AMBIGUITY AND AMBIVALENCE IN THE VOTING BOOTH AND BEYOND

A Social-Psychological Perspective on Racial Attitudes and Behavior in the Obama Era

Destiny Peery

Department of Psychology, Northwestern University

Galen V. Bodenhausen

Department of Psychology, Northwestern University

Abstract

The issue of race has followed Barack Obama since he emerged on the national political scene, continuing unabated throughout his successful 2008 presidential campaign. Although the issue of race is not always explicitly acknowledged or discussed by Obama himself, the implications of his successful candidacy for U.S. politics and the ways people in the United States think about race more generally have been of great interest to media pundits, social scientists, and laypersons alike. Race has been considered a substantial barrier to the electoral success of previous non-White political candidates; therefore Obama's success requires reconsideration of how race can be expected to influence political outcomes in the future. In addition, his biracial identity also raises questions about how his role as a prominent cultural figure will affect existing racial categories in the United States. A review of social psychological evidence highlights the importance of understanding the ambivalence that characterizes contemporary racial attitudes, as well as the ways in which definitions of race and racial categories may be changing, in order to understand the impact that Obama could have on the future of racial politics. We conclude that Obama's victory represents a large step in the direction of increasingly positive racial attitudes and more sophisticated public conceptualizations of race, but steady progress in the coming years is not guaranteed. We consider some of the opportunities and obstacles that may affect the trajectory of future gains in the struggle for racial equality in the Obama era.

Keywords: Racial Attitudes, Racial Categorization, Hypodescent, Stereotyping

INTRODUCTION

President Obama considers himself a Black man with mixed racial heritage. His mother was a White Kansan, his father was Kenyan. Obama is now the president of

the United States and the first person of color elected to the highest office in a nation previously led exclusively by White men. Obama's electoral success has rightfully been regarded as an indication of important progress in the struggle for racial equality. Nevertheless, Obama's success may raise more questions than it answers about the role of race in the United States. When Obama emerged on the national political scene and an entry into the 2008 presidential race became a possibility, the issue of race followed him. A full year before announcing his candidacy for president, but long after the rumblings of his possible candidacy began, pollsters were already asking people about Obama's race (White 2006). What did they think his race was? Did it matter that he had a White mother? The media's fascination with Obama's racial identity reflects the historical and continued salience of race as a social category and the importance racial issues have acquired in U.S. politics.

Here we explore the implications of recent social psychological research on racial attitudes and behavior for understanding the politics of race in the Obama era. We begin with a brief review of evidence regarding the ambivalence underlying racial attitudes and discuss in particular the complex structure that is likely to characterize many White voters' racial attitudes. As we will show, there is an ample empirical basis for assuming that the right question about racial discrimination is not whether it still exists, but when and how it exists. Next, we consider the important and intriguing question of how our understanding of racial bias is complicated when multiracial people, such as Obama, enter the picture. We consider whether such individuals are better positioned to avoid discrimination by potentially defying simplistic, habitual racial classifications. Finally, we consider the implications of these issues for understanding the changing landscape of race in U.S. politics and U.S. life.

AMBIVALENCE IN RACIAL ATTITUDES

The 2008 presidential election featured seemingly endless discussions of the "Bradley Effect," named for Tom Bradley, the 1982 California gubernatorial candidate who enjoyed significantly greater support in preelection public opinion polls than in subsequent actual votes. Jack Citrin et al. (1990) described Bradley's candidacy in ways that some would think parallel descriptions of Obama's candidacy. Bradley, like Obama, designed his campaign to avoid overt appeals to minority groups in order to maintain support among White voters and support a message of unity. Political scientists have explored many explanations for the Bradley effect, but one seemingly straightforward interpretation is that White voters simply misrepresented their attitudes toward minority candidates when expressing them publicly, in an effort to appear unbigoted to interviewers. Steven Finkel et al. (1991) discussed the existence of such social desirability concerns, which could make individuals more likely to claim support for a Black candidate because admitting their support for the White candidate in a biracial race could be interpreted as an anti-Black vote. Nevertheless, data from both Citrin et al. (1990) and Finkel et al. (1991), among others, suggest that the Bradley effect is too complex to be explained merely by postulating the existence of social-desirability biases in poll responses. Instead, the role that race plays in a political contest depends on the characteristics of the candidates involved, the racial climate of the locale, and the characteristics of the individual voters. With respect to the last of these issues, psychological research suggests that it is likely a significant oversimplification to assume that White voters' expressed support for a minority candidate reflects nothing more than strategic self-presentation. Instead, in

many cases such expressions may be quite genuine; however, they reflect only part of the story, because racial attitudes are a complex amalgam of both automatic, impulsive evaluations and the more thoughtful and deliberated ones that are likely to be voiced to interviewers.

