

CHAPTER 8

Sasha and Malia: Re-Envisioning African-American Youth

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When I take that oath of office, there will be kids all over this country who don't really think that all paths are open to them, who will believe that they can be anything they want to be.

—Barack Obama, quoted in Kantor (2009)

Barack has shown no matter what color you are you can be anything you want to be.

—African-American sixth-grade student, November 2008 in response to the question, "Is it important to you who won the United States presidential election?"

Sasha and Malia Obama are arguably the most famous Black children in the United States today. Having been launched to national prominence during their father's campaign for the presidency, these girls are part of a family that has defied the odds all the way to the White House. Just before his inauguration as the first U.S. African-American president, Barack Obama published an open letter to his daughters in *Parade* magazine, writing "I want every child to have the same chances to learn and dream and grow and thrive that you girls have. That's why I've taken our family on this great adventure" (Obama, 2009, Jan. 18).

How much can Barack Obama, as a charismatic and counterstereotypical role model, actually affect youth, especially African-American youth, nationwide? From how well one performs on a quiz to which careers one perceives as being available, role models lay the framework for one's future possibilities. Barack Obama is the first enormously popular, nationally vindicated, African-American role model in many children's lives. Moreover, he has excelled in a role not stereotypically associated with African-Americans, succeeding in politics rather than sports or entertainment. The aftermath of Barack Obama's election, therefore, offers an opportune moment to explore the function and power of a role model for minority students.

Political pundits heavily discussed the first 100 days of his presidency, going back and forth about the economy and foreign policy; in this chapter, we will examine the time following the election and the first months of Obama's presidency through the eyes of a psychologist, exploring how media and the changing political climate may affect self-perception and achievement for middle school students.

One of the consequences of Barack Obama's "Yes, we can" presidential campaign and the symbolic significance of his becoming America's first African-American president has been a refocusing of the nation's attention on race and achievement. Numerous media reports, for example, have asked African-American and Latino students, who are often academically at risk, to assess the impact of Obama's success on their own motivation and achievement (Stannard, 2008; *New Haven Register*, p. 1). As evidenced by student responses in the news and the quote above from a middle school student who participated in the present research, Obama is clearly seen as a source of inspiration. Yet, whether Obama's achievements affect students' psychological functioning and achievement in school remains unclear.

This refocusing on race and achievement is evident in schools nationwide. Innovative educators have integrated Obama into their pedagogy to an extent unmatched by previous presidential elections (Dyson, 2008). Such transformations range from the informal (Obama posters in the classroom) to more substantive changes in the curriculum (Lewis, 2008). Underlying these grassroots changes to the classroom are the interlinked presumptions that students see Obama as a role model and that his achievements will enhance their own. Despite these changes, empirically driven science about how situational factors that transcend the classroom—in this case Barack Obama's ascendancy to the presidency—can have a proximal affect on student's psychological functioning remains nascent. This exemplifies what Bronfenbrenner called the macrosystem or sociocultural context in which child development occurs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

This chapter will advance a psychological analysis of President Obama's election affecting the academic achievement of academically at-risk ethnic minority students. Much work has shown that affirming personal or group values can have positive effects on the school achievement of academically at-risk ethnic minorities—for example, having students reflect on the importance of their social relationships or their racial identity (Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustowski, 2009). This work is based on the notion that the interaction of situational factors in the environment and students' psychological state is a fundamental determinant of motivation and performance (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008). We have shown that changing the psychological climate in the classroom by introducing a new situational element—such

as an affirmation intervention—can improve performance and positively change perceptions of the environment for minority students. If the election of Barack Obama acts as an affirmation for minority students, then we would expect to see similar improvements in academic performance when his success is made salient in a given environment.

Using data collected immediately following the 2008 presidential election and throughout Obama's first 9 months in office, we will advance an analysis of his impact on the academic achievement of minority students nationwide. First, we will discuss which facets of Barack Obama's identity and success might make him a particularly effective role model for minority youth. This will be followed by a description of our empirical work exploring the potential impact of Obama's election on students' psychological experience and academic performance. Finally, we will consider how best to maximize the potentially inspiring effect of Obama's success on African-American youth, presenting empirically supported suggestions gleaned from previous psychological research on role models.

WHAT MAKES OBAMA DIFFERENT FROM OTHER AFRICAN-AMERICAN ROLE MODELS?

Barack Obama is one of many successful African-Americans who may serve as a role model—family members, athletes, community leaders, musicians, and many other individuals inspire minority youth every day. Yet the impact of Barack Obama may be unique because he succeeded in a domain not stereotypically associated with African-Americans and was *elected* to his position by a majority of American voters. These characteristics of his success might make him an especially effective role model, particularly for young African-Americans.

African-American athletes, such as LeBron James or Venus and Serena Williams, and musicians, like Beyoncé or Jay-Z, have used their skills and dedication to become prominent, successful individuals whom many young children admire. Role models can profoundly influence their admirers by helping young people identify goals and strategies for achieving them (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997) and highlighting possible future selves (Lockwood, 2006). Among African-American youth, having a role model is associated with fewer aggressive behaviors and fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety (McMahon, Singh, Garner, & Benhorin, 2004). Additionally, because people are more likely to be influenced by someone who is similar to them (Bandura, 1968; Mussweiler, 2003), it is especially important for African-American youth to have same-race role models.

