Denial of racism and the Trump presidency

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to document the racist undertones of Donald Trump’s Presidential campaign rhetoric and draw implications regarding its impact on equality, diversity, and inclusion. Most contemporary individuals reject explicitly racist beliefs and strive to present themselves as having egalitarian attitudes toward other races and ethnicities. However, commonly held implicit biases toward historically marginalized racioethnic groups drive negative effect that is often unconscious and unacknowledged. Inconsistency between the conscious and unconscious aspects of contemporary racism generates a population of individuals who are uncomfortable with their attitudes, creating an opening for politicians willing to leverage racist rhetoric and gain support by resolving this inconsistency.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper applies social psychological theory and research to address the questions of what attracts otherwise non-racist individuals to racist-tinged rhetoric. The paper also provides theory-based interventions for reducing the attractiveness and impact of racist political campaigns.

Findings – Supporters of racist politicians resolve the conflict between their negative feelings toward racioethnic minorities and their espoused anti-racist views by distancing themselves from racist rhetorical content in three ways: by denying that racist statements or actions occurred, denying that the statements or actions are racist, and/or by denying responsibility for racism and its effects. These techniques provide supporters with validation from an authority that they can express their negative affect toward out-groups and still consider themselves to be good people and not racists.

Practical implications – Distancing from racism has allowed contemporary American extremists to reframe themselves as victims of closed-minded progressives seeking to elevate undeserving and/or dangerous out-groups at the in-group’s expense. Effective anti-racism techniques are needed to counter implicit biases in order to limit the attractiveness of extremist views. Implicit biases can be effectively reduced through training in counter-stereotypic imaging, stereotype replacement, and structured inter-group interaction. Effectively countering denial of the facts involves affirming the audience’s belief system while building skepticism toward the sources of misinformation.

Social implications – While countering racist politicians requires commitment, these efforts are essential for protecting the identity of the USA as a society striving toward equality, diversity, and inclusion.

Originality/value – By articulating the social psychological principles underpinning racist-tinged populist rhetoric, this paper explains the attractiveness of racist statements by politicians, which tends to be under-estimated.

Keywords Racial discrimination, Aversive racism, Implicit bias, Populism, Symbolic racism, System justification

Paper type General review

When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best […] They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us (sic). They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people […] It’s coming from more than Mexico. It’s coming from all over South and Latin America, and it’s coming – probably – from the Middle East (Donald Trump, Presidential Announcement Speech, June 16, 2015).

Donald Trump’s opening salvo to his presidential campaign was to spotlight immigrants from Mexico, Latin America, and the Middle East as a critical danger to the US society (TIME Staff, 2015). By highlighting marginalized identity groups as the key contributors to social and economic woes, President Trump triggered a volatile and hostile dynamic in the American public that fulfills the definition of racism. As such, racism undergirded Candidate Trump’s campaign rhetoric from the beginning. Given that most Americans eschew racism and vigorously reject the “racist” label (Norton et al., 2006), the election of President Trump raises troubling questions regarding the rationale for promulgating
racist-tinged rhetoric in a contemporary US election as well as the impact of racist political rhetoric on the US society.

Research has shown that observing unpunished racist acts increases the likelihood of espousing derogatory racist beliefs (Sullivan et al., 2016). Not only did Candidate Trump’s racist rhetoric go unpunished, he was elected the US President on the basis of his racist statements and policies, at least in part (Wood, 2017). And as President, Donald Trump has continued to promulgate racist-tinged rhetoric, for instance, encouraging police brutality against Latinos (Merica, 2017). When racist statements by leaders go unpunished, racist sentiments are encouraged. Racist rhetoric is also divisive: members of historically marginalized groups, who observe a disrespectful interaction between a member of their own group and a predominant group authority figure, feel greater social distance from the predominant group as a result (Davies and Sivasubramaniam, 2016).

