

Chapter 6 | The Social Psychology of Symbolic Firsts: Effects of Barack Obama's Presidency on Student Achievement and Perceptions of Racial Progress in America

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First indications, whether observed in the silent, mysterious phenomena of physical nature, or in the moral or intellectual developments of human society, are always interesting in thoughtful men. . . . John Brown used to say he had looked over our people as over a dark sea, in the hope of seeing a head rise up with a mind to plan and a head to deliver. Any movement of the water arrested his attention. In all directions, we desire to catch the first sign. . . . There is a calm and quiet satisfaction in the contemplation of present attainments; but the great future, and the yet unattained, awaken in the soul the deepest springs of enthusiasm and poetry.

—Frederick Douglass, 1865

AS FREDERICK DOUGLASS noted when he observed some of the first political achievements of emancipated black Americans, the human imagination is captivated by pioneers. Indeed, popular history is often a chronicle of pioneers: the first explorer to circumnavigate the globe, the first woman appointed to the United States Supreme Court, the first man to walk on the moon, the first successful heart transplant on a human patient. These and other pioneers capture the public's imagination because they challenge people's prior beliefs about the limits of human nature or

the constraints on what is achievable in human societies. It is this power of symbolic firsts to change people's perceptions of their own limitations and those of other members of their social group that is the focus of our analysis.

In particular, we wish to highlight how symbolic firsts can alter people's perceptions of the constraints and opportunities afforded to them as a function of their social group memberships, what psychologists have termed a person's identity contingencies (Purdie-Vaughns et al. 2008; Steele 2010). Our analysis focuses on the influence of the first black president of the United States as a symbolic first that may potentially influence identity contingencies in two relevant domains of American life: race and education achievement, on one hand, and perceptions of racial progress in society, on the other.

Symbolic firsts are transformative public figures, historic characters, and pioneers who are symbols of special achievement widely expected to inspire others. John F. Kennedy was a symbolic first. Before Kennedy was elected president, many people wondered whether the American presidency was a realistic aspiration for Catholics. For many years anti-Catholic bigotry was prevalent in the United States, and many American voters feared that a Catholic president would put the interests of the Vatican over the interests of the American people (White 1962). Such anti-Catholic bigotry appears to have played a role in Al Smith's defeat in the 1928 presidential election.

Kennedy's election in 1960, however, demonstrated that anti-Catholic prejudice was no longer an insurmountable barrier to the nation's highest elected office. Being elected president could no longer be said to be contingent on one's being a Protestant Christian. Moreover, as Americans observed Kennedy's behavior in office and it became clear to them that he was not deferring to the Vatican, the attitudes of many Americans quite likely became more open to voting for Catholic candidates for high office in the future, further altering the constraints and opportunities of American Catholics. Indeed, willingness to vote for a Catholic candidate dramatically increased after Kennedy's election and continued to rise in the years that followed (Servin-Gonzalez and Torres-Reyna 1999). In short, the symbolic significance of Kennedy's election may have helped to change the identity contingencies of all American Catholics.

Barack Obama is also a symbolic first. No one can miss the historic significance of the election of the first black American president and the first person of color worldwide to govern a country with a white majority. Before Obama was elected people wondered whether it was possible for a black American to be elected to the nation's highest office. Indeed, nationally representative surveys show dramatic changes in white and black re-

spondents' attitudes toward a black president between 2006, when Obama was an unlikely contender, and 2008, when he was elected. In 2006, when asked "Do you think America is ready for a black president or not?" 31 percent of white and 42 percent of black respondents said no. By April 2008, negative responses dropped to 20 percent of white and 29 percent of black respondents. That question is no longer relevant: a majority of voters in the 2008 presidential election cast ballots that indicated their readiness to elect a black president. Although being elected to high office undoubtedly still presents particular challenges for racial minority candidates, it can no longer be said that being elected president is contingent on race.

Obama's political success has stimulated much interest in questions about the power of racial symbolic firsts to alter people's perceptions of the constraints and opportunities afforded to them and to others who share their social identities. Symbolic firsts stimulate reflection about progress, progress that has been made and progress left to be achieved in the future. Symbolic firsts also stimulate reflection about one's self and one's family and how one's life space may be transformed by society-altering events. Such reflections often center on people's current attitudes and behaviors and the future possibilities for their children. Thus it is perhaps unsurprising that pundits and laypeople alike conjecture about how Obama's presidency might inspire student achievement, particularly among racial minority students, and potentially alter people's perceptions of racial progress.

IDENTITY CONTINGENCIES AND SYMBOLIC FIRSTS

A complete assessment of whether people expect to be successful in a particular situation—finishing a marathon, doing well on a test, becoming an attorney general or even president—depends on their view of what is possible for them given the particulars of their social identity. Social identities create contingencies that influence people's actual and perceived opportunities for success in particular domains of everyday life. The social psychologist Claude Steele (2010, 3) defines *identity contingencies* as "the things you have to deal with in a situation because you have a given social identity, because you are old, young, gay, a white male, a woman, a black, Latino, political conservative or liberal, diagnosed with bipolar disorder, a cancer patient, and so on. Generally speaking, contingencies are circumstances you have to deal with in order to get what you want or need in a situation."

Identity contingencies can be actual (for example, a police department

that stops more black than white drivers in a small town) or perceived (the perception that police officers profile blacks). Contingencies of identity are not merely figments of imagination: they stem from the historical and present-day circumstances, structural barriers, access to resources, laws, policies, and everyday practices that are transmitted through and held in place by individuals and institutions. Most relevant to our analysis of symbolic firsts is the notion that important features of everyday life can serve as cues about a person's identity contingencies in any particular setting (Purdie-Vaughns et al. 2008).