Obama as a counterstereotypical role model. Children may constrain their own aspirations to the domains in which they find their role models succeeding.

Role models not only inspire but also provide people with important information about their *own* abilities and possible future selves (Lockwood, 2006). Therefore, minority youth who are coming of age during the Obama presidency may very well use his example as a point of reference when forming their own aspirations. The success of Barack Obama in the realm of politics means that young African-Americans can have not only famous athletes and musicians as role models, but also the President of the United States, increasing the likelihood that they will imagine themselves pursuing and succeeding in a political career.

Studies in psychology have shown that having a role model from one's ingroup (e.g., ethnicity, gender, alma mater) might defend one against the negative effects of stereotype threat *if* one attends to the role model's counterstereotypical behaviors (Marx & Goff, 2005). For example, if an African-American student sits down in his classroom to take a math test and pauses to think about his role model Barack Obama, he will be less likely to do poorly on that test (as a result of the deleterious effects of stereotype threat) if he thinks about Obama's counterstereotypical behaviors (e.g., running for the presidency) rather than his stereotype-consistent behaviors (such as playing basketball) (Wout et al., 2009). Barack Obama's success is replete with counterstereotypical behavior, meaning that students will have plenty of examples to draw from when trying to focus on this role model's stereotype-inconsistent actions. This may make him a more potentially beneficial role model than other successful African-Americans whose track records, although impressive, are more consistent with existing stereotypes.

Obama as a role model with widely publicized achievements. Another factor that might distinguish Obama as a particularly effective role model is the widely publicized nature of his accomplishments: His life's journey from a single-parent family in Hawaii to an Ivy League education and then on to politics was a national topic of discussion both during and after the 2008 presidential election, meaning that many Americans are familiar with the narrative details of the 44th president's success. For a role model to be effective, the details of his or her success must be readily accessible for admirers: Buunk, Peiro, and Griffioen (2007) found that a role model can be inspiring even if one has never had direct contact with one's role model, so long as one is familiar with this person's record of success and can easily bring this success to mind. The fact that Barack Obama's counterstereotypical life and success are so widely known makes it more likely that he will be a role model capable of inspiring others, even those with whom he has not had direct contact.

Although Obama is not the first African-American to succeed in the domain of politics, he is the first to be elected to the presidency of the United States. His political success took place on a national scale and resulted in his

holding the highest office, making Barack Obama a household name. Importantly, Barack Obama was elected to his position by a majority of American voters—including 9% of registered Republicans—meaning that his success can be seen as reflecting the nation's attitudes about race and achievement (FEC, 2009). If millions of voters would choose an African-American man to run the country, then America is a place where a majority (of voters, at least) believes in the capability of a minority leader. The scale and prominence of his achievement may serve as a societal-level disconfirmation of previous stereotypes related to minorities and achievement, and therein lies the distinct potential for Barack Obama to be an especially effective role model for minority youth.

Political figures such as Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice held prominent positions in the presidential cabinet before Barack Obama arrived at the White House, but they were appointed to their positions by one individual and confirmed by dozens of others. This distinguishes their political success from Obama's in an important way: Relatively few individuals partook in the process that led to Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell becoming Secretary of State. More than 131 million Americans voted in the 2008 presidential election, however, and almost 70 million of them cast ballots for Obama/Biden (FEC, 2009). Although these three African-Americans have all succeeded in politics, securing important positions in the American government, the extent to which the American public participated in their success varies greatly. The degree of public participation may correlate with the degree to which each of these individuals will positively impact minority youth, as greater public involvement may be reflective of broader societal attitudes.

Other African-American politicians besides Barack Obama have been elected to their positions, such as Newark's mayor Cory Booker or Deval Patrick, the governor of Massachusetts. The scale of their success in city and state elections, respectively, however, pales in comparison to the national election that was won by Barack Obama. Neither the election of Cory Booker nor Deval Patrick was hailed as a national referendum on race, whereas the election of Barack Obama was expected to "usher in a new era of race relations" (Kaufman & Fields, 2008) and change the way Americans feel about themselves and each other. Large-scale public expectation and affirmation may impact individual students more powerfully than these local politicians.

Almost 70 million Americans sent Barack Obama to the White House, believing that an African-American man should be president of the United States (FEC, 2009). Experiencing the 2008 presidential election could potentially change the way one thinks about America and Americans, attitudes and achievement, and race and racism, even if one was too young to vote.

A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO OBAMA AS A ROLE MODEL AND EFFECTS ON AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Although the election of Barack Obama generated much excitement among adults, with 69,456,897 voters casting ballots for Obama (FEC, 2009) and more than 71 million North American viewers tuning in to televised election night coverage (Nielsen, 2008), the extent to which children attended to the election's issues and outcome was less clear. Historically, children are not usually counted among those who are expected to know or care about politics. But the unprecedented level of media coverage coupled with the historic outcome of this particular election led many to assume that American youth, particularly minorities, would be profoundly affected by the election of Barack Obama.