Over the past decade the social-psychological literature has been flooded with innumerable demonstrations documenting that many of the evaluative processes underlying social attitudes can and do occur very rapidly and automatically (Petty et al., 2009). One framework for understanding the nature and function of such automatic evaluations is provided by the associative and propositional evaluation (APE) model (Gawronski and Bodenhausen, 2006, 2007). According to this model, evaluative reactions begin when a stimulus is encountered and relevant associations are automatically activated in memory. These associations provide the basis for an initial, primitive evaluative impulse (termed *automatic affect*) toward the stimulus. For example, if offered a slice of cake for dessert, a person might have an immediate positive feeling about the cake. When called upon to make a judgment or choice, the APE model assumes that these initial primitive feelings are typically translated into corresponding propositional evaluations, which most simply involves the confirmation of the truth of the evaluation implied by the automatic affect (e.g., "I like cake."). A critical assumption of the APE model is that the automatic affect that people experience is *not* governed by principles of logic, consistency, or subjective endorsement; it simply is what it is. However, the propositional evaluations that can be generated from these affective feelings *are* subject to validity concerns. When individuals engage in thoughtful deliberation about a stimulus, they are likely to consider a range of factors beyond their immediate automatic affect, and they are likely to reach a propositional evaluation that is consistent with other salient propositions and which they explicitly endorse. So, for example, if concerns about one's waistline are salient, then the automatic positive feeling about the cake may be transformed into a negative propositional evaluation (e.g., "Cake is fattening."). The APE model assumes that in many instances associative and propositional evaluations will be closely aligned, but in some important contexts, such as racial attitudes, there may be noteworthy discrepancies between the two types of evaluations. In such cases, both types of evaluation reflect significant aspects of the person's attitude system, and it is a very interesting question which aspect will exert greater control over behavior.

The racial attitudes of White people have long been postulated to consist of ambivalent reactions, containing both negative reactions based in pervasive, disparaging cultural representations deriving from the oppression of African Americans over centuries and positive reactions based on the endorsement of egalitarian values and aspirations (Gaertner and Dovidio, 1986; Myrdal 1944). It has often been assumed that "anti-Black affect" is the most automatic and immediate association in the minds of many Whites because they are subject to cultural conditioning that continuously reinforces racist associations in both blatant and subtle ways (Devine 1989; Dovidio and Gaertner, 1986). However, most of these same people also explicitly disavow racism (Schuman et al., 1997), so when their egalitarian values are salient, they may be likely to transform their automatic negative affect into positive propositional evaluations (Gawronski et al., 2008). The conditions under which egalitarian values will be most likely to trump anti-Black affect are exactly the ones that commonly exist in an opinion-survey context—where people are likely to enter a self-reflective, deliberative mindset in which they access their values and ideals, with ample time and opportunity for these cognitions to override any automatic negative affect that might be triggered.

What will happen in the voting booth? A good deal of research has documented that automatic affective reactions can produce corresponding impulsive behavior

(Strack and Deutsch, 2004), so situations that either preclude or discourage thoughtful reflection are likely to show evidence of negative automatic affect (when it is present) in Whites' behavior toward African Americans. Certain forms of behavior, such as spontaneous, nonverbal signaling (e.g., patterns of eye gaze and posture that convey warmth or coldness), have been shown to be especially likely to convey the connotations of automatic affective reactions (Dovidio et al., 1997; Dovidio et al., 2002). However, voting behavior seems far removed from these sorts of impulsive and spontaneous behavior. Should we therefore feel confident that most White voters will enter the voting booth mindful of their egalitarian values and therefore be unlikely to assess a Black candidate through the lens of automatic, culturally conditioned racism?