These identity contingency cues can be any person, place, symbol, or object that implicitly or explicitly conveys information about how one's group identity may affect one's opportunities in that setting (Purdie-Vaughns et al. 2008). Because of the interpretive dimension of these cues, what serves as a cue for one group in a particular situation may not do so for another group in the same situation.

The same cue can be interpreted in radically different ways depending on the identity of the interpreter. For instance, as a symbolic first, Obama's racial identity may serve as a cue for liberals and conservatives alike. For many liberals, his racial identity may be viewed as an important milestone in an ongoing endeavor to expand racial opportunity in American society. By contrast, for some white conservatives, Obama's racial identity may convey a threat to their perceived control over their country.

Finally, contingency cues can powerfully affect one's immediate social experience. Herein lay the strengths and limitations of symbolic firsts. Because symbolic firsts achieve greatness, they are unusually high-profile representatives of their social group, and thus their successes and failures can have an outsize effect on people's attitudes. The success of a symbolic first can inspire and motivate individuals who share that person's social identity. However, when a symbolic first suffers setbacks, morale and motivation can be undermined for those who share that person's social identity. Assuredly, any symbolic first will experience both accomplishments and setbacks, and, for better or worse, other people's ups and downs can be inextricably tethered to those of the symbolic first.

For those assessing their probability of success in a particular domain, group identity (for example, racial and gender identity) has been shown to serve as a powerful cue that affects feelings of comfort and belonging, particularly in settings where one's group has experienced discrimination. For instance, for black professionals (Purdie-Vaughns et al. 2008) and female scientists (Murphy, Steele, and Gross 2007), merely receiving information that a corporate setting or science laboratory employs substantial numbers of other blacks or women dramatically increases motivation, as-

pirations, and institutional trust among black business school students and female undergraduate science majors. In these experiments, whites and men respectively were unaffected because minority representation and gender representation were not cues that conveyed information about their identity contingencies in this particular context.

As a symbolic first, Obama's racial identity serves as an identity contingency cue, an important feature of daily life in America that conveys information about the constraints and opportunities afforded to other racial minorities, or to others with nontraditional backgrounds, based on their group identity. If members of underrepresented groups attend to group representation as a cue about their identity contingencies, then racial minority students may attend to Obama's identity as a cue that conveys what is possible for them and members of their group in school. Moreover, any American who perceives Obama as a symbolic first may perceive his identity as a cue conveying information about the state of racial progress more broadly in America. It is this reasoning that lends us to use the identity contingency framework to outline research on Obama's possible effect on school achievement, his potential effect on some white conservative parents, and the influence of his presidency on popular impressions that we are moving toward a postracial America.

SYMBOLIC FIRSTS AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

As the sociologist Thomas Cottle (1974, 85) has noted, "The teachings of [black children's] parents and their very own histories and perceptions reveal for them the forces that play upon them and keep them where they are. . . . Children are not only little people, they are shadow people whose needs and personalities are only indirectly faced up to. For their barest outlines to be visible, one needs the light of institutions and government to beat down on their bodies." Children do not vote. They are not political constituents. They do not understand complex legal and political terminology. Yet their perceptions of the constraints and opportunities they face based on one or more of their group identities—their contingencies of identity—are barometers for racial progress in two important ways.

First, as Cottle suggests, their views about their everyday experiences in school reflect broader societal forces such as economic resources (Is my school clean?) and policies (Am I bused across town?) that aim to either lessen or maintain racial inequality in American education. Second, their views about what is possible for them or members of their group may reflect actual changes in the environment in how members of their group are perceived. For instance, if Obama's racial identity serves as a cue convey-

ing that stereotypes are less likely to constrain their own opportunities in school, then students' perceptions may reflect the broader idea that his achievements—as least temporarily—stand as a society-wide disconfirmation of negative racial stereotypes. Accordingly, research on how the political achievements of Obama affect young children in school provides a unique window into the broader theme in this volume: how racial inequalities can be mitigated or perpetuated by factors that go beyond behavior openly justified in racist terms.

The idea that children's political attitudes and views of themselves are important barometers for racial progress is not new. In the 1972 presidential election, when the incumbent Republican president Richard Nixon was challenged by Senator George McGovern, Cottle interviewed black children from Roxbury, Massachusetts, before and after the election (Cottle 1974). The stark contrast between their ability to alter their views of themselves based on their race compared with that of children after the 2008 presidential election dramatically illustrates the power of symbolic firsts.

He paused for a moment and looking at me, through me perhaps. "I ain't voting for no one. No one here I'd vote for." [William D. Williams, eleven-year-old black boy, fifth grade]

"Why not?" [Cottle]

"Nobody out there running who speaks for me. President has to represent you, right?"