The Obama Effect refers to the notion that ethnic minorities who reflect on Obama's achievements can experience positive outcomes in domains where they often contend with negative stereotypes, such as education. The explanation for this posited effect is that the symbolic significance of Obama can buffer students against the detrimental effects of psychological threat in their proximal environment (Marx, Ko, & Friedman, 2009; Aronson, Jannone, McGlone, & Johnson-Campbell, 2009). This threat arises from concerns about confirming negative stereotypes about the intellectual ability connected with one's racial group (Aronson, 2002; Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Steele, 1997; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002; *see also* Cohen & Garcia, 2005). It is now well-established that such stereotype threat, a form of social identity threat, causes stress and cognitive impairment (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Blascovich, Spencer, Quinn, & Steele, 2001; Schmader & Johns, 2003; Steele & Aronson, 1995), undermines academic belonging and school performance (Cook et al., 2009; Walton & Spencer, 2009; Cohen et al., 2006; Aronson et al., 2002), and can also undermine performance in test-taking situations. The significance of Obama's achievements could serve as a societal-level disconfirmation of stereotypes about minorities' ability to succeed in mainstream institutions and relieve threats to social identity.

Currently, not enough research exists to draw conclusions about the "Obama Effect." Yet, the possibility that Obama's highly publicized achievements could alleviate psychological threat and boost performance is suggested by experiments showing the positive effects of salient role models on test performance. Studies show that role models can have positive effects on motivation (Lockwood & Kunda, 1999) and that students contending with negative stereotypes perform better on challenging tests in the presence of role models who share their group identity (Marx & Roman, 2002; McIntyer, Paulson, & Lord, 2003; McGlone, Aronson, & Kobrynowicz, 2006). Individuals are

buffered against the effects of social identity threat when role models share their group membership and are perceived as highly competent in the domain (Marx & Roman, 2002). To have positive effects, however, role models' achievements need to be perceived as relevant and personally attainable in the future (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Although the office of the Presidency of the United States may not be perceived as personally attainable when minority students think about Barack Obama, the prominence of his achievement may elucidate related academic and career goals for students who admire him.

THREE POSSIBLE HYPOTHESES ON OBAMA'S EFFECT

In addition to the research on role models mentioned above, studies showing that reflecting on important *group* identities, such as one's racial group, also suggest that Obama's achievements could improve students' own psychological functioning and achievement (Sherman et al., 2007). For stereotyped students, Obama's achievements could serve as a group affirmation (Sherman et al., 2007), which may reduce stress and improve performance. Taken together, the above research leads to the hypothesis that Obama's achievements may uniquely diminish threat and boost performance among ethnic minority students.

However, other psychological processes could offset these potential positive effects. Role models can fail to improve motivation or can even undermine it under certain circumstances. For example, this can occur if most of the role model's achievements seem beyond one's grasp (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Lockwood & Kunda, 1999). Moreover, subtyping, the tendency to see positive exemplars as exceptions to the rule (Brewer et al., 1981; Fiske et al., 2002), might lead students to see Obama as a unique exception and thus doubt his relevance to their lives. This research could lead us to hypothesize that Barack Obama's achievements would have a null or even negative impact on threat and performance not only among ethnic majority students but also among ethnic minority students.

A third plausible outcome is that *both* students who contend with negative stereotypes and students who do not may be positively affected by the significance of Obama's achievements. Irrespective of his political platform, Obama's election as the first African-American president of the United States is seen as a singular event that may carry a host of positive consequences. Obama's life story could be perceived as an example of someone who succeeds despite adversity and thus could be inspirational to students in general. People might admire and identify with Obama for reasons beyond race, which could make him inspirational to children regardless of their race, especially those

individuals who perceive themselves and Obama as psychologically close or similar (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; 1999; Tesser, 1988; Tesser & Campbell, 1983).

THE FIRST 100 DAYS: TESTING THE OBAMA EFFECT

In the study we report in this chapter, we examined whether the psychological salience of the first African-American to the U.S. presidency mitigates threat in middle school students and affects academic achievement. Our sample was comprised of sixth-grade students from middle to lower socioeconomic class families in a suburban Northeastern middle school where the student body was approximately half African-American and half White. We exploited social-psychological processes related to priming and affirmation effects (Bargh & Chartrand, 1999; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). This research shows that simply making salient a personally relevant target person or mental construct affects people's behavior and performance.

Accordingly, we experimentally manipulated the psychological salience of Barack Obama by having students reflect on the presidential election and their political beliefs using a brief questionnaire, approximately 1 week following the 2008 presidential election. A random half of students completed this questionnaire and the remaining students completed a filler questionnaire related to daily habits in school. Immediately following the prime, all students completed measures of psychological threat and political attitudes. Our primary focus was on students' sense of threat over the course of a calendar year. To explore such longitudinal effects, students' perceived threat was again assessed at the end of sixth grade and the beginning of seventh grade. We also collected school records over the course of this experiment to assess the effect of a brief Obama prime, if any, on academic achievement over the same time period.

Our previous research suggests that an affirmation intervention can improve performance and change perceptions of the environment for minority students (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006; Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009). Thus, we expected that Obama's achievements would affect students' psychological threat and performance in response to their school environment. The positive effects of Obama's election and presidency may be confined to African-American students. His election, however, may convey a more general message of mobility for ethnic minorities—the notion that their efforts can translate into advancement. If this is the case, similar effects should be found for both African-Americans and Latino Americans. Still another possibility is that Obama's election acts as an even more global source of inspiration. It could reinforce individuals' pride in being an American, in which case White students could benefit as well.

Set-up for the Study. We decided to test the effects of thinking about Obama on academic performance using a diverse sample of sixth-grade students attending a suburban middle school in the Northeastern United States that primarily served lower- to middle-class families. Just over half of the students who took part in the study were African-American or Latino, with both genders represented in our sample about equally.

