

SHORT NOTE

**SELF-REPORTS OF RACIST ATTITUDES FOR ONESELF  
AND FOR OTHERS**

Donald A. SAUCIER  
*University of Kentucky, USA*

Individuals are often motivated to avoid appearing prejudiced. In this study, it was hypothesized that participants would indicate that other people would be more likely than themselves to agree with racist arguments. Participants read a series of positive and negative arguments about African Americans and rated the extent to which they agreed with the arguments and how convincing they found the arguments to be. Participants also rated how much the "average person" would agree with and be convinced by the arguments. The hypotheses were supported. Participants overwhelmingly reported that, compared to themselves, the "average person" would agree more with and be convinced more by the racist arguments. These results suggest that individuals may justify their own prejudice by believing that other people are more prejudiced, allowing the individuals to maintain nonprejudiced self-concepts despite their own racist attitudes.

The expression of overt prejudiced attitudes has decreased sharply in the last few decades. Individuals in contemporary society are much less likely to express overt negativity toward minority groups (e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 1991; Dovidio, Brigham, Johnson, & Gaertner, 1996) or to endorse negative stereotypes about minority groups even when they are consciously aware of the content of the negative stereotypes (e.g., Devine & Elliot, 1995). However, studies have shown that while the overt expression of explicit prejudiced attitudes has declined, the attitudes still linger to produce real and measurable instances of less obvious discrimination (e.g., Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Dovidio, Smith, Donnell, & Gaertner, 1997). Therefore, while there has surely been some improvement in racial attitudes over time, racist sentiment still exists, but is often suppressed from observable expression.

Individuals are motivated to appear nonprejudiced (e.g., Phillips & Ziller, 1997; Plant & Devine, 1998) which influences how they report their atti-

---

I would like to thank Leslie Ashburn-Nardo, Mary Cain, John Cox, Stirling Sampson, and Lindsay Sharp for their comments on this manuscript, and Vanitha Nair, Robin Roy, and Jaylyn Waddell for their help in data collection.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Donald A. Saucier, Department of Psychology, University of Kentucky, 204 Kastle Hall, Lexington, Kentucky, USA, 40506-0044. E-mail: [dasauc2@uky.edu](mailto:dasauc2@uky.edu)

tudes about minority groups (e.g., Dunton & Fazio, 1997). Presumably due to this motivation, studies show that individuals often attend more closely to information given by minority group members (Petty, Fleming, & White, 1999) and provide feedback to minority group members that is systematically more positive than to majority group members (Harber, 1998). Further, when individuals who report that they are not prejudiced are made aware of their previous prejudiced behavior, they typically report feelings of compunction and adjust their subsequent behavior to be even less prejudiced (e.g., Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991; Monteith, 1993). In addition, recent work has shown that individuals will reduce their levels of reported prejudice after being told that other people do not report high levels of prejudice (Stangor, Sechrist, & Jost, 2001).

Because being nonprejudiced is a valued attribute, it is likely that individuals will be motivated not only to believe that they are nonprejudiced on an absolute level, but also on a relative level when compared to others. Research has shown that individuals exhibit a false uniqueness effect and state that they possess positive attributes in greater degrees than do comparison groups, including desirable personality attributes (Brown, 1998; Sande, Goethals, & Radloff, 1988), fairness (Messick, Bloom, Boldizar, & Samuelson, 1985), and superiority in health risk (Klein & Kunda, 1993) and work performance (Cross, 1977). In addition, individuals believe that they are better than average (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995).

The present study measured the relationships between the prejudicial attitudes that individuals report for themselves and for others. Using a procedure similar to that used by Krueger (1996), the potential for false uniqueness effects and for projection effects (Krueger, 1996) in reports of prejudice were assessed. Participants read a series of racist arguments and reported how much they agreed with the arguments and how convincing they found the arguments to be. Participants also reported how much the "average person" would agree with and be convinced by the arguments. It was expected that the participants' responses for themselves and for the "average person" would correlate as a result of the projection of their beliefs into their perceptions of what others believe, as previously shown by Krueger (1996). Further, it was expected that participants would exhibit a false uniqueness effect by reporting that they were less racist than the "average person."

## Method

### *Participants*

Eighty undergraduate students at a northeastern university in the United States enrolled in summer courses in biopsychology, statistics, and introductory psychology participated in this study in exchange for extra credit. Twenty-one participants reported that they were male (26.3%), 58 reported that they were female (72.5%), and one participant did not report his or her sex (1.3%). Fifty-seven participants indicated that they were European American (71.3%), 7 indicated that they were African American (8.8%), 11 indicated that they were of another race or ethnicity (13.8%), and 5 did not indicate their race or ethnicity (6.3%). While participants were not asked to report their ages, course instructors indicated that, with few exceptions, students were of traditional college age (18 to 23).