Such a conclusion is clearly premature. Several studies have recently investigated the relationship between so-called implicit attitudes (the "automatic affect" of the APE model) and voting behavior (e.g., Arcuri et al., 2008; Friese et al., 2007; Galdi et al., 2008). For example, Luciano Arcuri et al. (2008) conducted a study examining the implicit attitudes of undecided voters. Employing a commonly used technique for assessing the automatic affect of these voters, Arcuri et al. showed that undecided voters who had more positive implicit attitudes toward one candidate eventually voted accordingly. Silvia Galdi et al. (2008) observed similar results with regard to attitudes toward a controversial military-base expansion plan. They found that among respondents who reported being undecided, their future conscious beliefs about the issue were significantly related to their automatic associations during the first data collection. In other words, the automatic evaluative impulses of undecided voters predicted which way their subsequent voting preferences would go.

How can automatic affect influence thoughtful, deliberate behavior such as voting? Although it is the case that deliberations involving salient beliefs and values can sometimes simply override automatic affective reactions, it is often the case that automatic affect contaminates subsequent cognitive deliberations (e.g., Fazio 1990; Fazio and Olson, 2007). Basic processes of decision making can be fundamentally altered when automatic prejudice and stereotypes have been activated (Bodenhausen 1988; Bodenhausen et al., 2007). Because they arrive first in mind, these automatic reactions have the potential to bias subsequent attention, interpretation, and memory for relevant information. This bias is typically assimilative in nature, producing impressions that are aligned with the implications of the automatic reactions. Importantly, this bias is largely or entirely implicit. For this reason, the resulting impressions seem to be based on thoughtful consideration of relevant evidence, rather than merely reflecting impulse, bias, or prejudice. In other words, sometimes the deliberative thought process that follows the activation of automatic affect simply serves to intellectually justify a corresponding behavioral response. In any political contest, there will be ample reasons provided (by the opposing candidate, if not the mainstream media) for rejecting a candidate, other than his or her race per se. A White voter who experiences negative automatic affect when contemplating a Black candidate can rely on these ostensibly nonracial justifications to feel confident that a negative response to the minority candidate reflects meaningful substantive concerns rather than racism. Indeed, research indicates that Whites factor in such "nonracial" detractions much more strongly in the case of Black versus White individuals, confirming the underlying importance of race in the decision-making process (see Dovidio and Gaertner, 2004, for a review).

In the process of reaching a decision about whom to vote for, voters' egalitarian values will not necessarily always be salient (unless they stop to reflect upon their broader ideological views), but their intellectual justifications for supporting or

opposing a given candidate, once generated, are likely to remain at the forefront of their subsequent deliberations and decisions. From this perspective, for many White voters, race will play a determining role in their vote when "nonracial" justifications for opposing a minority candidate are available and sufficiently compelling *and* rival justifications for supporting the minority candidate are easily dismissed or over-looked. In the 2008 presidential election, Obama's opponents produced many nonracial justifications for opposing his candidacy (e.g., he's too inexperienced; he's too liberal), and while such arguments certainly resonated with some voters, they appeared on the whole to be insufficient to offset the nonracial justifications that Obama's partisans produced for supporting him (e.g., he will bring much-desired change to Washington; he will restore America's reputation abroad). It may also be the case that the sweeping historical context of the potential for our first non-White national leader also functioned to keep egalitarian values more salient than they might have been in other biracial political contests. Even though some of Obama's opponents eventually attempted, quite transparently, to target racial anxieties and animosities (e.g., he's not a true patriot; he pals around with terrorists), these same allegations were equally without merit. In the end, although the potential for racism to contaminate the decisions of many members of the White electorate was a real possibility, reality constraints might have prevented many White voters from constructing a sufficiently compelling personal rationale for opposing Obama. When they entered the voting booth, any impulse to vote against Obama deriving from automatic anti-Black affect was apparently trumped by the disciplined, effective message the Obama campaign disseminated, providing Democratic Party loyalists and independent voters with compelling nonracial justifications for supporting his candidacy. In the end, analysts such as Nate Silver (FiveThirtyEight.com) were able to make impressively accurate predictions of the election outcome on the basis of public opinion data, signaling the irrelevance of the Bradley effect in the context of this particular election.