We administered the experimental manipulation approximately 1 week after Obama won the presidential election. Experimenters unaware of student condition and hypotheses presented students with a packet containing study materials, explaining that the study was "to get an idea of what students your age think about and things that are going on in the world." Students were not told that there were multiple conditions and were asked to follow all instructions in their study packets and to not skip pages.

Half of the students in our sample answered 12 questions designed to subtly increase the salience of Obama and the presidential election. Students first responded to an open-ended question: "Is it important to you who won the United States presidential election? If so, why?" and were presented with two lines to write their responses. Next, students were asked to indicate the winner of the election by circling the appropriate name from a list of the presidential and vice presidential candidates. They were also asked to select one or more choices from a list of ethnicities that described President Obama. Another item assessed students' attitudes toward Obama (i.e., "Obama is a person I respect") using a four-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*).

To further increase the salience of Obama's election and to assess students' political attitudes, an additional set of measures was included in the Obama salience condition. One measure assessed students' perceived *political engagement* using a scale adapted from the International Civic Education Study (ICES) (Baldi et al., 2001). This scale included three items (e.g., "How often do you talk about the United States presidential election in your classroom?") that students responded to on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*very often*). Another measure assessed *identification with the election*. This scale consisted of two items (e.g., "I am happy with who won the United States presidential election") that students responded to using a four-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The final measure assessed students' *national identification* (Baldi et al., 2001). The scale included three items (e.g., "I have a great love of the United States") that students responded to using a four-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). In sum, the questions we asked participants in the Obama prime condition were designed to have them think about the president, the election, and their relationship to both.

Students in the control condition, like their classmates in the Obama prime condition, answered a free-response question and 11 forced-choice items. However, instead of soliciting students' thoughts on the election and the president-elect, we asked about things that students might put in their locker, followed by a series of items asking about health and exercise (e.g., "I don't really care what I eat as long as it tastes good") that students responded to using a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). The final series of questions asked about the number of hours they engaged in specific activities each day (e.g., "I spend ___hours talking with my friends on the Internet each day"). These questions were not expected to influence students' responses on the subsequent survey.

Our key outcome measures tried to capture both quantitative academic achievement and qualitative evaluations of the school environment. We will first present the results of the qualitative analysis, followed by the quantitative performance evaluation. We first coded student responses about the importance of Obama. To ascertain students' subjective experiences, we used a measure of social identity threat adapted from Cohen and Garcia (2005). This scale consists of 10 items regarding students' concerns with how they are perceived socially and academically (e.g., "In school, I worry that people will think I am dumb if I do badly," "In school, I worry that people will judge me because of what they think about my racial group"). Students responded to each item using a six-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Finally, we measured students' Grade Point Averages from school transcripts in core subjects: math, science, social studies, reading, and English/language arts.

THEMES ABOUT OBAMA AS ROLE MODEL FROM THE STUDENTS

Students in the Obama prime condition first responded to an open-ended question: "Is it important to you who won the United States presidential election? If so, why?" and were presented with two lines to write their responses. Answering this question 1 week after the election of Barack Obama, students were overwhelmingly positive about the president-elect and mentioned prominent campaign issues, such as taxes and the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with surprising frequency.

Overall, students thought that the 2008 presidential election was important. The vast majority of our respondents said that the outcome of the election was important to them, with very few students writing that the outcome of the election was *not* important to them. "Wanting to know who runs the country" was frequently cited as a reason for the personal importance of the

election's outcome, perhaps reflecting a latent civic curiosity amongst our nation's youth.

Seeking to identify other recurring themes in the student responses, two coders were asked to read all of the student responses and indicate which topics were frequently mentioned. We found that both African-American and White students identified with Barack Obama, emphasizing similarity to the president-elect in their responses. In addition to this widespread identification, themes of race and change arose among many African-American students.

Although the racial component of Barack Obama's identity received much attention throughout the entire campaign and in the days following his election, this is only one facet of his identity, and there were many other dimensions on which students likened themselves to the president-elect. Some students did mention racial similarity when writing about the personal importance of his election ("Yes because he is the same race as us."), but other students, both minority and nonminority, chose to write about their *ideological* similarity to Barack Obama. In response to our question about the importance of the 2008 presidential election, an African-American student wrote, "I want a president that shares my opinion [sic]," and a White student wrote, "I think that having an African-American brings great change. I also stand with him on his issues." Students are clearly incorporating dimensions of similarity beyond race in their responses, finding ideological common ground with Obama independent of his status as the first African-American president. One student even used a partisan label in her response, writing that the 2008 election was important to her "because Barack Obama is a Democrat and so am I and he is going to help the economy." Although it is anyone's guess what one does to be a Democrat at the age of 12 years, it is apparent that students from various racial backgrounds were able to find commonality with America's first African-American president.

The fact that nonminority students identified with Barack Obama speaks to his remarkable potential as a role model who may inspire all children to strive for success. This is not to say, however, that his historic achievements do not make him a particularly powerful role model for minority youth: Obama's success challenges many existing negative stereotypes about African-Americans and achievement, and research has shown that comparing oneself to a more successful member of one's ingroup (e.g., African-Americans) when a negative group stereotype is salient can have positive effects on self-esteem (Blanton, Crocker, & Miller, 2000).