"Supposedly." [Cottle]

"Well, neither 'Govern or Nixon can do that for me. No way they can do it. They ain't black, neither of 'em, and they don't have no black friends with 'em. Whenever you see 'em they're always with white people. They ain't even got women with them, except their wives once in a while, but that don't mean anything. That's just to make sure that everybody knows they're married and have a family and stuff like that. If Nixon really wanted to do something he'd make sure we all had money." (Cottle 1974, 28)

Compare these observations of an eleven-year-old in 1972 with those of eleven-year-old children in 2008, commenting on the election a week after Obama's victory:

"[Barack Obama's election is] important to me because Barack Obama's won ment [*sic*] that we can do anything no matter what race we are." [Black sixth-grade student]

"Yes, [Barack Obama's election is important] because it will show racist stereotypes that blacks aren't dumb but smart." [Black sixth-grade student]

Our common sense suggests that, at least compared with the significance of the 1972 election, Obama's achievements positively affected minority children. Common sense also suggests that the children's responses after the 2008 election reflect a shift in broader perceptions of societal opportunities and racial progress compared with those of children after the 1972 election. But the critical question is whether, as a symbolic first, Obama alters students' perceived contingencies in their own school environment and the effect this has, if any, on academic performance.

Symbolic Firsts and the Academic Achievement Gap

The academic achievement gap between academically at-risk racial minority students and their white peers has long concerned the education community and social policy makers. At every level of family income and school preparation, black and Latino students earn relatively lower standardized tests scores and school grades (Bowen and Bok 1998). A 2007 National Assessment of Education Progress report finds that the difference in average reading and math scores of black and white eighth-graders was virtually unchanged between 2007 and the early 1990s. Moreover, between the years 2004 and 2007, 10 out of every 100 African Americans and 22 out of every 100 Latino students had not received a high school diploma or its equivalent; for white students, this number dropped to 6 out of every 100 (Planty et al. 2009).

Systemic structural changes informed by education policies yield the most consistent long-term effects on student motivation and achievement. Obama's intense interest and involvement in education reform throughout his first term is notable. He delivered more than twelve speeches on education during his presidential campaign and transition and has called for a radical transformation of urban schools (Obama 2006). Throughout his first term, no candidate has made such consistent rhetorical and financial commitments to education since Lyndon Johnson, who had been a former high school teacher before he entered politics (Darling-Hammond 2009).

Although Obama rarely explicitly engages the relevance of his identity as a role model, he undeniably believes in his potency as a symbolic first. In 2006, for instance, when pressed by his wife in a strategy session to articulate what would distinguish an Obama presidency from a Hillary Clinton or John Edwards presidency, Obama responded, "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. And I think the world will look at America a little differently" (Obama, quoted in Kantor 2009). In spite of educators' and Obama's own enthusiasm about his potential to inspire students, the impact of his achievements on them is unclear; empirical research has great potential to clarify the effect of Obama's success on minority student achievement.

The Effect of Symbolic Firsts on Children's Views of Themselves

If a symbolic first has the power to alter the perceived contingencies one may face in a given social setting, then the significance of Obama's achievements may have an impact on students' perceived experience of the racial climate in their schools, expectations of their own performance, and perhaps even actual academic performance. The assumption underlying this posited Obama effect is that reflecting on Obama leads to positive outcomes for racial minorities in domains, such as education, where they often contend with negative racial stereotypes (Marx, Ko, and Friedman 2009; Aronson et al. 2009; Purdie-Vaughns et al. 2010).

The explanation for this effect rests on the much-studied premise that racial minorities experience elevated stress in school. This extra stress arises from their fear that they could be seen in light of a negative stereotype about the intellectual ability of their racial or ethnic group (Steele, Spencer, and Aronson 2002; Steele 2010). In situations where the stereotype applies, such as test-taking situations, the fear that they may confirm the stereotype in the minds of others causes minority students to experience added stress. It is now well established that such stereotype threat causes stress and cognitive impairment (Blascovich et al. 2001; Schmader and Johns 2003; Steele and Aronson 1995) and undermines academic performance. Symbolic firsts such as Obama are proposed to buffer students against the detrimental effects of this psychological threat.

The lived experience of stereotype threat is palpable in a letter written by Audrey Delgado, a Latina fifth-grade student, who implores President Obama to change testing in her school. "As a kid and student I know that taking a test isn't very fun. For instance, when you're in a room and it's quiet, you're focusing on your test; you studied for hours the night before but you still feel uncomfortable. I always think I know I can do this, but why am I not confident? I know that personally for me it's because I know I'm doing well in school that I feel pressured to do well on a test. It may not be the same for other kids" (Delgado 2009, 226). Although Audrey never explicitly mentions race as a source of test anxiety (people experiencing stereotype threat rarely do), she describes an added pressure to per-

form on tests, a pressure not faced by other students. This is the nature of stereotype threat: an enigmatic, insidious source of stress that racial minority students contend with unbeknownst to others.

The possibility that Obama's highly publicized achievements could alleviate psychological threat and boost performance is suggested by social psychology studies showing the positive effects of same-race role models on test performance. Laboratory studies of role models show that they can positively affect motivation (Lockwood and Kunda 1999), and students contending with negative stereotypes perform better on challenging tests in the presence of mock role models who share their group identity (Marx and Roman 2002; McIntyre, Paulson, and Lord 2003; McGlone, Aronson, and Kobrynowicz 2006). Two conditions facilitate such role model effects: the role model must be perceived as highly competent in the specific domain (Marx and Roman 2002), and the role model's achievements must be perceived as personally relevant and attainable in the future (Lockwood and Kunda 1997).

An Experimental Test of the Obama Effect in Schools

One week after the 2008 presidential election, our research team set out to test this "Obama effect" directly (Seabrook 2008). In particular, we examined whether experimentally manipulating the salience of the first black American president mitigates threat in middle school students and affects academic achievement. Our sample consisted of students from families of middle to lower socioeconomic status in a suburban northeastern middle school whose student body is approximately half black and half white. We focused on a sample of sixth-grade students as they entered middle school because this is an important and vulnerable developmental period in which focusing on a valued role model might have particular impact.