RACIAL CATEGORIZATION

Understanding the electorate's response to Obama also requires a consideration of how his status as a multiracial person might affect the relevance of racist reactions, such as the anti-Black affect and automatic stereotypes that social psychologists have documented in Whites' reactions to African Americans. Conventional racial categories have a prominent place in historical and contemporary U.S. society, but there have always been individuals who do not fit neatly into the existing categories, sometimes allowing them to "pass" from one category to another because of this ambiguity (Hirschman 2004). Historically, racial categorization in the United States has been determined by rules such as the *principle of hypodescent* (Banks and Eberhardt, 1998), which says that the race of a mixed-race child is assigned to the racial group of the "socially subordinate" parent (Harris 1964, p. 56), and the *one-drop rule*, which says that one drop of non-White blood makes a person non-White (Rockquemore and Arend, 2002). Despite the commonplace assumption that these ways of thinking about race are outmoded (Brunsma 2006), there is reason to believe that their legacy, even if not their strict adherence, still pervades racial categorization in the general public. Clearly, the media were fascinated with Obama's race, asking questions in headline after headline about whether he, given his mixed racial heritage, was Black or biracial, too Black or not Black enough. While rooted in slavery (Davis 1991), these categorization rules also reflect the desire to use existing racial

categories even when encountering those who do not neatly fit into these historically significant, but relatively rigid and arbitrary, existing categories.

Recent work by Destiny Peery and Galen Bodenhausen (2008) has attempted to answer some questions about how people categorize racially ambiguous individuals who are (or are not) identified as multiracial. Specifically, we examined how participants categorized racially ambiguous persons who were identified as having one White parent and one Black parent, or for whom no genealogical information was available. In the first part of the study they read about a number of persons (both racially ambiguous and unambiguous), ostensibly to learn about them for a subsequent memory test. In order to determine the automatic reactions of non-White participants to such racially ambiguous persons, participants completed an unexpected speeded categorization task requiring rapid judgments about whether each target was Black or not Black and also whether each target was White or not White (based on a photograph alone). By looking at these judgments in combination, any given person could have been categorized as (1) Black and not White, (2) White and not Black, (3) both Black and White, or (4) neither Black nor White. In the absence of any information about parentage, monoracial categorization patterns were the most common for the racially ambiguous targets, but the percentage categorized as Black/not White was comparable to the percentage categorized as White/not Black (31.9% vs. 29.8%, respectively, in Experiment 2). However, the categorization pattern shifted markedly toward categorizing the targets as Black/not White (43.6%) rather than White/not Black (19.7%) when a person was explicitly known to have one Black and one White parent. On the other hand, there was little change in the frequency of "multiracial" categorization patterns (2.2% decrease for "both Black and White" and 0.6% increase for "neither Black nor White" when parental races were known). In short, rapid, reflexive categorizations tended to follow the principle of hypodescent, and having one Black parent was sufficient for assigning a person to the Black/not White category.

In a second task, we asked the same participants to describe the race of the racially ambiguous target persons, in a *non*-speeded, reflective questionnaire format. In contrast to the speeded (automatic) categorizations, these more deliberate responses showed that having known mixed-race parentage resulted in a stronger likelihood of categorizing a person as multiracial. Thus, this study revealed a divergence between automatic and deliberate categorizations, such that participants were more likely to judge that targets with mixed-race parentage were Black (and not White) on the speeded categorization task, but multiracial on the deliberate categorization task. As the population of multiracial people increases and the lines of racial categories grow increasingly blurry, these results highlight the potential importance of considering automatic as well as thoughtful categorization processes, which in diverging may each have notably different implications for judgment and behavior.

The fact that non-Black respondents often conformed to the historically prominent hypodescent pattern in their rapid racial categorizations may reflect the enduring legacy of rigid and increasingly inadequate notions of race at the level of conditioned, automatic responses. In contrast, the acknowledgement of a multiracial identity at the deliberate, reflective level may suggest the emergence of a shift away from the traditional notions of race toward a view that is more flexible than U.S. culture has previously allowed. If it is true that such deliberate categorizations can be taken as evidence of this kind of shift, it does not imply that the automatically activated categories have no effect on subsequent thoughts or behavior. As we noted above, the categories applied to objects can affect further information processing and behavior toward those objects quite systematically. This may mean that how people

respond to Obama and other multiracial persons may depend on how they are categorized at both the automatic and deliberate level.