The purpose of this paper is to document the racist undertones of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign rhetoric and draw implications regarding his impact on equality, diversity, and inclusion in the US society. The paper is organized as follows. First, I provide standard definitions of race, racioethnic groups, and racism. Next, I discuss the dynamic of distancing oneself from racism as a means of protecting a positive self-concept utilized by individuals who support candidates promulgating racist speech. Then, I share research testing various methods for overcoming racism in the face of denials and draw conclusions for countering racist political tactics.

Race, racioethnic groups, and racism

Any discussion of a topic as emotionally charged as racism requires grounding in clear definitions. In this section, I provide definitions for the concepts of race, racioethnic groups, and racism based on the predominant understanding shared among contemporary scholars. These definitions provide the foundation for characterizing Donald Trump’s presidential campaign rhetoric as racist.

Race

Scientists in the fields of biology, epidemiology, and genetics argue that the terms “race” and “ethnicity” have no clear scientific meaning (Collins, 2004) and that geographic ancestry is a more accurate representation of an individual’s genomic heritage (Yudell et al., 2016). Recent research indicates that Americans in the same self-identified racioethnic categories show broad variation in geographic ancestry, with non-Hispanic white individuals ranging from Northern Europe to Southern Europe and the Middle East, and Latinos showing ancestry from all of the major continents (Banda et al., 2015). Genetically, Sub-Saharan Africans include all other human population groups, and many African sub-populations showing greater similarity to Europeans than they do to each other (Maglo et al., 2016). Furthermore, continental clustering explains less than 2 percent of human genetic variation, indicating that geographic ancestry holds limited explanatory value regarding an individual’s biological heritage (Maglo et al., 2016). As such, race and ethnicity are best understood as socially constructed concepts based upon a history of interaction between cultural identity groups (Cox, 2004).

Racioethnic groups

Although race and ethnicity have little meaning genetically, they have many implications for identity and social interaction (Avery et al., 2009; Chrobot-Mason et al., 2013; Deitch et al., 2003; Jones et al., 2016). Cox (2004) argued in favor of the term “racioethnicity” for identifying both race and ethnic groups in order to avoid implications that some socially constructed identity groups are biologically distinct “races” while others are
culturally distinct “ethnicities.” Thus, racioethnicity refers to (sometimes) visibly distinguishable social groups with distinctive cultures and identities. While individuals often take pride in their racioethnic identities, they also often show negative attitudes toward members of other racioethnic groups (Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt, 2009). In fact, people show a clear tendency toward in-group bias and out-group discrimination on the basis of even trivial distinctions between groups, such as being assigned to wear a red or a blue t-shirt (Bettencourt et al., 2001). Importantly, high-status groups show substantially more in-group bias and out-group discrimination than low-status groups, who often discriminate in favor of the higher-status group (Bettencourt et al., 2001). In sum, racioethnicity has implications for individual identity and experience, with systematic impact on one’s perspective and worldview (Pless and Maak, 2004).

Racism
Racism is an attitude consisting of a tendency to respond negatively toward a racioethnic group. As an attitude, racism has cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Cuddy et al., 2007). The cognitive aspect of racism is defined as categorizing and stereotyping people on the basis of racioethnic group membership. Racioethnic categorization can be more or less “essentializing,” defined as considering racioethnicity to have a fundamental and inalterable biological basis (Chao et al., 2013). Stereotyping means attributing a set of traits to an identity group, which generally reflect two major dimensions of social perception, specifically, warmth and competence (Fiske et al., 2002): “Groups viewed as competitors are stereotyped as lacking warmth, whereas groups viewed as cooperative are stereotyped as warm; groups viewed as high status are stereotyped as competent, whereas groups viewed as low status are not” (Cuddy et al., 2007, p. 632). The affective aspect of racism is prejudice, defined as negative feelings toward a racioethnic out-group (Crawford et al., 2017). The behavioral aspect of racism is discrimination, defined as showing differentially favorable actions toward others based upon racioethnicity (Esses and Dovidio, 2002; Hebl and Dovidio, 2005).