We exploited well-documented social-psychological processes that have demonstrated that simply making salient a personally relevant target person or mental construct can affect people's behavior or performance (or both). Accordingly, students were randomly assigned (by a flip of a coin) to reflect on either the recent presidential election and Obama's achievements (Obama salience condition) or on their own health habits (control condition) approximately one week after the 2008 presidential election. These reflections took the form of a short survey in which participants answered open- and closed-ended questions about the importance of the Obama election (or health habits, in the control condition). Immediately following this experimental manipulation, all students completed mea-

asures of psychological threat (asked to rate how much they agreed or disagreed with statements such as "In school, I worry that people will think I am dumb if I do badly" and "In school, I worry that people will judge me because of what they think about my racial group"). These measures were repeated with the same students 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, if any, of a brief Obama salience prime on academic achievement over the same time period. Both students and experimenters were unaware of the experimental conditions, and students were unaware that the experiment was about Obama's potential effect on school performance.

Given past research on role model effects, we predicted that the impact of Obama's achievements would diminish threat and boost achievement among racial minority students but leave whites unaffected. The symbolic significance of Obama's achievements should serve as a society-level disconfirmation of stereotypes about minorities' ability to succeed in mainstream institutions, thereby altering their perceived contingencies about what school holds in store for them.

In addition, we suspected that the significance of Obama may positively affect both black and white students' academic performance, an issue that other research on role models had not addressed. It has been found that reflecting on a person one admires leads to "elevation," an inspirational emotional state associated with learning (Haidt 2003; Haidt and Keltner 2004). Obama's life story could be perceived as an example of someone's succeeding in spite of adversity and thus could be inspirational to all students regardless of their race. If both racial minorities and whites admire Obama, this should confer benefits to both black and white students' academic performance.

We first tested whether there were differences in threat by student race (black or white) and condition (reflecting about Obama or reflecting about daily health habits) in November 2008, one week after the presidential election and immediately after our Obama salience manipulation. If students worry that they might confirm negative intellectual stereotypes applied 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 black students in the Obama salience condition. This is precisely what we found: black students in the Obama salience condition reported significantly less threat than black students in the daily habits control condition. White students were unaffected by the Obama salience manipulation.

Next, we examined how long the effect persisted. Social identity threat was tracked through the fall of seventh grade, a full calendar year after the election. Remarkably, black students in the Obama salient condition reported experiencing less threat for the entire academic year of sixth grade, though the effect faded by the fall of seventh grade. Again, no such effects were found among black students in the control condition or white students in either condition.

Finally, we examined grades (as assessed by official school records in all required courses). To examine whether the Obama salience manipulation affected academic performance in the quarter following the intervention, we ran a statistical model on students' second-quarter grade point average (GPA) to test whether students in the Obama prime condition would perform better than students in the control condition (controlling for first-quarter GPA). Results revealed a significant effect of condition but no effect of race or gender. That is, for any given level of preintervention first-quarter GPA, black and white students in the Obama salience condition had significantly higher second-quarter grades than those in the control condition. This effect was large enough that, if a student was on the border between two grades, reflecting on Barack Obama would have boosted grades to the higher of the two. Given the brevity of the prime and the length of time between the intervention exercise and the end of the second quarter (approximately seven weeks), this finding, while modest, is quite remarkable. Follow-up analysis on measures assessing how students felt about Obama help explain this effect. In this sample of students, all students, regardless of race, reported that they identified with Obama and reported tremendous respect and admiration for him.

What explanation do we offer for these two distinct yet important findings? Other school interventions studied in our laboratory produce similar nonintuitively large and long-term effects for groups contending with psychological threat (for example, racial minorities, women in science) (Cohen et al. 2009; Cook et al. 2012; Purdie-Vaughns et al. 2009). Insights from this research help explain how and why the Obama salient manipulation worked. With respect to findings specific to black students, Obama's election and inauguration very likely altered the actual social environment at that period of time. The election thus served as an identity contingency cue that signaled that stereotypes based on one's race were less likely to constrain opportunities in one's proximal environment.

Given that expressive writing crystallizes and makes what one is thinking about concrete, our brief writing exercise designed to increase the salience of Obama was the catalyst that allowed black students to benefit from racially meaningful changes that took place in school, which, in turn, altered minority students' perceptions of how threatening their immediate

environment was and how much threat was tied to their racial identity. Because threat operates through recursive feedback loops, early reductions in threat, triggered by these micro shifts in how minority students were perceived, altered black students' construal of threat in their immediate school environment, perpetuating positive effects over time (Cohen et al. 2009; Cook et al. 2012).

With respect to performance among all children regardless of race, we found that students tended to look on Obama's achievements with awe and admiration. People can experience awe in response to charismatic leaders, and these emotion responses motivate self-improvement and personal change (Haidt and Keltner 2004). Because adolescence is a time when identities and values are formed, awe-inspiring experiences are most common among adolescents. Indeed, adolescents are particularly likely to be influenced by role models in their environment (Erikson 1968), especially models that they perceive to be similar to them or to who they would like to be (Bandura 1968; Mussweiler 2003). Two days before the election and one week before this study was conducted, Obama was described in the local paper as follows: "Obama offers that 'something'—call it charm, charisma, a positive vision for the future, a voice of empowerment, a role model for youth—Obama has 'it'" ("Election '08: Obama Choice for the Future," *Clarion Ledger* [Jackson, Miss.], November 2, 2008). Our findings are most consistent with the interpretation that racial minority and white students in this experiment perceived Obama as a role model and a charismatic leader and that written exercises prompting them to reflect about his achievements intensified positive responses and led to an increase in grades eight weeks after the election.