Although the overwhelming majority of students answered the questions, "Is it important to you who won the United States presidential election? If so, why?" by identifying with Obama, a subset of the students we surveyed

focused on Barack Obama's being the first African-American president of the United States, writing things such as "Yes because we finally [sic] got a black man whose [sic] president," and "Yes it is very important who won the election because Barack Obama is the first African American president." Recognizing the historic significance of this election, some students even wrote about themselves reflecting on the event in the future (e.g., "Yes, because if I have children I could say, 'He is the first black president.'").

Consistent with previous research, White students were much less likely than their African-American peers to mention race in their response (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008). To avoid seeming biased, many Whites adopt a strategy of "strategic colorblindness," which entails not mentioning race or racial difference. Studies have shown that this strategy is even utilized in situations where race is a salient and relevant topic (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008), so it is not very surprising that White students would be less likely than African-American students to mention race when discussing the election of the first African-American president of the United States.

Change is another theme that emerged in students' responses. Mentioned as frequently in students' responses as the president-elect's race, this theme probably results in some part from Obama's popular "Change we can believe in" slogan. Some students linked the themes of change and race ("Yes, because he made a change on him being the first African-American"), whereas many students wrote more generally about change: "Yes because Obama is giving change to the USA. And all of those changes are that I like"; "Yes, because we need change in the United States." It is unclear whether the frequent mentions of change represent a simple repetition of a campaign slogan, a reaction to personal or familial distrust of President Bush, whose popularity waned over his presidency, or a grasp of the potential of democracy to bring about change and the demonstration of certain American ideals that are too often limited to discussion in social studies class and not a national stage. For whatever reason, students were thinking about change as an important part of the 2008 presidential election.

Change [in GPA and Identity Threat] We Can Believe in? If students worry that they might confirm negative intellectual stereotypes attached to their racial group, having them reflect on the recent election of Barack Obama should mitigate this worry, suggesting that success is attainable and that stereotypes might be changing. Consequently, we expected a reduction in threat only for negatively stereotyped students in the Obama salience condition. To test this prediction, we constructed a statistical model to determine what effects the Obama prime had over time in our students. We first examine cross-sectional differences in threat, as a function of stereotyped group and

condition, immediately after the experimental manipulation. Our primary hypothesis predicts a significant stereotype group by condition interaction, with minority students who were prompted to think about Obama before reflecting on their own school environment expected to report less perceived threat than their minority peers who were in the control condition.

We first tested whether there were differences in threat by group and condition in November 2008, shortly after the presidential election and immediately after the Obama salience manipulation. As expected, results revealed a significant stereotype group by condition interaction, indicating that stereotyped (African-American and Latino) students in the Obama salience condition reported significantly less threat than those in the daily habits control condition. In other words, students who belonged to groups that experience identity and stereotype threat had this threat attenuated simply by being reminded about the president-elect.

Next, we examined the trajectory of social identity threat over time. In the control conditions, we found that stereotyped students' levels of identity threat stayed stable over time, whereas White students' threat declined. This suggests that although White students become socially acclimated and gain a sense of comfort in their school, minority students might not attain this level of belonging. Although the Obama prime did not change this pattern, it shifted the trajectory of belongingness for minority students such that they experienced a lower level of identity threat over the time-period of the study. This effect began to diminish by the fall of seventh grade. Follow-up tests revealed that although negatively stereotyped students in the Obama salience condition continued to have lower threat 6 months later in sixth grade (T2) than their peers in the control condition, this difference disappeared by the fall of seventh grade (T3). Nonstereotyped students did not differ by condition at any measurement occasion.

Results from the political measures and student responses suggested that students of all racial backgrounds identified with Barack Obama, leading us to contemplate whether this identification would boost academic performance across all racial groups when students thought about the president. To test whether the Obama salience manipulation affected academic performance in the quarter after the intervention, we ran a statistical model on students' second quarter GPA to determine whether, controlling for their GPA in the first semester, students in the Obama prime condition would perform better than students who wrote about their fitness habits, regardless of their racial background. As we predicted, our results revealed a significant effect of condition, but no effect of gender or stereotype group—that is, for any given level of pre-intervention quarter 1 GPA, stereotyped and nonstereotyped students in the intervention condition had slightly higher post-intervention

quarter 2 GPA than those in the control condition. This effect was large enough that if a student was on the border between two grades, then being asked to think about Barack Obama was enough to boost them to the higher of the two. Given the brevity of the prime and the length of time between the prime exercise and the end of the quarter (approximately 7 weeks) this finding, although modest, is quite remarkable.

To summarize, in this experiment, we capitalized on a significant moment in American history. One week after the 2008 presidential election, we experimentally increased the salience of Obama among stereotyped and nonstereotyped sixth-grade students in middle school. Social identity threat and performance (GPA) were then tracked through the fall of seventh grade, a full calendar year after the election. Both African-American and Latino students reported experiencing less threat when Obama was made salient to them, an effect that persisted over an entire school year, even among the latter group, whose ethnicity differs from Obama's. Increasing the salience of Obama provided a small but significant boost to GPA at the end of the quarter in which the Obama-salience manipulation was conducted (controlling for previous quarter's GPA) for both stereotyped and nonstereotyped students. Taken together, this experiment demonstrates that subtly reflecting on Barack Obama's achievements can powerfully reduce stereotyped students' sense of threat and boost achievement for all students, even in a chronically evaluative setting such as school.