Racist attitudes do not always exhibit cognitive, affective, behavioral, and essentializing components. The well-supported theory of aversive racism argues that many individuals with anti-racist beliefs have a negative effect toward racioethnic out-groups, which results in discriminatory treatment (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2004). Stereotyping is not the same as essentializing racioethnicity, and many individuals do not attribute stereotypical traits to biological or genetic heritage (Chao et al., 2013). However, essentializing is a significant predictor of racism and is associated with stronger stereotypes and prejudices against racioethnic groups and a reduced desire for cross-racial interaction (Chao et al., 2013). Essentialized racism echoes the historical rhetoric of Nazi Germany (Olick and Levy, 1997). Candidate Trump invoked Nazi symbolism (Jacobson, 2016) (see, for instance, Figure 1 showing Nathaniel Meyersohn’s August 12, 2016 tweet at: https://twitter.com/nmeyersohn/status/764153785182715904) and included purveyors of white supremacist rhetoric among the leaders of his campaign (Storey and Friedman, 2018). These facts suggest that Candidate Trump deliberately appealed to essentializing racist rhetoric and that considered such thinkers to be the valuable sources of information and guidance.

Is it racism if immigrants are really hurting the US economy and society? It is important to note that the evidence does not support President Trump’s claims. Immigrants are not “sent” to the USA by source countries, rather, they arrive in the USA through individual agency, usually on the basis of significant personal sacrifice (Birgier et al., 2016; Hagan et al., 2008). Immigrants tend to be hard-working, resourceful people who participate in education and skill-building at levels equal to the domestic US population (López and Radford, 2017). Immigrants contribute to the economic growth by founding new businesses at a higher rate than domestic citizens (Nasri, 2013), and a sizable proportion of the largest
companies in the USA were founded by immigrants or the children of immigrants (Anderson, 2011). Rather than taking good jobs away from domestic citizens, immigrants often take jobs for which they are overqualified because their international credentials are not recognized in the receiving country (Esses et al., 2006; Hao, 2004). Immigrants often work in undesirable jobs in the informal economy, receiving below-minimum-wage pay without benefits and exposing themselves to health and safety violations as well as exploitative treatment (Theodore et al., 2015).

Regarding the impact of Muslim immigrants on national security, evidence shows that most terrorist incidents in the USA are carried out by domestic citizens, often identifying themselves with white supremacy (Mathis-Lilley, 2015). A Georgia State study identified a total of 89 terrorist attacks on US soil between 2011 and 2015, 11 of which were perpetrated by Muslims, and 18 of which were perpetrated against Muslims (Bailey, 2017). Attacks by Muslims are also over-reported in the US media: “The average attack with a Muslim perpetrator is covered in 90.8 articles. Attacks with a Muslim, foreign-born perpetrator are covered in 192.8 articles on average. Compare this with other attacks, which received an average of 18.1 articles” (Bailey, 2017). Bailey (2017) concludes, “Your risk of being killed in a jihadist terror attack […] [including] 9/11 […] [was] 1 in 110,000. Your lifetime risk of dying in a lightning strike is 1 in 161,000, and your chance of being killed in a motor vehicle crash is 1 in 114. Given that our government has already squandered more than $500 billion on homeland security, while encroaching on our liberties, it is vital that Americans keep the threat of terrorism in perspective.”

While interpersonally, racism is an attitude, racism can be institutional as well. Institutional racism is defined as formalized systems and processes that systematically apply differentially favorable treatment to individuals on the basis of racioethnicity (Haney-López, 2000). Institutional racism has been documented in housing, healthcare, legal, educational, and other institutional systems (Guerrero, 2016; Haney-López, 2000; Mendez et al., 2014). Candidate Trump indicated his support for increased institutional racism with policies like creating an official Muslim registry (Abramson, 2016), and building
a wall to keep out Latino immigrants (Joshi, 2017). President Trump has instituted a travel ban against individuals from predominantly Muslim countries despite the fact that none of the terrorist incidents on US soil were carried out by citizens of the listed countries (Walsh, 2017).