These findings are important because they begin to clarify whether and how symbols of achievement such as Obama can affect student achievement. Yet just as being a symbolic first can have positive consequences in the domain of education, this very symbolism can lead to negative consequences as well. The underlying premise for both positive and negative consequences is the same. Symbolic firsts serve as cues that convey contingencies attached to a particular identity. But when an identity is externally contingent, it has the power to change for the better or for the worse, depending on changes in external cues. If Obama's presidency comes to be widely seen as a failed presidency, he may transform from a high-profile symbol of black success to a symbol of black failure. This sort of contamination of a previously positive role model was seen recently in the case of Tiger Woods, whose reputation as an inspiring role model for children in general and racial minority children in particular was damaged, perhaps beyond repair, by sensationalist media stories about his sexual affairs and the breakdown of his marriage.

Symbolic Firsts and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in Schools

The potential positive consequences that a symbolic first, such as President Obama, can have on educational achievement may be limited in size, scope, and population. Educators, policy makers, and parents are likely to be unaware of how and when the Obama effect influences students, thus leading them to overestimate how much his symbolic significance contributes to directly reducing the achievement gap. To the extent that a symbolic first such as Obama does alter students' imagination of their potential in school, his influence may be limited to particular age groups and populations.

For instance, it may be that the Obama effect bolsters student achievement only for those who are young enough to imagine that Obama's achievements might be attainable for them. Psychologists have shown that role models facilitate performance for those who perceive the role models' achievements as attainable for themselves and for members of their group (Lockwood and Kunda 1997). Our study involved students at the age of eleven, an age at which psychological threat can undermine aspirations (McKown and Strambler 2009) but reflecting on an inspiring role model can strengthen them. Other studies using older students in college failed to show an Obama effect. One such study assessed performance on the Medical College Admissions Test by students enrolled in a summer program to help facilitate medical school acceptance (Aronson et al. 2009). Although the results were highly speculative, given that Obama attained extraordinary success at a relatively young age, college students may have found comparisons to Obama threatening and aspirations comparable to his beyond their reach (Buunk and Mussweiler 2001; Lockwood and Kunda 1997). Although older students may find Obama's message more comprehensible and his symbolic significance inspiring, reflecting on his achievements may fail to confer benefits on test performance because they no longer find his achievements to be personally attainable. Thus rather than looking at Obama as a model of their own potential future success, older students may view Obama as a social comparison figure, whose remarkable achievements dwarf their own.

Moreover, even among young students, symbolic firsts may not have the power to consistently bolster performance. Students' own difficulties in school may influence their perceptions of the personal relevance of a symbolic first's achievements. Throughout middle school and high school, student performance tends to decline, with steeper declines found among racial minority students than among whites (Eccles, Lord, and Midgley 1991). As students begin to struggle in school they may perceive Obama's

achievements as beyond their grasp, diminishing his effectiveness as an inspirational figure for them.

Finally, it is important to test Obama effect interventions in less privileged environments, for instance, urban and economically impoverished schools. Obama's campaign, which continues to resonate in schools as of 2012, used hope as a core principle around which Obama laid his vision for reclaiming America. Although schools may often borrow this theme along with his campaign slogan—"Yes, we can!"—offering hope without substantive resources is disingenuous in many poor, urban, inner-city schools. Hope has been an overused, underactualized theme in the lives of urban poor youth (Duncan-Andrade 2009). The sociologist Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade uses the term "hokey hope" to expose how the theme of hope can target students' individual responsibility to achieve in the absence of even minimal resources to thrive in school: "Individualistic up-by-your-bootstraps hyperbole [suggests that] if urban youth work hard and play by the rules, then they will go to college and live the 'American Dream'" (Duncan-Andrade 2009, 182). Hokey hope ignores real inequalities that impact the lives of urban youth. This kind of hope ultimately projects a middle-class multicultural opportunity structure that is inaccessible to the overwhelming majority of working-class, urban youth of color (Duncan-Andrade 2009). Furthermore, when hokey hope is articulated in schools it has the potential to shift educators' attention to individual-focused solutions and away from addressing the structural inequities in urban schools.

Following the election of Obama, there was much public discussion about expectations that the academic performance of black students would dramatically improve. Indeed, in our study of the Obama effect, many of the black sixth-grade students openly discussed Obama's significance as the first black president. For instance, in response to the question "Is it important to you who won the United States presidential election? If so, why?" one student wrote, "Yes because we finally got a black man whose [sic] president." Another student wrote about herself reflecting on the event in the future: "Yes because if I have children I could say 'He is the first black president.'" These students explicitly referenced Obama's racial identity, but notably they mentioned his racial identity as important to them; we, as the experimenters, did not.

This leads to yet another way that Obama's symbolic significance for racial minority achievement must be qualified. Specifically, it may be important to employ subtle methods to induce students to view a symbolic figure as a role model. The present study increased the salience of Obama by asking students questions about Obama and their attitudes toward the election. Other research shows that subtly making characteristics of a person's identity more salient can help performance (Shih, Pittinsky, and Am-

bady 1999), but making those same characteristics more overt can undermine performance because the perceiver then feels excessive pressure to meet positive expectations (Cheryan and Bodenhausen 2000).