### *Procedure*

At the experimenter's request, course instructors offered their students the opportunity to complete questionnaires in exchange for extra credit. Students who agreed to participate completed the questionnaires anonymously during their regularly scheduled class sessions. Most participants completed the questionnaire within 20 minutes. Participants were then debriefed and thanked for their participation.

The questionnaires consisted of a series of arguments that supported positive or negative conclusions regarding African Americans (Saucier & Miller, 2002)<sup>1</sup>. Six of the arguments supported positive statements toward African Americans and seven of the arguments supported negative statements toward African Americans. An example of a negative argument and conclusion is given below.

It has been argued that welfare programs are too often exploited by African Americans in this country. Welfare offices in every state appear packed with African Americans applying for and collecting welfare benefits. These high numbers of African American welfare recipients are disproportionate for their numbers in the general population, and other racial groups are suffering because they can not receive benefits. Therefore, the number of African Americans receiving welfare should be limited to provide benefits for others.

---

<sup>1</sup> Saucier and Miller (2002) used the same arguments and conclusions as an indirect measure of racism. In contrast to this study, Saucier and Miller (2002) asked participants to rate how much the arguments supported the conclusions, not how much they agreed with the arguments and conclusions.

Participants rated how much they personally agreed with each argument and how convincing they found the argument to be. Participants also rated how much they believed that the "average person" would agree with each argument and how convincing the argument would be to the "average person." Participants made all ratings on five-point Likert-type scales from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).

## Results

### *Data Reduction*

Participants who reported that they were African American were excluded from analyses. Ratings for arguments and conclusions that were positive toward African Americans were reverse coded so that higher scores on each item indicated more negative attitudes toward African Americans<sup>2</sup>. Summed scores for self agreement and convincingness to self were highly correlated ( $r = .92, p < .001$ ), as were summed scores for the agreement of the "average person" and convincingness to the "average person" ( $r = .84, p < .001$ ). Accordingly, racism scores were computed by summing ratings of agreement and convincingness for the self ( $\alpha = .90$ ), and for the "average person" ( $\alpha = .83$ ). Possible ranges of scores for each total were from 26 to 130 with higher total scores indicating more negative attitudes toward African Americans.

### *Analyses of Self vs. Other Ratings*

Correlational analysis showed that participants' ratings of racism for the self were correlated with participants' ratings of racism for the "average person" ( $r = .52, p < .001$ ). This result indicates that participants used their own levels of racism, expressed through their agreement and convincingness ratings of racist arguments, to predict the levels of racism of others.

A 2 (sex) x 2 (self vs. other) mixed factorial analysis was used to examine the effects of sex as a between groups variable with the effects of reporting racism for oneself and for others as a within-groups variable. Only the within-groups effect was significant ( $F(1, 61) = 46.82, p < .001$ ). This result indicates that while the reports of racism for oneself and others are correlat-

---

<sup>2</sup> The combination of ratings on negative items and reversed-coded positive items is justified given that the internal consistencies of the positive ( $\alpha_{\text{self}} = .88, \alpha_{\text{other}} = .79$ ) and negative subscales ( $\alpha_{\text{self}} = .87, \alpha_{\text{other}} = .86$ ) were similar to the internal consistencies for the combined scales.

ed, participants reported that they ( $M = 57.10$ ,  $SD = 16.37$ ) were less racist than were other people ( $M = 72.64$ ,  $SD = 10.28$ ). Calculation of difference scores between the racism ratings for self and others showed that the vast majority of participants (87.5%) considered themselves less racist than the "average person."

To explore the depth of this effect, paired-samples *t*-tests were performed on the individual ratings of agreement and convincingness for self and others for each of the thirteen arguments and conclusions. Only 4 of the 26 comparisons failed to reach the significance level of .0019 determined by the Bonferroni correction procedure to control Type I error rates necessitated by the large number of comparisons. Each of the other 22 comparisons showed that participants reported that they agreed with racist arguments less and found racist arguments less convincing than did other people,  $t_s > 3.27$ ,  $p_s < .001$ .

### Discussion

In contemporary society, being nonprejudiced is considered a positive attribute. Subsequently, individuals should exhibit a false uniqueness effect when they report their own racist attitudes compared to those of other people. This hypothesis was supported. Participants reported that they were significantly less racist than they reported other people to be.

These results also showed evidence of a projection effect by which participants overestimated how similar others' attitudes would be to their own deriving from their limited vantage point of only their own perspectives (e.g., Dawes, 1990; Krueger, 1996). In addition, these results provided evidence of a false consensus effect (Krueger & Clement, 1994; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). The relationship between participants' ratings of racism for themselves and for others suggests that participants higher in prejudice reported that the average person was also higher in prejudice. This finding is consistent with research that shows that individuals who behave in ways that violate social norms will overestimate the likelihood that others will do the same (Sagarin, Rhoads, & Cialdini, 1998). In this study, the participants highest in prejudice were probably aware that their attitudes were relatively high and that being prejudiced is derogated by current social norms. Accordingly, these participants may have indicated that the average person was also high in prejudice to protect their self-concepts.