Candidate Trump’s campaign messaging is consistent with that of radical right politicians in Europe (Forchtner et al., 2013). Such language appeals to the racist dynamics by attributing the major problems of society to a deviant group of people with a hostile ideology who are either inner or external enemies (Sakki and Pettersson, 2016). Research shows that election outcomes favoring candidates who use racist-tinged rhetoric leads people to conclude that racist ideas have become more accepted in society and to show reduced willingness to speak out against racism (Portelinha and Elcheroth, 2016). As such, the election of President Trump may well have increased the acceptability of racist dialogues at the margins of US society, as indicated by increased activity and high levels of support for President Trump on white nationalist websites (Garcia, 2016), as well as troubling images of young people raising the Nazi salute as a joke (see photo in Tasneem Nashrulla’s article on BuzzFeed News, http://bzfd.it/2t4CEgc) (Nashrulla, 2017).

Why appeal to racism in a political campaign?

Fascinatingly, Candidate Trump’s rhetorical devices echo Hitler’s anti-Jewish/anti-communist propaganda by wedding out-group hate with an anti-socialist perspective aiming to deconstruct the public sector institutions constituting the American safety net. This rhetoric has its appeal as public opinion polling shows that some of the strongest predictors of opposition to public welfare programs in the USA are negative attitudes toward African Americans and the perception that welfare recipients are undeserving (Gilens, 1999). Media bias arguably plays a role in linking social welfare programs to race the US research on US magazine and television stories shows that in over half of all media stories, poor people were portrayed as being African American, almost double this group’s actual representation among Americans in poverty (Gilens, 1999). Racism is one of the strongest predictors of voting for Candidate Trump (Wood, 2017).

People at risk of accepting racist political campaigning are those individuals who justify inequality between racioethnic groups by blaming the poor for contributing less value to society. This reasoning relies on a basic logic of deservingness as an explanation of extant inequality and/or more sophisticated claims that unequal outcomes result despite fair processes and a context of equal opportunities (Bank, 2016). These individuals are more likely to embrace candidates like Donald Trump because their racist-tinged rhetoric is consistent with the need to believe that society is just (Nail et al., 2003). Other people reject just society beliefs and support proactive efforts to eradicate poverty. This logic links inequality and poverty to harmful outcomes such as failure to provide for the basic needs of individuals, reduced social cohesion, rejection of a market economy, and/or threats to democracy (Bank, 2016). These individuals are unlikely to embrace the racist-tinged political rhetoric (Crawford et al., 2017; Nail et al., 2003).

The link between anti-socialism and the rhetoric of hate is the unspoken implication that much of the cost of socialist institutions (welfare, housing subsidies, public education, public sector employment, social security, Medicaid/Medicare, etc.) goes to support members of threatening out-groups (Latino immigrants, African Americans, Muslims, etc.) (Gilens, 1999). Limiting these programs or ridding the government of them altogether would benefit you, the superior people, who add most of the value to the economy! You would be rich if you did not have to support those inferior people with your taxes! There would be more high-paying jobs if companies did not have to pay taxes to support these people, either – and you, as the superior people, would be first in line for those jobs! Your superiority is also a reason not to support raising the minimum wage, which goes to inferior people adding little value through their labor!
Importantly, liberals and conservatives alike show evidence of racist tendencies. While liberalism is negatively associated with endorsing racist beliefs, liberals show behavioral evidence of racism based on negative affect (Esses and Dovidio, 2002; Nail et al., 2003). Conservatism shows a different pattern of racism and is associated with statements opposing government programs for poor members of racioethnic out-groups (Nail et al., 2003). As such, conservatives are more likely to view racist-tinged populist rhetoric as consistent with their own views.

Now that Donald Trump is President, his policy initiatives lay bare his agenda of cutting taxes for businesses like his company and wealthy individuals like himself (Long, 2017). His cabinet choices indicate intentions to vitiate public sector programs supporting the poor and working classes (Tcherneva, 2017). The Republican-sponsored healthcare bills in the House and Senate both included substantial tax cuts for the wealthy subsidized by major funding cuts to healthcare for the poor (Krieg, 2017). Candidate Trump had promised no cuts to government social security and Medicaid, but his budget proposal makes such cuts (Sherman, 2017) and he remained supportive of the Republican bills despite the fact that they break his promise (Levey and Mascaro, 2017).

