
“Keep Your Eyes on the Prize”: Reference Points and Racial Differences in Assessing Progress Toward Equality

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White Americans tend to perceive greater progress toward racial equality than do ethnic minorities. Correlational evidence (Study 1) and two experimental manipulations of framing (Studies 2 and 3) supported the hypothesis that this perception gap is associated with different reference points the two groups spontaneously use to assess progress, with Whites anchoring on comparisons with the past and ethnic minorities anchoring on ideal standards. Consistent with the hypothesis that the groups anchor on different reference points, the gap in perceptions of progress was affected by the time participants spent deliberating about the topic (Study 4). Implications for survey methods and political conflict are discussed.

Keywords: *social judgment; reference points; framing; racial equality; goals*

“Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on. Hold on.”
—(Refrain to a civil rights hymn by Alice Wine)

To properly gauge progress toward a goal, one must compare one’s current position to two critical reference points: the starting point and the endpoint one is striving toward. Consider a long-distance runner who discovers that she has just passed the 25-mile mark. Now, if this hypothetical runner only focuses on how far she’s come from the starting line she may be quite impressed at her progress—25 miles is quite a distance! However, her assessment of progress should also take into account whether she’s competing in a typical 26.2-mile marathon or a 50-mile ultramarathon. In a typical marathon, she’s only a short distance from the finish line, but in an ultramarathon, she’s only halfway there.

Similarly, the struggle toward racial equality might be viewed as considerably more successful if the present is compared to the racist conditions of the past than it might if the present is compared to the goal of full racial

equality. As Wolfe (1998) wrote concerning racial equality, “Compared with where we were there is progress. Compared with where we should be, that progress is insufficient” (p. 223). Pettigrew (1996) reviewed a number of social statistics that encourage an optimistic impression of racial progress when current conditions for ethnic minorities are compared to those of the past (see also Simon, 1996). However, when current conditions for minorities are compared with those for White Americans, the result is a decidedly more pessimistic impression (Pettigrew, 1996). For example, although the life expectancy for Black Americans in 1990 was significantly higher than the life expectancy in 1940, Blacks still have not closed the life expectancy gap with Whites (Pettigrew, 1996).

Although a complete assessment of progress should take into account distance from both the starting position and the final goal, people may sometimes narrowly focus on one or the other of these reference points. They may judge progress with respect to the selected reference point, neglecting to take into account distance from the other critical point. The status quo ante is often used as a reference point for evaluating change. However, goals and aspiration levels are sometimes used as alternative reference points (Heath, Larrick, & Wu, 1999; March & Shapira, 1992), and the magnitude of

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goal progress can seem very different when it is judged against these different reference points (Rothman, 2000). Selection of a reference point for assessing goal progress may be affected by a number of psychological factors that differ between individuals and social groups, including mental representation of the goal and strategies of goal pursuit.

Goals that are personally important are especially likely to be converted from a mere wish into a binding intention (Heckhausen & Kuhl, 1985). Moreover, once a goal has been represented as an intention it becomes a predominant concern and stimulates more attentive monitoring of goal progress (Heckhausen & Kuhl, 1985). Whites and ethnic minorities are likely to differ in the degree to which the struggle toward racial equality represents a goal of personal importance, and we argue this difference in representation of the goal is likely to influence both the frame of reference they adopt and their overall assessments of progress toward that goal. Indeed, Whites and ethnic minorities do strongly differ in the degree to which full racial equality represents a central goal for them. In the 1983 General Social Survey, 76.4% of Black Americans compared to 49.9% of White Americans rated race relations as either important or one of the most important issues for them (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2000). More recently, in the 1992 National Election Study, Black Americans were 7.9 times more likely than White Americans to list racial problems as the most important challenge facing the country (Miller & the National Election Studies, 1994).

In addition, Whites and ethnic minorities might differ in the type of goal that racial progress represents. Higgins and colleagues recognized a distinction between security goals, which are more urgent goals including safety concerns and other basic needs of the person, and nurturance goals, which include the person's ideals and aspirations (Brodscholl & Higgins, 2003; Higgins, 1997; Shah & Higgins, 1997). For ethnic minorities, progress toward racial equality might more often represent a security goal, whereas for White Americans, progress toward racial equality might more often represent a less urgent, nurturance goal. This difference in representation of the goal might be important because people tend to weight distance from the endpoint more heavily when assessing progress toward security goals but weight distance from the starting point more heavily when assessing progress toward nurturance goals (Brodscholl & Higgins, 2003). Thus, if ethnic minorities represent racial equality as a goal relevant to their long-term security needs while White Americans represent racial equality as a mere aspiration, White and ethnic minority Americans are likely to judge progress toward that goal relative to different reference points. White Americans should tend to judge racial progress by com-

paring the present to the way things were in the past when segregation and institutionalized discrimination were at their peaks. By virtue of their greater personal stake in the movement to establish racial equality, ethnic minorities should focus their assessments of progress on the end goal of full racial equality, following the advice of the popular civil rights injunction that says "Keep your eyes on the prize."