For students who contend with negative stereotypes, the significance of Obama's achievements may have been a powerful stereotype-disconfirming event. Making Obama salient may have lessened students' sense that race is a contingency affecting how others perceive them in school. This is important because, over time, threat may undermine students' abilities to foster cross-race relationships (McKown & Strambler, 2009) and stay engaged in school (Steele, 1997; Osborne & Walker, 2006), ultimately increasing the likelihood of lower performance. Because nonstereotyped students do not contend with these same stereotypes in school, their sense of threat was unaffected by the prime and declined over time.

These findings provide evidence that Obama's achievements could confer role model effects. First, regardless of ethnicity, Obama-primed students' end of quarter GPAs improved relative to students in the control condition. Second, although politics and the election were made salient to students across conditions, only Obama-primed students' performances improved, suggesting that reflecting about *Obama* was critical to the prime's effectiveness. Finally, among Obama-primed students, regardless of ethnicity, respect and admiration for Obama was high, an important condition for role model effects to occur.

Bringing Obama into the Classroom to Inspire without Intimidation. Feeling admiration toward another person has been found to increase individuals' desires to improve themselves and achieve their goals (Algoe & Haidt, 2009), so students simply admiring Barack Obama as a high-achieving individual could lead to improvements in their personal motivation. In an effort to capitalize on this potential role model and inspire students even more, it may be tempting to say something like, "Look, Barack Obama did well in school—you're just like him, so you can too." This, however, has the potential to backfire, leading not to inspiration but demoralization. Research in psychology has explored the nuanced relationship between individuals and their role models, and to maximize the positive potential of a role model, it is important to recognize one's similarity without diminishing the perceived attainability of the role model's achievement (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997).

Not surprisingly, people are most likely to engage in social comparison with someone who is similar to them on some dimension (Bandura, 1968; Mussweiler, 2003; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). There are many dimensions on which people can be similar to Barack Obama, such as race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, hobbies, ideology, religion, vocation, alma mater, and age, just to name a few. Researchers have found that exposure to high-achieving individuals who are relevant to the self (e.g., are pursuing the same career) results in participants rating themselves more positively on traits associated with success, whereas exposure to a high-achieving individual who is not relevant to the self has no effect on participants' self-ratings (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Research has also found positive effects for individuals who are part of a minority group comparing themselves to another, more successful, member of their ingroup (Brewer & Weber, 1994), indicating that Barack Obama might be most effective as a role model for minority youth. If young African-Americans can find a dimension on which they are similar to Barack Obama—be it their family structure, political aspirations, ethnicity, or some other characteristic—then they will be more likely to see him as relevant and therefore a potentially inspiring role model.

Following their experiment on role model relevance, Lockwood and Kunda (1997) explored the impact of perceived attainability of role models' success, and these findings are equally—if not more—important to include in this discussion of Barack Obama as a potential role model. In this study, participants were first- and fourth-year accounting students who read a fictitious newspaper article about a high achieving fourth-year accounting student. One might expect that this potential role model would be most inspiring to the fourth-year accounting students participating in the study, seeing how they are similar to this individual in both intended vocation and age. In fact, researchers found the exact opposite: First-year accounting students who read

about the successful fourth-year student rated themselves significantly more positively than first-year students who were not exposed to the role model. Fourth-year students, however, were more likely to rate themselves *less* positively than their peers who did not read about the successful student. Although the effect for fourth-year participants was not statistically significant, it does suggest that comparing oneself to someone who is similar and successful can have negative consequences for the self.

What might lead students to be adversely affected by exposure to a potential role model? Lockwood and Kunda suggest that the fourth-year students compared their own level of achievement to that of the outstanding fourth-year student presented in the newspaper article, and this comparison with someone who has achieved more at the same stage in their career was threatening to participants, resulting in their lower self-ratings on traits related to success. The first-year students, on the other hand, perceived the outstanding fourth-year student's success to be attainable: They still had 3 years to achieve what the student described in the newspaper had done, compared to the fourth-year participants, who did not have any more time to reach the same level of success as a fourth-year.

So, although African-American youth should be encouraged to find similarity between themselves and Barack Obama, they should be reminded of the time it took for him to get where he is today. Helping children think about Obama's achievements in politics, education, community organizing, or another domain in a way that makes them seem attainable will maximize the positive potential of their social comparisons. Emphasizing that Obama's success is the result of decades of hard work should help children perceive his level of accomplishment as something that they, too, could possibly achieve in the future, after they themselves have worked for that long.

Intuitively, positive expectations for students' performances in the classroom are beneficial and lead to a better scholastic experience. Again, however, there is empirical work demonstrating that the situation is often more nuanced than intuitions would allow. Some facets of social identity are associated with contradictory stereotypes—for example, an Asian woman contends with positive stereotypes about Asians' mathematical ability and negative stereotypes about women's math ability. One might expect that increasing the salience of an identity that is normally positively stereotyped would improve someone's performance on a stereotype-relevant task, but researchers have found the exact opposite. Work by Cheryan and Bodenhausen (2000) demonstrated that Asian-American women who were asked to think about their (positively stereotyped) ethnic identity before completing a math test performed *worse* than those who had been asked to think about their (negatively stereotyped) gender identity before the test. Although their findings are somewhat counterintuitive,

they show that the "model minority" status associated with high expectations based on a social identity can impair performance much like negative expectations based on one's social identity.