## Denial and distancing from racism

Due to the desire for a positive self-concept (Deutsch, 2006), individuals seek to distance themselves from socially undesirable racist beliefs and actions (Table I). Distancing from facts happens when individuals deny that a racist statement was made or that a racist action occurred. Distancing from racist interpretation results when people accept that a statement or action occurred but deny that it reflects racism. Distancing from responsibility happens when individuals accept that racism underlies a statement or action but deny responsibility for the action, or more subtly, for ameliorating the negative impact of racism on others. Support for President Trump is likely associated with wholesale denial and ignoring of facts about his racist-tinged statements and actions, as well as the development of alternative explanations distancing his statements and actions.

### Distancing mechanisms

| Deny the facts: the racist statement was not made, the racist action did not occur | Classic cognitive dissonance: People avoid uncongenial facts contrary to their attitudes, beliefs and worldview (Hart et al., 2009) |
| Deny the racist implications: acknowledge that the statement or action occurred but deny its racist implications | Social psychological theories of racism: Juxtaposition of social categorization with claims of color-blindness reduces task performance and perceived friendliness (Norton et al., 2006) |
| Deny responsibility: acknowledge that racist statements or actions happened but deny responsibility for racism | Symbolic racism among conservatives (Sears and Henry, 2003) |

### Theoretical foundations

- **Deny the facts:** Mainstream media is "fake news" Extremist views are "alternative facts"  
- **Deny the racist implications:** Claim color-blindness Justify negative affect toward racioethnic minorities with political beliefs Claim egalitarian beliefs/deny negative affect toward racioethnic minorities

### Table I. Distancing self-concept and self-presentation from racism

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actions from their racist implications and denial of responsibility for ameliorating racism. The next paragraphs link each of the distancing strategies to bodies of social psychological theory and research.

Denying the facts
Classic cognitive dissonance research documents that individuals distance themselves from uncongenial facts that threaten their beliefs. Meta-analytic data indicate that when given a choice, people show a moderately strong ($d = 0.36$) preference for accessing information that supports their attitudes and beliefs, and that this tendency is stronger when the belief is highly relevant to closely held personal values ($d = 0.51$) (Hart et al., 2009). The political campaign of Candidate Trump and the administration of President Trump leverage the desire of their supporters to distance themselves from the uncongenial facts by attacking the mainstream media as “fake news” and elevating information from fringe sources known to fabricate stories as “alternative facts” that deserve greater attention (Drum, 2016). These sources, such as Breitbart, routinely promulgate racist-tinged rhetoric, such as the false allegation that in 2013, the US Department of Agriculture erroneously overspent $2.6 billion in food stamps (Mora, 2013). The Trump campaign attempted to deny a racist action by quickly deleting Candidate Trump’s tweet about his opponent Hillary Clinton containing an image of the six-sided Star of David taken from an internet message board for the alt-right: “less than two hours after the original tweet, the Trump account sent out a new image – one that was identical except that the words ‘Most corrupt candidate ever!’ were placed in a red circle rather than a star” (Figure 2) (Jacobson, 2016; Lartey, 2016). But the original tweet was made public, and its sourcing identified (Figure 3). And this was not an isolated incident, “Trump twice retweeted from the feed of the Twitter account, @WhiteGenocideTM, which claims to be located in ‘Jewmerica’ and regularly posts anti-Semitic material” (Jacobson, 2016). In this instance, the Trump campaign was unsuccessful in its attempts to deny the facts.

Denying the racist implications of the facts
When people cannot deny the fact that racist actions occurred, they can distance themselves from racism by arguing that the action should not be interpreted as racist and that racism does not underlie the action. For instance, when removing the “Star of David” tweet did not work, the Trump campaign tried to distance itself from the racist undertones of the message by arguing that the image was a Sheriff’s Star or a plain star (Jacobson, 2016). This example illustrates how individuals capitalize upon attributional ambiguity to distance their statements and actions from possible attributions to racism.