We argue that racial differences in the frame of reference adopted will produce different perceptions of how successful the struggle toward racial equality has been. A wealth of research suggests that framing and reference points can powerfully affect social judgments and satisfaction with social conditions (Heyman, Mellers, Tishchenko, & Schwartz, 2004; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984; Kinder & Sanders, 1996; March & Shapira, 1992; Pettigrew, 1967; Quattrone & Tversky, 1988; Sears & McConahay, 1973; Stouffer, Suchman, DeVinney, Star, & Williams, 1949; Thibaut & Kelley, 1986; van den Bos & van Prooijen, 2001). In particular, the magnitude of goal progress can seem more modest when it is judged with respect to the end goal than when it is judged with respect to where one began (Pettigrew, 1996; Rothman, 2000). Thus, White Americans might have a more favorable impression of the overall magnitude of racial progress than might ethnic minorities by virtue of more often judging progress relative to where we were rather than where we should be.

Indeed, nationally representative opinion surveys provide evidence that White American and ethnic minority perceptions of racial progress diverge as expected. For instance, in a June 2000 *The New York Times* survey, nearly three quarters of White respondents but only 55% of Black respondents agreed that there had been significant progress eliminating racial discrimination since the 1960s (Correspondents of *The New York Times*, 2001). Similar gaps in White and Black assessments of racial progress are found in several other nationally representative opinion surveys (Hochschild, 1995; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Sigelman & Welch, 1991). White and Black Americans disagree about both general racial progress and very concrete, specific indices of racial progress. For instance, in the 1998-1999 Multi-Investigator Study, when respondents were asked to judge how the racial wage gap had changed over the previous 10 years, 72% of White but only 38% of Black respondents judged that this gap had decreased (Sniderman & Brady, 1999).

In the following studies, we explore whether the gap in White and ethnic minority assessments of racial progress is associated with their use of different reference points to assess racial progress. Study 1 measures whether White and ethnic minority participants use different reference points to assess racial progress and tests

whether these different reference points are associated with different assessments of the magnitude of progress. Studies 2 and 3 manipulate the reference points that Whites and ethnic minorities use to assess racial progress to test whether the gap in their assessments of progress diminishes when they are focused on the same reference point. Finally, Study 4 tests whether the impact of this tendency to anchor on different reference points is exacerbated when judgments are rushed compared to more reflective judgments.

STUDY 1

To test the hypothesis that White and ethnic minority disagreements concerning the magnitude of racial progress are associated with the use of different reference points, we asked White and ethnic minority participants to assess progress toward racial equality and respond to an open-ended question asking them to explain their assessments. The responses to this open-ended question were coded to determine whether a given participant's assessment of racial progress focused on comparing the present to either the past or the goal of full racial equality. We predicted that White participants' explanations would be more likely to focus on comparisons with the past while ethnic minority participants' explanations would more likely focus on comparisons with the goal of full equality. Furthermore, we predicted that this difference in the focus of comparison would mediate the difference between White and ethnic minority participants' overall ratings of racial progress.

Method

Participants. In Study 1, 33 White (63.6% female) and 18 ethnic minority (61.1% female) Cornell University students participated. Participants were recruited from psychology and human development classes and various other campus locations. The ethnic minority participants included 8 Black students, 4 Hispanic/Latino students, and 6 students of Asian descent.

Procedure. Participants completed a questionnaire that first asked them to indicate how much progress had been made toward equality for racial minorities in the United States since the 1960s. Participants responded on a scale ranging from 0 (*very little progress*) to 7 (*a great deal of progress*). After responding to this initial question, participants were asked to provide an open-ended explanation of their response in the lined space that followed.

Coding. Participants' explanations of their responses in the open-ended question were read and coded to determine whether their assessments of progress were primarily based on comparisons between the present and the past or on comparisons between the present and some ideal standard of what racial conditions should be

like today. There were four coding options. Two coders, unaware of the participants' race, used the following coding scheme: A score of 1 was assigned if the explanation seemed to be based exclusively on comparisons between the present and the past with no mention of comparisons with some ideal standard of equality; a score of 2 was assigned if the explanation seemed to be primarily based on comparisons between the present and the past but there was some brief acknowledgement of discrepancies between the present and some ideal standard; a score of 3 was assigned if the explanation seemed to contain comparisons between the present and the past as well as substantial comparisons between the present and some ideal standard; and finally, a score of 4 was assigned if the explanation only seemed to contain comparisons between the present and some ideal standard of equality with no mention of comparisons between present and past conditions. The two coders' ratings achieved reliability ($\alpha = .89$) using this scale. These ratings were averaged together, and the average was used as the measure of participants' explanations in the following analyses.