How a person or an object is categorized can depend on one's attitudes (Fazio and Olson, 2007). The presentation of an attitude object may potentially activate many categories, but it has been shown that the category that is most salient will likely depend on the most accessible attitude (Smith et al., 1996). As already described, these accessible attitudes and the resulting categorization may color subsequent perceptions of the attitude object (Fazio and Olson, 2007). Thus, for a non-White candidate in a biracial race, such as Obama, whether race is a salient category at all, and which racial category becomes salient, may be affected by individuals' attitudes (e.g., Blascovich et al., 1997; Pettigrew and Allport, 1958). If Obama is categorized as Black, then it may make sense to expect, as a starting point, that the response to Obama would be similar to the response to other Black candidates in similar political races against White opponents. On the other hand, it is unclear what result would be expected from a multiracial categorization, for which specific attitudes and stereotypes may be less accessible or articulated. When considering the Obama phenomenon, it is clear that much more remains to be learned about the extent to which multiracial political candidates evoke essentially the same psychological responses as "monoracial" minority candidates or whether a set of substantially new (and so far largely undocumented) considerations come into play.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHANGING RACIAL AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The research we have reviewed shows how non-White political candidates may face substantial barriers to political success because of the influence of racial attitudes on behavior. These barriers are not necessarily any less substantial for candidates who have a White parent but otherwise identify as non-White, as they may elicit racial categorization that corresponds to the non-White part of their identity, at least at the automatic level. So what does it mean that Obama, a biracial man who identifies as Black and who ran against a White man in a political race for the highest office in the nation, is the new president of the United States? Does Obama's success suggest that we are abandoning arcane notions of race as a biological category or that racial or ethnic prejudice and discrimination no longer represent meaningful challenges to the success of non-White people?

Changing Racial Categories and Definitions

Race can be conceptualized as being a biological or a sociocultural phenomenon (Hirschfeld 1995), but lay theories of race, particularly in the United States, have been biologically deterministic (Hirschfeld 1996; Rothbart and Taylor, 1992). This belief in the biological nature of race is reflected in the application of the principle of hypodescent and especially the one-drop rule to racial categorization in the United States. Is Obama's prominence as a multiracial person enough to change a long history of considering race a biological category? Should we expect a greater shift toward the understanding of race as a sociocultural construct?

Despite compelling scientific arguments refuting the meaningfulness of race as a biological category, race continues to serve as a particularly prominent basis for defining social groups (Hirschman 2004). This continued adherence to supposedly distinct racial categories remains even as it becomes increasingly difficult to define or

measure race in terms of the traditional monoracial categories. Charles Hirschman (2004) points out that most modern peoples are mixtures of different populations that represent the migration of peoples from Europe, Africa, and Asia, and the blending of these people with native Amerindians. In the United States specifically, marriage across ethnic and religious boundaries has become normative (Alba and Golden, 1986). As these marriages produce children, the number of people who identify as multiracial increases, resulting in an increase in a population that may refuse to identify with any one of the traditional racial categories. This pressure to recognize the increasing multiracial population was behind the changes made to the 2000 U.S. Census that allowed people to check more than one box to indicate their racial identity (Farley 2002). Hirschman (2004) argues that there has been a shift in the concept from race as a biological category to race as a social category, and Obama may further encourage this approach to race as a purely social category by playing down the importance of his own mixed racial background and the importance of defining and dividing people by race.

Implications for Prejudice and Stereotyping

The outcome of a single election cannot be taken as a definitive diagnosis of the state of racial bias in electoral politics. If Obama's dramatic rise to the most important elected office in the United States is not necessarily a signal of the irrelevance of prejudice and stereotyping to electoral politics, might a successful Obama presidency at least hold the promise of dispelling racial stereotypes and diminishing the impact of prejudice in future elections? On one hand, research shows that people are likely to draw generalizations about minority groups on the basis of individuals (e.g., Gelman 2000), particularly when the group is viewed as being defined by an underlying biological essence, as is commonly the case with racial groups. Exposure to nonstereotypical, positive members of racial minority groups has been shown in a number of studies to result in more positive evaluations of the groups to which these individuals belong. For example, Bodenhausen et al. (1995) found that having non-Black participants call to mind successful and well-liked Black celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey (in an incidental and seemingly unrelated context) led them to express more favorable and sympathetic judgments about African Americans overall. This pattern of generalized appraisals suggests that Obama could indeed lead to more favorable evaluations of Blacks overall, to the extent that he represents a successful and well-liked Black exemplar. This research also showed, however, that when an exemplar is viewed as being atypical in some noteworthy way, then positive responses to the individual may not generalize to the group as a whole (see also Richeson and Trawalter, 2005). As we have argued, there is the potential for considerable variability in the extent to which Obama is categorized by White citizens as a Black person, let alone a typical Black person. Stereotyping research has also shown that exposure to individuals who disconfirm stereotypes, such as successful Black executives, can result in subtyping, a process whereby such individuals are represented as constituting a separate and distinct "type," constituting an exception to the stereotypic rule. Such representations serve to preserve prevalent stereotypes about the broader category (see Richards and Hewstone, 2001, for a review).