WHEN SYMBOLIC FIRSTS THREATEN PEOPLE'S WORLDVIEWS

On September 8, 2009, President Obama delivered his first Back to School presidential address. Schools nationwide televised the address, and the White House made supplemental resources available to schools (that is, back-to-school goal-setting materials). Obama's address challenged students to take personal responsibility for their education, set goals, and work hard throughout the upcoming year. What was intended to be a nonpartisan motivational address quickly polarized the nation, with supporters adamantly in favor of the speech and adversaries clamoring to protect their children from it (Chandler and Shear 2009).

Supporters found Obama's remarks inspiring. Obama's well-publicized modest beginnings and fast rise had clear implications for the upward mobility component of the American Dream (that is, smart students who work hard can rise to the top) (Hochschild 1996). As the first black president, Obama is also seen as inspirational to students from nontraditional backgrounds, particularly black youth. Furthermore, his address was skillfully crafted to connect with young people (for example, he referenced X-Box, YouTube, Twitter, and his personal troubles in school). From this vantage point, Obama's symbolic significance, his oratory skills, and his affirming messages about education (for example, every student is good at something) were intended to produce an uplifting, motivating boost to the school year.

Yet from another vantage point, Obama's remarks were deeply threatening. For some families, Obama symbolizes a threat to their core values (Silverleib 2009). Rather than perceiving his address as carrying a universal message, adversaries feared that Obama's Back to School address was a thinly disguised indoctrination of their children to a socialist agenda. His oratory skills were also threatening. Conservative activists alleged that the speech would further a cult of personality and that Obama was a seductive piper threatening to lure their children away from their families' political views (Silverleib 2009). Many parents were particularly troubled that a federal office could distribute uncensored school materials locally without parental permission and ultimately kept their children from school to prevent them from watching the address (Silverleib 2009).

It is perhaps not surprising that one of the first dramatic episodes of backlash against Obama played itself out in a school setting. Schools have

often been the front line of the culture war between progressives and conservatives (Hunter 1991), with many emotional battles over such issues as the use of busing to integrate schools, restrictions on the expression of religion in public schools, and the sexual education curriculum. For quite some time, conservative parents have feared that they are losing control over their children's education, and Obama's election seems to have amplified many of those concerns.

Conservative opinion leaders have often suggested that white parents have good reason to be afraid of how Obama's presidency will influence their children. On his website the Drudge Report, conservative blogger Matt Drudge occasionally posts links to stories implying that Obama's image is being used to indoctrinate students in opposition to their parents' values. These stories are accompanied by alarming headlines like: "SHOCK VIDEO: School Kids Taught to Praise Obama" (Nobles 2004) and "Obama to High School Students: I Tried Drugs as a Teen" (Shapiro 2010). One site that Drudge linked to compared videos of school children singing songs about President Obama to a scene of the zombie children in the horror movie *Village of the Damned* (quoted in "Disgusting Pro-Obama Ad Exploits Kids," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, WABC-AM, October 29, 2012).

These fears of Obama's negative effects on children sometimes emphasize racial threats. The influential conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh (2009) expressed the idea that white students might be disadvantaged by Obama's presidency with characteristic directness when he commented on an incident in which white students were beaten up by some of their black peers:

It's Obama's America, is it not? Obama's America—white kids getting beat up on school buses now. You put your kids on a school bus you expect safety but in Obama's America the white kids now get beat up with the black kids cheering "yeah, right on, right on, right on, right on." And of course everybody said the white kid deserved it. He was born a racist, he's white. . . . We can redistribute students while we redistribute their parents' wealth. I mean we can just redistribute everything. Just return the white students to their rightful place—their own bus with bars on the windows and armed guards.

Limbaugh's suggestion that Obama is somehow responsible for creating a school climate that encourages racially motivated violence against white students may be absurd, but it is also an exaggerated version of a common tendency among racially conservative white Americans to see the gains of black Americans as entailing losses for whites (Eibach and Keegan 2006; Eibach and Purdie-Vaughns 2009). In a recent interview Obama him-

self speculated that a sense that progress for black Americans somehow disadvantages whites has contributed to the conservative backlash against his election:

America evolves, and sometimes those evolutions are painful. People don't progress in a straight line. Countries don't progress in a straight line. So there's enormous excitement and interest around the election of an African-American President. It's inevitable that there's going to be some backlash, potentially, to what that means—not in a crudely racist way, necessarily. But it signifies change, in the same way that immigration signifies change, in the same way that a shift from a manufacturing-based economy to a service-based economy signifies change, in the same way that the Internet signifies change and terrorism signifies change. . . . [Progress] requires each of us, every day, to try to expand our sense of understanding. And there are going to be folks who don't want to promote that understanding because they're afraid of the future. They don't like that evolution. They think, in some fashion, that it will disadvantage them or, in some sense, diminishes the past. I tend to be fairly forgiving about the anxiety that people feel about change because I think, if you're human, you recognize that in yourself. (Quoted in Remnick 2010, 584–85)

If the controversy over Obama's address to students on the importance of education seems extreme, the issue at stake was not that Obama would inculcate a certain attitude toward school in America's children but rather that he would implant alien values that extended beyond learning to ideology and racial beliefs. Indeed, the zombie imagery and sensationalist headlines paint a picture of a generation of youngsters as vessels for "Obama's America," where traditional values are replaced with radical ones. In the most extreme articulation of this fear, Obama's elevated status is linked to negative attitudes toward whites. In this way, then, Obama's position to influence America's youth suggests another kind of Obama effect, by which his unique influence as a symbolic first is seen as a threat to white Americans.