Following the election of Barack Obama, there was much public discussion about expectations that the academic performance of African-American students would improve as a result of his being elected. Although the expectations themselves were positive in valence, minority students who are aware of the increased focus on their doing well in school may "choke under pressure" and end up performing worse than they would have without the elevated public expectations.

Negative consequences for African-American children could also stem from the fact that Barack Obama is an extreme example of a minority who has succeeded in mainstream institutions. People who compare themselves to an extremely successful individual, or exemplar, have been found to perceive themselves as being *less* like the exemplar than those who compare themselves to a moderately successful exemplar (Mussweiler, Ruter, & Epstude, 2004). When researchers asked participants to read about an extremely athletic person (such as Michael Jordan) or a moderately athletic person (like a former race car driver) and then rate their own level of athleticism, participants who read about Michael Jordan rated themselves as being significantly less athletic than those who had read about the race car driver (Mussweiler, Ruter, & Epstude, 2004).

Using social comparisons such as the one described above can be helpful, allowing situation-relevant information to be integrated into one's perceptions about one's relative attributes in a given setting. Imagine walking onto a basketball court knowing that you're about to face one of two opponents in a free-throw shooting contest: LeBron James or your grandmother. Your relative level of athleticism probably varies considerably depending on which of these two people you'll be playing against, and if asked to gauge your prospect of succeeding, it would be useful to compare your level of skill to that of your opponent. One would most likely anticipate success if facing grandma on the court, but defeat would be expected if asked to compete against an NBA player.

Social comparisons can be shaped by a focus on similarities or differences between the self and others. For young minorities who compare their own prospects for success against the extremely successful Barack Obama, inspiration will not be the most likely outcome if their comparison focuses on differences such as, "He went to private school and I go to public school" (Mussweiler, Ruter, & Epstude, 2004). To increase the likelihood that a comparison between oneself and Obama will lead to positive consequences like inspiration and improvements in motivation, one should instead focus on

existing similarities (e.g., "Obama works hard and I work hard") (Mussweiler, Ruter, & Epstude, 2004; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997).

WHY DO ROLE MODEL EFFECTS FADE?

Notably, the positive effects of our Obama salience manipulation fade over time, with threat returning to its initial levels by the fall of seventh grade and the performance boost found in the second quarter wearing off in the course of the year. There is surprisingly little empirical research on actual role models and their long-term effect on students' psychological functioning and achievement in school settings. We can only speculate as to why role model effects such as ours faded. It is possible that role model effects are externally contingent, rising and falling with the role model's successes and difficulties. During the trajectory of the present study, President Obama's approval ratings suffered major declines (Pew Research Center, 2009). As the post-election elation wears off, perhaps Obama's potential to affect student achievement as a role model wanes as well.

Alternatively, as a role model becomes more commonplace, his/her ability to inspire fades (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). Female political role models have been shown to exert their influence on young girls, primarily through their unique and *rare* status as *female* political figures (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2006). Ironically, as the first African-American president in the history of the United States becomes old hat, students normalize his presence and his symbolic significance fades.

A third possibility is that students' own performance interacts with their perceptions of role models. Students' academic performance in middle school tends to decline (Eccles et al., 1991), so as students perceive Obama's achievements to be less attainable, they may become less inspired by them (Lockwood & Kunda 1997, 1999). Each of these explanations is important, providing ample opportunities for future research.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: RE-ENVISIONING AFRICAN-AMERICAN YOUTH

What does this mean for African-American children? Although Barack Obama's historic victory does not mean that we are now living in a post-racial America, it does mean that children are growing up in a country where a majority of voters chose a man of American and African descent to be their leader. Heralded as a pivotal event in American race relations, the election of Barack Obama instigated a national conversation about race and achievement, one that has the potential to reshape the content of racial stereotypes and the extent to which they are endorsed (both publicly and privately). Role models

provide people with important information about their *own* abilities and possible future selves (Lockwood, 2006), so minority youth who are coming of age during the Obama presidency may very well use his example as a point of reference when forming their own aspirations.

Obama himself even explicitly outlines his route to success, sharing his story with American youth. In his back-to-school speech delivered in September 2009, the president likens his own struggles and successes to those being experienced by young students today:

I get it. I know what it's like. My father left my mother when I was two years old, and I was raised by a single mother who struggled at times to pay the bills and wasn't always able to give us things the other kids had. There were times when I missed having a father in my life. There were times when I was lonely and felt like I didn't fit in. . .

But at the end of the day, the circumstances of your life—what you look like, where you come from, how much money you have, what you've got going on at home—that's no excuse for talking back to your teacher or cutting class, or dropping out of school. That's no excuse for not trying.

Where you are right now doesn't have to determine where you'll end up. No one's written your destiny for you. Here in America, you write your own destiny. You make your own future (Obama, 2009b).

Some facets of Barack Obama's achievement, such as the Ivy League education and personal financial success, are not unusual for a U.S. president. His struggles with issues surrounding race, family, and stability, however, closely resemble those experienced by many American youth today. By using his own story and consistently emphasizing the effort he exerted to overcome obstacles, Obama illustrates the opportunities and routes to success available to children of all backgrounds.