Social psychological theory and research has documented several ways of denying that racism underlies one’s actions. One line of research examines color-blindness, or denial that one categorizes individuals on the basis of race. This method of distancing oneself from racism operates under the logic that, “If I do not notice race, then I cannot be a racist” (Norton et al., 2006, p. 949). As demonstrated by the fine comedy of Russell Peters (2010), attempts to deny noticing racioethnicity can be disingenuous to the point of being laughable. Worse, white Americans who attempt to be color-blind when interacting with an African American partner perform more poorly on a dyadic task and show more nonverbal behavior that makes them appear unfriendly (Norton et al., 2006).

Social psychological theories of racism identify two ways that individuals attempt to distance themselves from accusations of racism. The symbolic racism paradigm argues that some individuals justify their negative affect toward racioethnic out-groups with widely communicated political belief systems reflecting racial resentment (Sears and Henry, 2003). For instance, symbolic racists are likely to endorse beliefs that, “(a) Blacks no longer face much prejudice or discrimination, (b) Blacks’ failure to progress results from their
unwillingness to work hard enough, (c) Blacks are demanding too much too fast, and (d) Blacks have gotten more than they deserve” (Sears and Henry, 2003, p. 260).

The aversive racism paradigm argues that many individuals who explicitly reject such political beliefs still have racist tendencies. This view identifies a more liberal racism where individuals endorse egalitarian beliefs about racioethnicity but retain negative affect toward racioethnic out-groups, which causes them to engage in discriminatory behavior (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2004). The conflict arising between unacknowledged negative affect and explicitly anti-racist intellectual views can result in liberals showing greater discomfort with African Americans than conservatives do (Nail et al., 2003).

Other social psychological research shows that denial of racism by privileged racioethnic group members is reinforced by self-interest and self-serving biases in causal attribution. Individuals who have benefitted from privilege do not want system change to create more fairness and equity (Siegel et al., 2016). Individuals who believe they have experienced upward social mobility compared to their parents’ status are more likely to

attribute poverty to laziness, particularly in nations with high income inequality like the USA (Gugushvili, 2016). Both in-group identification and meritocracy beliefs limit the willingness of members of historically privileged groups to attribute negative outcomes to racism (Blodorn et al., 2016).

Denying responsibility for racism
When individuals cannot deny the fact that an action occurred and that it was racist, another way of distancing themselves from racism is to deny personal responsibility. This dynamic was well-documented in the aftermath of Hitler’s Nazi regime (Olick and Levy, 1997). Some Germans claimed that they did not know about the genocide of the Nazi Holocaust, others claimed that they knew but did not personally participate in the Holocaust, and still others claimed that they had to participate because authorities demanded that they do so (Bartov, 1998). Milgram’s classic experiments demonstrated that people can be pressured to engage in actions they find personally reprehensible if told to do so by an authority (Blass, 2000). Contemporary research indicates the continuing impact of
authority on racist action by showing that business justifications by authority figures increase individual willingness to engage in hiring discrimination (Brief et al., 2000).

The findings of this research suggest that presidential statements and actions have the potential to impact thinking and behavior in the US society. White supremacist hate groups have been emboldened by the election of President Trump (Emmons, 2016), likely because their views are now legitimated by an authority figure. Examples of individuals invoking President Trump’s name as they brazenly harass US Latinos and Muslims abound (Bailey, 2016; Jenn, 2017; Sidahmed, 2016).

A simple way for supporters to deny a leader’s responsibility for the racist implications of his or her actions is to trivialize the racism, arguing that other issues are more important. For example, White House Spokesperson Sarah Huckabee Sanders argued that President Trump was “making a joke” when he told police officers to be rough with suspects (Merica, 2017). Claiming that one is joking is a way of expressing socially undesirable racist thoughts and feelings without having to take responsibility for the destructive implications of racism. Leaders in the policing community did not take kindly to this joke, however, and police chiefs across the country denounced President Trump’s statements as counter-productive to their goals of improving relationships with their communities (Wootson and Berman, 2017).