In previous research we have found that white Americans, particularly those who value group dominance, tend to believe that the progress racial minorities have made toward equality entails losses for whites (Eibach and Keegan 2006). This idea that the gains of black Americans and other racial minorities symbolized by Obama's election to the presidency entail losses of status and resources for white Americans may be reflected in Obama opponents' rallying cry to "take back America" and allegations by conservative opinion leaders such as Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh that white people are victims of "reverse racism" perpetrated by the Obama admin-

istration. The idiom of white backlash can also be detected in the rhetoric and imagery that is sometimes found at Tea Party rallies, antigovernment websites, and other forums that express grievances against the Obama administration. To illustrate, Rush Limbaugh characterized Obama's economic policy as slavery reparations, and Glenn Beck accused Obama of having a "deep-seated hatred for white people." Although most of Obama's more mainstream opponents are probably motivated by principled political objections to his policy agenda rather than backlash against perceived threats to white dominance, it seems clear that racial anxieties play some role in shaping reactions to Obama's election and policies.

Taken together, the research and commentary described here suggest that just as Obama's status as a symbolic first can alter contingencies of identity for racial minorities, it also alters perceived contingencies for some racially conservative white Americans. To them, Obama symbolizes a threat to their core values and their ability to control the environment their children grow up in. Moreover, as recent events show, conservative whites' fears that policies benefiting racial minorities will harm whites can have a significant effect on our social and political climate. Thus a full assessment of Obama's election will need to take into account how his status as a symbolic first has the potential to provoke a conservative backlash and increase racial polarization.

SYMBOLIC FIRSTS AND PERCEPTIONS OF AMERICA AS A POSTRACIAL SOCIETY

In addition to their inspirational function as role models, symbolic firsts are also salient examples of historical change that can change people's attitudes about present-day social conditions and their perceptions of the necessity for further government attention to problems of racial equality. Indeed, Obama's election to the presidency was viewed by many as a dramatic symbol of America's progress in overcoming the racial inequalities of its past. Some commentators explicitly cited Obama's election as evidence that America had entered a new, "postracial" era in which racism could no longer be considered an impediment to achievement.

For example, on the evening of Obama's election, the former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani said, "We've achieved history tonight and we've moved beyond . . . the whole idea of race and racial separation and unfairness" (quoted in Wise 2008). On November 5, 2008, the morning after Obama's election victory, the *Wall Street Journal's* editorial board commented, "A man of mixed race has now reached the pinnacle of U.S. power only two generations since the end of Jim Crow. This is a tribute to American opportunity. . . . One promise of his victory is that perhaps we can put

to rest the myth of racism as a barrier to achievement in this splendid country. Mr. Obama has a special obligation to help do so." And in an election-day opinion piece in the *Washington Post*, Richard Cohen made a similar point: "Just as John F. Kennedy was only incidentally a Catholic, so is Obama only incidentally a black man. It is not just that he is post-racial; so is the nation he is generationally primed to lead. . . . My fellow Americans, we have overcome."

All of this celebratory discussion of a postracial America has understandably led some to worry that Obama's election may distract the public's attention from America's persisting racial inequalities, leading many to become less supportive of social policies to ameliorate these inequalities (Wise 2008). Psychological research on racial attitudes suggests that these worries may be justified. White Americans are often eager to emphasize that racial inequality is a problem of the past. For example, compared with black Americans, white Americans are more likely to focus on how much more racial equality there is today than in the past, and they are less likely to take into account persisting inequalities (Eibach and Ehrlinger 2006). This leads white Americans to have an overall more favorable opinion of the nation's progress toward equality (Eibach and Ehrlinger 2006), which in turn causes whites to be less supportive of egalitarian policies such as affirmative action (Brodish, Brazy, and Devine 2008). So to the extent that white Americans view Obama's election as further evidence of the nation's progress toward racial equality, they may become less committed to social policies aimed at addressing persisting inequalities.

Recent evidence supports this concern. A longitudinal study found that Obama's election significantly increased participants' perceptions of racial progress and decreased their support for egalitarian policies such as affirmative action and school desegregation (Kaiser et al. 2009). Other research shows that when white Americans have recently been given an opportunity to express their approval of Obama they are subsequently more likely to discriminate against black people, presumably because expressing approval of Obama affirms their image as nonracist and thereby excuses subsequent unfavorable behavior toward black Americans (Effron, Cameron, and Monin 2009).

However, other research suggests that, though reduced public support for policies promoting racial equality may be a predictable consequence of egalitarian achievements like Obama's election, it is not an inevitable consequence. Awareness of goal achievements can have either a motivating effect or a demotivating effect on a person's persistence toward a goal, depending on how the person interprets his or her goal achievements (Fishbach and Dhar 2005). A person who interprets his or her goal achievements as symbolizing progress toward that goal will tend to psychologi-

cally disengage from the goal and prioritize other competing goals. However, a person who interprets his or her goal achievements as symbolizing commitment to that goal will tend to become more psychologically invested in that goal and continue to prioritize it over other competing goals. For example, in a study by Fishbach and Dhar (2005) participants were asked to think about a goal-consistent behavior (for example, studying in pursuit of the goal of academic success). Then participants in the progress-frame condition were asked to rate their progress toward the goal (for example, academic success) while participants in the commitment-frame condition were asked to rate their commitment to the goal. Finally, after rating either their progress or commitment, participants reported how likely they would be to behave in ways that prioritized a competing goal (for example, socializing at night). As the researchers predicted, participants in the progress-frame condition reported that they would be more likely to prioritize a competing goal, while participants in the commitment-frame condition reported that they would be less likely to prioritize a competing goal.