    Research on "moral credentialing" (Monin and Miller, 2001) provides yet another reason for tempering optimism about the consequences of Obama's electoral success. This research shows that when individuals have had the opportunity to establish moral credentials by expressing egalitarian values, they feel freer to subsequently

violate those values with impunity. Of particular relevance, Benoit Monin and Dale Miller found that after first endorsing a member of stereotyped group (women or African Americans), participants subsequently became significantly more likely to show sexist or racist biases (compared to other participants who had not been given the previous opportunity to endorse a stereotyped group member) in a personnel selection context. Having voted for Obama, will White Americans feel that they have established their egalitarian bona fides and worry less about potential racial bias in subsequent electoral contexts? The downstream consequences of Obama's success are hard to presage with any confidence because a number of competing psychological effects can reasonably be anticipated on the basis of social psychological research; there are clearly reasons for optimism, but tempered with caution.

CONCLUSION

Prior to the election, Michael Crowley (2008) suggested that perhaps the United States has moved so far beyond race that even White supremacists care relatively little about Obama. He argued that White supremacists have to instead explain away Obama's success by focusing on something other than his race—that is, mostly on the White liberals who support him and on their desire for a postracial society. On the other hand, CBS News (2008) reported shortly after the election of Obama that racially motivated incidents had increased across the country. The report included descriptions of nooses, racial epithets, cross burnings, and elementary school children chanting on the school bus, "Assassinate Obama." It is difficult to avoid comparisons between these incidents occurring across the country in 2008 and incidents occurring decades ago at a time when overt racism was rampant—times many would like to think are long behind us.

Hirschman (2004) argues that despite the rejection of racist ideologies of the past, when constructing social policies the United States still tries to measure race as an ascribed status and to consider race as existing in mutually exclusive categories. He also argues that if we have moved to a point where we consider race only as a social category, it makes little sense to maintain these rigid divisions. Although abandoning an intellectually untenable concept like race makes a great deal of sense in theory, so long as conceptions of race are psychologically alive in the minds of the public, failing to take race into account will only make measuring and effectively countering continued inequality and discrimination more difficult.

What then should we expect from the Obama era? Despite calls to end affirmative action (Byrne 2008) and declarations that the United States has overcome its racial issues (Witt 2008) in the wake of Obama's electoral success, the United States has not suddenly transcended hundreds of years of racialized politics. Race has meaning in the United States, and the meaning it has been given cannot be neutralized by the success of one person of color. It is probably true that Obama will have an impact on how we think about race in a number of ways. As the number of multiracial people in the United States grows—people who now have a prominent representative in Obama—we may well see changes in the way we define race and its categories. On the other hand, we may not understand the nature and implications of these new distinctions any more than we understand the old ones we may be moving away from. Obama's success per se is unlikely to provide answers to questions about race that have eluded us so far. The fascination with Obama's racial identity and the meaning of race in the 2008 election cycle in and of itself suggests the continuing importance of race for our understanding of the social life

of Americans. As long as the public considers race to be such a centrally important social identity, it will retain its power to define individuals and divide groups. We cannot reasonably expect Obama alone to change these deeply entrenched psychological structures. While many hope for the day when race will no longer have the power to define and divide in such substantial ways, we are not yet there. Can we get there? Here, there is one thing Obama's successful presidential candidacy does confirm: when pursued with determination, intelligence, and optimism, even the most unprecedented outcomes are possible. As Obama himself would likely say, "Yes, we can."

Corresponding author: Professor Destiny Peery, Department of Psychology, Northwestern University, 2029 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60208. Email: d-peery@northwestern.edu

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