Results/Discussion

We first submitted participants' overall assessments of racial progress to a 2 (race: White vs. ethnic minority) \times 2 (sex: male vs. female) ANOVA. Sex was included as an independent variable in this and all subsequent studies because in some nationally representative samples (e.g., Davis et al., 2000) male respondents have reported significantly greater assessments of racial progress than have female respondents. It was thus important to test whether sex of participants interacted with the other measures in our studies. There was a significant main effect of race, $F(1, 47) = 4.60, p < .05$. As predicted, White participants judged that conditions for racial minorities had improved significantly more ($M = 5.30$) than did ethnic minority participants ($M = 4.67$). No main effects or interactions with sex were significant.

We next submitted participants' coded explanations to a 2 \times 2 ANOVA with race and sex as independent variables. Again there was a significant main effect of race, $F(1, 47) = 7.15, p < .05$. Specifically, White participants' explanations were weighted more toward comparing the present with the past ($M = 2.19$) than ethnic minority participants, whose explanations were weighted more toward comparing the present with some ideal standard of racial equality ($M = 2.69$). Again, there was no main effect or interaction involving sex of participants.

Next, we tested the association between participants' assessments of the magnitude of racial progress and their coded explanations. As predicted, there was a significant negative correlation between participants' judgments of the magnitude of progress for racial minorities

and the coding of their explanations for these judgments, $r(49) = -.63$, $p < .001$. It seems that respondents whose explanations focused primarily on comparisons with the past judged that conditions for racial minorities had progressed more than did those whose explanations focused primarily on comparisons with some ideal standard of equality.

Following specifications of Baron and Kenny (1986), we conducted a mediational analysis to determine whether explanatory focus on the past versus some ideal standard accounted for the difference between White and ethnic minority participants' overall ratings of racial progress. First, judgments of racial progress were predicted from participant's race, which yielded a significant association ($\beta = -.30$), $t(49) = 2.17$, $p < .05$. Second, explanatory focus (the proposed mediator) was predicted from participant's race, which also yielded a significant association, ($\beta = .33$), $t(49) = 2.42$, $p < .05$. Finally, judgments of racial progress were predicted from both race and explanatory focus. This final analysis revealed that the relationship between race and judgments of racial minority progress was no longer significant ($\beta = -.10$), $t(48) < 1$. However, the mediator—explanatory focus—remained a significant predictor of progress judgments in the same regression ($\beta = -.60$), $t(48) = 5.10$, $p < .001$. A Sobel test confirmed that explanatory focus significantly mediated the effect of race on overall ratings of racial progress, $z = 2.17$, $p < .05$.

Conservative pundits often contend that racial minorities are unwilling to acknowledge progress toward racial equality, with their views remaining fixated on the country's overtly racist, segregationist past. For instance, McWhorter (2003) suggested that many Black Americans follow a "Cult of Victimology, under which remnants of discrimination hold an obsessive, indignant fascination that allows only passing acknowledgement of any signs of progress" (p. 2). McWhorter argued against "a conviction held by many blacks that forty years after the Civil Rights Act, conditions for blacks have not changed substantially enough to mention" (p. 6). Similarly, Bennett (1992) wrote, "Economic gains don't stop a very active and voluble civil rights lobby from continuing to live in the past, as if we were still in the era of Jim Crow" (p. 189). This idea is stated most eloquently by S. Steele (1990) who wrote,

The memory of any enemy is always a pull into the past, into a preparedness against what has already happened. . . . When there is a vast lake of such memory—and I can think of no group with a more powerful collective memory of its enemy than black Americans—the irresistible pull into the past can render opportunities in the present all but invisible. (pp. 151-152)

Contrary to the speculations of these conservative writers, only 2 ethnic minority participants in Study 1 failed to mention any improvements in conditions for racial minorities since the 1960s. Furthermore, none of the ethnic minority participants selected the lowest number on the scale of progress toward racial equality. It seems that ethnic minority participants resisted the "irresistible pull into the past" and clearly distinguished present-day racial conditions from conditions in "the era of Jim Crow." However, 76% of White participants either neglected to mention or only briefly mentioned any discrepancies between present racial conditions and some standard of how things ought to be. This evidence suggests that conservative commentators may have misplaced the focus of their explanations for the gap in perceptions of racial progress. This gap does not seem to be associated with a failure by racial minorities to acknowledge progress where it exists. Rather, this gap seems to be associated with the failure by some White Americans to consider needs for further progress.