We recently applied this goal representation model to study Americans' reactions to evidence of increasing racial equality (Eibach and Purdie-Vaughns 2011). In one study participants read a passage describing a number of ways that racial conditions in the United States have improved over time. Immediately after reading this passage a group of participants who were assigned to the progress-frame condition were asked to rate how much progress Americans had made toward racial equality. A second group of participants who were assigned to the commitment-frame condition were asked to rate how committed Americans are to racial equality. Finally, after making the specified rating, participants then rated their own support for prioritizing racial equality policies. As predicted, participants in the commitment-frame condition were more supportive of prioritizing racial equality than participants in the progress-frame condition.

An important implication of this finding is that we may need to be more mindful of the motivational implications of the different ways that we might talk about historic achievements such as Obama's election to the presidency. If we are careful to frame these achievements in terms of our collective commitment to social justice, then these achievements can inspire us to work even harder to fulfill our egalitarian goals.

CONCLUSION: ON HERO WORSHIP

Charles Horton Cooley (1902, 312) commented, at the beginning of the past century, "[The worship of heroes] has a great place in all active, aspiring lives, especially in the plastic period of youth. We feed our characters,

while they are forming, upon the vision of admired models." Now, however, we live in a cynical era in which heroes and role models are viewed with great skepticism. The modern media culture has undermined many of the mechanisms by which heroic myths were formerly created and propagated. And holding leaders accountable, which is a principal function of modern democratic government, is often incompatible with hero worship. Furthermore, it is now recognized that heroic myths often serve a system-justifying function. Indeed, the personal success of heroic exemplars is often cited by defenders of the status quo to refute social justice advocates' claims that there are systemic inequalities in society. This is particularly the case when heroes are members of historically disadvantaged groups. Indeed, we reviewed evidence that Obama's rise to the presidency has been used to support the claim that racism is a problem of the past as we enter a new postracial era in which policies to promote racial justice are no longer needed. Given all this, skepticism of heroes and heroic narratives, in general, and the heroic framing of Obama's achievements, in particular, is well justified.

However, though it is important to question the use of heroic myths to whitewash social injustices, it is also important to acknowledge the potential beneficial functions heroes can play in individuals' lives. Cooley's (1902) quotation implies that if we were to give up heroes altogether, we might lose a crucial social mechanism for character formation and personal aspiration. Indeed, research suggests that heroes may function to help people define the meaning and purpose of their lives. Research on the psychology of heroes shows that individuals who reflect often on the meaning of their lives are more likely to report having heroes (Porpora 1996). Individuals incorporate representations of these heroes into their own self-concepts (Sullivan and Venter 2005). Furthermore, when individuals are exposed to heroic models of moral virtue or outstanding achievement they experience distinct positive emotions and physiological changes, which motivate them to behave in ways that follow the example of these heroes (Algoe and Haidt 2009; Silvers and Haidt 2008). Finally, individuals indicate that their personal heroes provide them with a sense of purpose and moral direction (Porpora 2001). Cumulatively, these findings support Arthur Schlesinger's admonition, "Let us not be complacent about our supposed capacity to get along without great men. If our society has lost its wish for heroes and its ability to produce them, it may well turn out to have lost everything else as well" (quoted in Porpora 2001, 170).

As the first black American president, Obama has great potential to alter the perceived contingencies for achievement for racial minorities in American society, and thus he may serve as an inspirational role model for many students, particularly racial minority students. However, Obama's high

profile as a symbolic first quite likely means that both his successes and his failures could have an outsize influence on people's perceptions of black Americans. Furthermore, Obama's presidency has been accompanied by an apparent intensification of political polarization, perhaps in part owing to a conservative backlash against what has been perceived to be the irresponsible hero worship of Obama by many on the left. Finally, as a symbolic figure of racial progress, Obama has the potential to reinforce a popular impression that racial inequality is a problem of the past and that we are now living in a postracial society.

Thus we conclude with a complicated view of Obama's status as a symbolic figure. Following Cooley, we would reject the overly cynical view that there is no room for heroes in modern society. Clearly, heroes play an important role in social development, and a figure like Obama, who represents a symbolic first, has the potential to be an inspiring role model for many. However, the research we have reviewed suggests that we must be careful in how we use Obama's symbolism and what lessons about the opportunities and limitations of our society we take away from the historic event of electing the first black American president.

The Obama presidency's capacity to symbolize both how far the nation has come and how far it has yet to go in addressing problems of racial injustice was dramatically illustrated by Obama's public remarks on a Florida case in which Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager who was minding his own business, was tracked and fatally shot by a neighborhood safety volunteer. Commenting on this tragic event, Obama empathized with the pain of his family and local community, saying, "My main message is to the parents of Trayvon Martin. You know, if I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon." Obama's comment marks the first time in our history that a U.S. president could address suffering within the black community in a direct, personal way, speaking as a member of that community. The cultural significance of this type of recognition from the nation's top political leader should not be underestimated. However, that a black man who had achieved the highest elected office in the land could still so readily imagine his own child dying a premature death in a racially charged incident shows just how far the nation still needs to go to achieve racial justice.

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