More sophisticated distancing arguments deny personal responsibility for ameliorating racism. Here, individuals acknowledge the racist implications of the facts while denying the need for societal change. Such arguments include individualism, social dominance orientation, and meritocracy beliefs. Individualism suggests that individuals are solely or primarily responsible for their own outcomes and that racioethnicity has little impact (DiAngelo, 2010). Social dominance orientation is a constellation of beliefs that justify hierarchy in human society, such as, “Some groups are simply inferior to other groups,” “It’s probably a good thing that certain groups are at the top and other groups are at the bottom” and is associated with racism against African Americans (Pratto et al., 1994, Appendix C). Recent research documents that if people show a strong social dominance orientation or strong meritocracy beliefs (e.g. “I feel that people get what they deserve”), they are less likely to believe that they are obligated to reduce racial biases or to avoid discriminating against others on the basis of racioethnicity (Redford and Ratliff, 2016).

In summary, some people use meritocracy beliefs to justify denial that racism is an important factor affecting individual outcomes. In this view, racist actions occur and are due to racism, but their impact is either not negative or is not important enough to merit social change. Such thinking allows individuals to support President Trump while minimizing the dissonance associated with his racist-tinged statements and actions.

**Fighting racism: effective anti-racist action**

Social psychologists have devoted substantial effort toward building and testing theory regarding how to fight racism (Table II). Because racism has both interpersonal and institutional dimensions, effective anti-racist action requires change at both of these levels. Methods for countering misinformation can be used oppose denial of racist-tinged facts and their racist implications. Appeals to a wide variety of value systems are effective for countering denials of the impact of racism and may increase support for dismantling institutional racism.

**Countering interpersonal racism**

Allport’s (1954) classic intergroup contact theory argues that contact between groups under optimal conditions reduces inter-group prejudice. His theorizing has inspired extensive research, and meta-analysis of over 700 independent samples indicates a small to moderate effect size of \(-0.21\), supporting the hypothesis that contact is negatively associated with prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Structured programs creating conditions of equal
status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and support of authorities show a stronger effect of −0.29.

These small to moderate effects suggest that in many cases, intergroup contact does not reduce prejudice, and others have worked to identify more effective methods of fighting racism. Devine (1989) frames prejudice as a habit and developed a prejudice reduction program based on raising awareness of prejudice, raising concern about the impact of prejudice, and providing habit-breaking strategies for reducing prejudice. These strategies include stereotype replacement (recognizing and replacing stereotypical responses), counter-stereotypic imaging (imagining examples of out-group members who counter popular stereotypes), individuating (viewing members of other racioethnic groups according to their personal rather than stereotypical characteristics), perspective taking (adopting the perspective of members of other racioethnic groups), and contact (increasing exposure to members of other racioethnic groups). A 12-week longitudinal study demonstrated that this multifaceted intervention dramatically reduces implicit race bias in participants (Devine et al., 2012). Such training can be used to counter the impact of racist statements and actions against US Latinos and Muslims.

Countering denials of the facts
Cognitive psychologists have developed an evidence-based set of principles for countering misinformation which can be applied to people’s denial of facts (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Given that people prefer information congenial to their worldview (Hart et al., 2009), framing arguments about facts in terms consistent with the target audience’s belief system results in greater acceptance (Feinberg and Willer, 2015; Kahan, 2010). Affirming people’s worldview through stories of times they felt good about themselves because they acted on their values increases openness to uncongenial information (Cohen et al., 2007). Building skepticism about the motives of sources of false but congenial information also helps individuals to reject it (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). People are more likely to accept statements countering false information if they come from someone who shares their worldview and whose motives they trust (Lewandowsky et al., 2012).

