went deeper: Is the attribution of symbolic racism falsifiable? We believe not. The list of counterhypotheses is, in principle, infinite. Furthermore, the flow of causality, even when studied by the most sophisticated statistical modeling procedures, will remain highly ambiguous as long as symbolic racism researchers reserve the right to label a wide range of (nonracial) values and policy preferences as racist. Suppose, for example, that one were to find that all the variance in white opposition to government assistance for blacks could be statistically explained as a function of commitment to economic individualism, antipathy toward the federal government, and the belief that market mechanisms are the most efficient method of alleviating the plight of the poor. Assume, moreover, that affect toward blacks did not even emerge as a significant predictor of opposition to government assistance to blacks. Would this—at first glance, quite devastating—evidence count against the symbolic racism thesis? Not necessarily. Symbolic racism researchers could respond that such data only buttress their case. After all, the data reveal a connection between traditional values (support for economic individualism and capitalism) and opposition to assistance for blacks, and these traditional values are the very essence of symbolic racism. In short, as currently formulated, symbolic racism theory fails the fundamental test expected of any scientific theory—falsifiability. It is unclear what evidence it would take to convince symbolic racism researchers that they are wrong.

Conclusion

Group portraits are risky—and still riskier for groups (like symbolic racism researchers) who say they agree but do not. In our reading, there are at least two quite different, perhaps even contradictory, versions of symbolic racism theory. For example, McConahay stresses how open, crude expressions of racism once were tolerated but are no longer acceptable in the mainstream of American society; consequently, a new kind of racism has arisen that takes the form of a defense of traditional values (McConahay, in press). Symbolic racism, in this view, is disguised or covert racism. Sears, on the other hand, has stated privately that he rejects McConahay’s position (Schuman et al., p. 239). Of course, symbolic racism researchers are free to disagree with one another. But it is hard to work out their positions with precision if, on the one hand, they disagree on fundamental points—and the thesis of disguised racism is surely a fundamental one—but, on the other, never say they disagree and indeed give the opposite impression by frequently citing each other’s work as supporting their own.

Moreover, symbolic racism theory (in all of its versions) suffers from a major omission. What is omitted from the study of symbolic racism is prejudice itself.

Much is known about prejudice, about its sources, about its historically familiar forms, about its plasticity (i.e., its facility for assuming different expressions in different historical situations); and, not least, about its tenacity (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel, Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Quinley & Glock, 1979; Selznick & Steinberg, 1969). Unfortunately, little of this knowledge fig-
Symbolic Racism


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