IMPROVING THE LIVES OF MINORITY YOUTH: YES WE CAN

The election of Barack Obama is by no means a panacea for the issues facing young African-Americans, but it does have the potential to positively affect them. Our research has shown that increasing the salience of Obama's victory shortly after the 2008 presidential election led to a slight boost in academic performance for students regardless of ethnicity. More importantly, this same brief manipulation reduced minority students' levels of self-reported social identity threat. Given that threat may undermine students' abilities to foster cross-race relationships (Strambler, 2009) and remain engaged in school (Steele, 1997; Osborne & Walker, 2006), the possibility that Obama's success would reduce this adverse consequence of belonging to a negatively stereotyped group is promising and should be considered further in research and the public discourse.

The American public's endorsement of Barack Obama may change the way young African-Americans think about the country they live in, their fellow citizens, and the content and validity of the stereotypes by which they might be judged. This is no small thing: Research on stereotype threat has demonstrated that an individual's concern related to confirming a negative stereotype about their group can seriously harm performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995), so if the election of Barack Obama leads African-American students to perceive those stereotypes as being less relevant (e.g., "People must not endorse the idea that African-American s are stupid if they would vote for Obama.") or their own performance as being less critical to others' judgment of their racial group (e.g., "Others will probably judge African Americans by Obama's success, not mine."), then stereotype threat may not inhibit performance to the same extent.

In this chapter, we explored a moment when a national election translated into higher achievement for individual students. These were promising, if fading, effects. The message is clear, however: Change is possible. Our educational system can shift the way students consider themselves and their own potential through smart interventions. In giving us a set of role models, our historic moment shapes us. We, in turn, must shape our history. What the media briefly did with Barack Obama's election (putting the glowing image of a smart African-American man into every living room), schools can do every day. The effects need not wane.

But this will take work. A reduction in students' perceptions of social identity threat, a tweaking of deeply entrenched stereotypes, and a prominent minority role model will not change the fact that minority students are still more likely to attend a school with teachers who are at the beginning of their careers or instructors who have less education and training in the subjects they are teaching, overcrowding and large class sizes (Edelman, 2004), just to name a few of the issues that continue to disproportionately affect minority students in America's public education system. Additionally, segregation by race and socio-economic status continues to rise in the United States (Bigg, 2009; Dewan, 2010). It will take much more than Obama's ascendancy to the White House to ameliorate the obstacles facing today's African-American youth. As President Barack Obama proclaimed during his inauguration (Obama, 2009c):

Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real. They are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this, America: They will be met. . .

The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.

Whether or not Barack Obama is able to advance these ideals during his time as president, accomplishing the goals he outlined in his open letter to Sasha and Malia that all children are able "to learn and dream and grow and thrive" remains to be seen.

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CHAPTER 8 COMMENTARY

Re-Envisioning Black Youth

Marc Lamont Hill

As we enter the early stages of the “Obama era,” the plight of Black youth remains one of the most urgent social issues. In the educational realm, Black youth remain under-represented in post-secondary institutions and over-represented in special education classes, suspension lists, and dropout rolls. In other sectors of public life, such as public health, criminal justice, and the labor market, Black youth linger at the bottom of nearly all indices of social prosperity and remain firmly at the top of all indices of social misery. Within the public imagination, Black youth are perennially framed as dangerous social burdens, unworthy of the basic provisions, protections, and supports that are afforded to their White counterparts.

In the midst of these sobering circumstances, the authors of the preceding chapter force us beyond romantic and hortatory narratives about Barack Obama’s historic victory. Instead, they force us to ask penetrating questions about the concrete benefits of such a victory, particularly as it relates to the self-perception and achievement of Black youth. Simply put, how does the ascendance of a Black president produce new sites of educational possibility for our children? Given Obama’s early failure to substantively challenge free-market fundamentalism, corporate cronyism, environmental abuse, and imperialist aggression, such questions are not only legitimate but urgently necessary.

Through their empirical investigation, the authors offer a compelling and provocative set of claims about the value of the Obama Presidency for helping Black youth re-imagine the role of race and racism in American life. The authors suggest that Obama serves as a role model whose success within the racially treacherous realms of education and politics allows them to reassess their own life chances, rethink the viability of American democracy, and recommit themselves to academic excellence. Without question, such claims provide necessary help and hope as we attempt to reconcile the existence of a Black president with pervasive levels of Black suffering.

Although we can (and should) find comfort in these powerful and necessary insights, we must not allow them to seduce us into naïve or counterfactual optimism about the future of our youth. After all, as centuries of educational research has demonstrated, Black children have never been plagued by aspirational deficits. Even amidst the most oppressive social conditions in human history, Black youth have always aspired to be doctors, lawyers, engineers, and teachers at rates that surpass other racial and ethnic groups. Tragically, however, the road from aspiration to attainment for minority youth has always been plagued by resource gaps, structural inequality, and institutionalized forms of White supremacy. To ignore these material realities is to endorse a dangerous and dishonest gospel of individualism that traces educational success to the exclusive repositories of talent and desire.

To be clear, the authors of this chapter are not guilty of such a practice. On the contrary, they offer complex and subtle insights that enable us to find legitimate purpose, value, and hope in the Obama Presidency. Nevertheless, the full power of these insights can only be leveraged within a social context that closes the gap between aspiration and attainment, between merit and destiny. If we commit ourselves to producing such a world for our children, then, and only then, will Obama's Presidency realize its full potential for our children.