In conclusion, being nonprejudiced is a desired attribute. Individuals are motivated to be nonprejudiced, and report that they are less prejudiced than are other people. Concurrently, individuals believe that other people are similar to themselves in prejudicial attitudes. Accordingly, the results of this study showed evidence of both false uniqueness and projection effects in the

reports of prejudice for oneself and for others.

#### References

- Alicke, M. D., Klotz, M. L., Breitenbecher, D. L., Yurak, T. J., & Vredenburg, D. S. (1995). Personal contact, individuation, and the better than average effect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 68*, 804-825.
- Brown, J. D. (1998). *The self*. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Crosby, F., Bromley, S., & Saxe, L. (1980). Recent unobtrusive studies of Black and White discrimination and prejudice: A literature review. *Psychological Bulletin, 87*, 546-563.
- Cross, P. (1977). Not can but will college teaching be improved. *New Directions for Higher Education, 17*, 1-15.
- Dawes, R. M. (1990). The potential nonfalsity of the false consensus effect. In R. M. Hogarth (Ed.), *Insights in decision making: A tribute to Hillel J. Einhorn*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Devine, P. G., & Elliot, A. J. (1995). Are racial stereotypes really fading? The Princeton Trilogy revisited. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 21*, 1139-1150.
- Devine, P. G., Monteith, M. J., Zuwerink, J. R., & Elliot, A. J. (1991). Prejudice with and without compunction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 60*, 817-830.
- Dovidio, J. F., Brigham, J. C., Johnson, B. T., & Gaertner, S. L. (1996). Stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination: Another look. In C. N. Macrae, C. Stangor, & M. Hewstone (Eds.), *Stereotypes and stereotyping* (pp. 276-319). New York: Guilford.
- Dovidio, J. F., & Gaertner, S. L. (1991). Changes in the expression of racial prejudice. In H. J. Knopke, R. J. Norrell, & R. W. Rogers (Eds.), *Opening doors: Perspectives on race relations in contemporary America* (pp. 119-148). Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.
- Dovidio, J. F., & Gaertner, S. L. (2000). Aversive racism and selection decisions: 1989 and 1999. *Psychological Science, 11*, 315-319.
- Dovidio, J. F., Smith, J. K., Donnella, A. G., & Gaertner, S. L. (1997). Racial attitudes and the death penalty. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 27*, 1468-1487.
- Dunton, B. C., & Fazio, R. H. (1997). An individual difference measure of motivation to control prejudiced reactions. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 23*, 316-326.
- Harber, K. D. (1998). Feedback to minorities: Evidence of a positive bias. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 74*, 622-628.
- Klein, W. M., & Kunda, Z. (1993). Maintaining self-serving social comparisons: Biased reconstruction of one's past behaviors. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 19*, 732-739.
- Krueger, J. (1996). Personal beliefs and cultural stereotypes about racial characteristics. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 71*, 536-548.

- Krueger, J., & Clement, R. W. (1994). The truly false consensus effect: An ineradicable and egocentric bias in social perception. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *67*, 596-610.
- Messick, D. M., Bloom, S., Boldizar, J. P., & Samuelson, C. D. (1985). Why we are fairer than others. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *21*, 480-500.
- Monteith, M. J. (1993). Self-regulation of prejudiced responses: Implications for progress in prejudice-reduction efforts. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *65*, 469-485.
- Petty, R. E., Fleming, M. A., White, P. H. (1999). Stigmatized sources and persuasion: Prejudice as a determinant of argument scrutiny. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *76*, 19-34.
- Phillips, S. T., & Ziller, R. C. (1997). Toward a theory and measure of the nature of nonprejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *72*, 420-434.
- Plant, E. A., & Devine, P. G. (1998). Internal and external motivation to respond without prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *75*, 811-832.
- Ross, L., Greene, D., & House, P. (1977). The false consensus phenomenon: An attributional bias in self-perception and social-perception processes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *13*, 279-301.
- Sagarin, B. J., Rhoads, K. v L., & Cialdini, R. B. (1998). Deceiver's distrust: Denigration as a consequence of undiscovered deception. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *24*, 1167-1176.
- Sande, G. N., Goethals, G. R., & Radloff, C. E. (1988). Perceiving one's own traits and others': The multifaceted self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *54*, 13-20.
- Saucier, D. A., & Miller, C. T. (2002). *The persuasiveness of racist arguments as a subtle measure of racism*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- Stangor, C., Sechrist, G. B., & Jost, J. T. (2001). Changing racist beliefs by providing consensus information. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *27*, 486-496.