Racism and identity in contemporary society
While US liberals and conservatives are divided, we share in common rejection of explicit White racism (Norton et al., 2006). Endorsement of explicitly racist statements in the USA
shows a downward trend since the mid-twentieth century (Schuman et al., 1997). As far back as 1992, average responses to survey questions assessing explicit racism (e.g. whether White respondents consider members of various racioethnic groups to be unintelligent, etc.) showed mean values well below the neutral point of 4 on a rating scale of 1 to 7 (Bobo and Zubrinsky, 1996). Americans consider racists to be violent, cruel, untrustworthy, unintelligent, and immoral (Sommers and Norton, 2006). In sum, scholars have concluded that, “few labels are as aversive as that of ‘racist’” (Norton et al., 2006, p. 949).

Unfortunately, the general intellectual or cognitive rejection of White racism in America is accompanied by widespread implicit biases against historically marginalized racioethnic groups (Greenwald and Kreiger, 2006). Studies of implicit bias ask participants to respond quickly to word and picture pairs combining advantaged or disadvantaged groups with positive or negative adjectives. Respondents commonly pair advantaged groups with positive words and disadvantaged groups with negative words more quickly than the mismatched advantaged/negative and disadvantaged/positive combinations (Greenwald et al., 2009). Implicit bias against African Americans in the USA is shared across age, gender, education, political, and racioethnic groups with the exception of African Americans themselves, who show neutral responses, pairing white and African American faces equally quickly with positive and negative words (Greenwald and Kreiger, 2006).

In addition to sharing an aversion to racism combined with implicit racist bias, liberals and conservatives also share a common interest in contributing toward a positive American identity. Whatever his personal intentions as a candidate, President Trump flirted with a racist ideology in order to win election by appealing to people’s (mostly) implicit racist biases. Public policies linked to this ideological rhetoric threaten the integrity of core national values. As the German experience shows, national evils have the potential to taint a society, generating difficult questions regarding individual responsibility, societal accountability, and national identity (Maier, 1988). Violations of core human values on a societal scale create future obligations, which Germany has worked to fulfill with an unprecedented reparations policy and ongoing national education programs ensuring that subsequent generations “never forget” (Olick and Levy, 1997). Nonetheless, the painful impact of Nazi Germany resonates across generations of Germans, as children and grandchildren struggle to reconcile a blighted national heritage with the bonds of affection they feel toward their parents and grandparents (Shattuck, 2017). As a person of German heritage and a grandchild of Nazis on one side of my family, I caution politicians and citizens alike to consider their impact on future generations.

Conclusions

While the percentage of the US public who endorse explicitly white supremacist messages is quite small, white supremacists’ enthusiastic support for President Trump is concerning. President Trump’s rhetoric emphasizing minority groups as major threats to society reinforces US racism by underscoring stereotypes, fueling negative emotions, and encouraging discriminatory behavior toward racioethnic minority groups. By denying that his rhetoric has racist implications, President Trump legitimates white supremacists and helps them to distance their views from the socially undesirable “racism” label. Evidence suggests that President Trump’s statements and actions have emboldened white supremacists, as evidenced by increased activity on their websites and in racist-tinged harassment (Garcia, 2016; Jenn, 2017).

Both liberals and conservatives show implicit bias toward racioethnic minorities (Greenwald and Kreiger, 2006). Conservatives are more likely to endorse explicitly negative statements about racioethnic minority groups reflecting symbolic racism (Sears and Henry, 2003), while liberals are more likely to show aversive racism through negative arousal and unintentional interpersonal discrimination toward racioethnic minorities.
Both conservatives and liberals desire to distance themselves from racism, indicating a shared aversion to the “racist” label (Sommers and Norton, 2006).

People of conscience – the 99 percent of us who are against racism and white supremacy – can build upon our shared heritage by acknowledging implicit biases, educating ourselves on the impact of these biases, and breaking the habit of racism (Devine et al., 2012). We are likely to be more effective in achieving anti-racist goals if we share facts clearly while validating each other’s values and articulating how anti-racism is consistent with a wide variety of belief systems (Feinberg and Willer, 2015; Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Acknowledging that liberals and conservatives alike are limited by human biases (Hart et al., 2009), we can use Devine’s principles to break the habit of prejudice toward each other (Crawford et al., 2017) and unite to defeat contemporary American extremists who threaten US identity as a society striving toward equality, diversity, and inclusion.

References


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