Study 1 provides correlational support for the hypothesis that the gap in White and ethnic minority assessments of racial progress can be explained by their use of different reference points. In Study 2, we provide a more rigorous test of this hypothesis by exploring how experimentally manipulating the reference point affects participants' judgments of racial progress.

STUDY 2

The results of Study 1 are consistent with our hypothesis that White participants tend to assess racial progress by comparing present conditions with past conditions while ethnic minority participants tend to assess racial progress by comparing present conditions with ideals of equality. Furthermore, this use of different reference points was associated with differences in the magnitude of progress participants perceived. Although the results of Study 1 are consistent with our predictions, we cannot conclude that the use of different reference points accounts for racial differences in perceptions of racial minority progress because the reference points were not experimentally manipulated. For instance, it is possible that the different reference points participants mentioned did not produce different judgments of racial progress but rather participants' judgments of racial progress influenced the reference points they selected to justify those judgments.

To more definitively test the causal influence of reference points on judgments of racial progress, Study 2 experimentally manipulated the reference points participants used to assess progress. In Study 2, participants completed a task designed to focus their thoughts either on past racial conditions (where we were prime) or ideals of racial equality (where we should be prime) or nei-

ther reference point (unframed). The where we were prime should lead participants to compare present conditions to past conditions when assessing racial progress. In contrast, the where we should be prime should lead participants to compare present conditions to ideals of racial equality. Assessments of progress in the where we should be condition should be more modest compared to the where we were condition. Furthermore, if comparisons to past racial conditions are the default for White Americans, then White participants' assessments of racial progress in an unframed condition should not differ from their assessments in the where we were condition, but their assessments of progress in both these conditions should be greater than their assessments in the where we should be condition. By contrast, if comparisons with ideal racial conditions are the default for ethnic minorities, then these participants' assessments of racial progress in the unframed condition should not differ from their assessments in the where we should be condition, but assessments of progress in both these conditions should be lower than assessments in the where we were condition. Study 2 thus tested the prediction that White participants' assessments of progress would become like ethnic minority participants' assessments if they had been primed to think about ideals of full racial equality, whereas ethnic minority participants' assessments of progress would become like Whites' assessments if they had been primed to think about past racial conditions.

Method

Participants. In Study 2, 36 White (66.7% female) and 36 ethnic minority (52.8% female) Cornell University undergraduates participated. Participants were recruited from psychology and human development classes and various other campus locations. The ethnic minority participants included 16 Black students, 8 Hispanic/Latino students, and 12 students of Asian descent.

Procedure. All participants received a questionnaire that asked them to indicate how much progress had been made toward equality for racial minorities in the United States since the 1960s. Participants responded on a scale ranging from 0 (*very little progress*) to 7 (*a great deal of progress*). However, before participants saw and responded to this question they were randomly assigned to one of three framing conditions. Participants who received the where we were prime were instructed to complete a brief essay describing what conditions were like for racial minorities in the United States prior to the 1960s civil rights movement. This task was designed to focus participants on past racial conditions before they assessed progress toward racial equality. Participants who received the where we should be prime were asked to write a brief essay describing Martin Luther King's

vision of a society with full racial equality as described in his famous "I have a dream" speech. This task was designed to focus participants on an ideal standard of racial equality before they assessed progress toward racial equality. Finally, participants in the unframed condition merely answered the question about progress toward racial equality without completing any essay beforehand. In this condition we expected participants to adopt their own spontaneous frame to answer the question about racial progress.

Results/Discussion

We submitted participants' assessments of racial progress to a 2 (race: White or ethnic minority) \times 2 (sex: male or female) \times 3 (reference frame: unframed, where we were, or where we should be) ANOVA, obtaining significant main effects of race, $F(1, 60) = 5.11, p < .05$, and reference frame, $F(2, 60) = 9.51, p < .01$, and a marginally significant main effect of sex, $F(1, 60) = 3.92, p < .1$. As predicted there was a significant Race \times Reference Frame interaction, $F(2, 60) = 3.35, p < .05$. No other interactions were significant.

We hypothesized that White and ethnic minority Americans differ in their assessments of racial progress because they tend to spontaneously adopt different reference frames for assessing progress. Specifically, we hypothesized that when they assessed racial progress in the unframed condition, White participants would spontaneously focus on comparisons with the past, whereas ethnic minority participants would spontaneously focus their comparisons on some ideal standard. Consistent with the hypothesis that the differences in White and ethnic minority assessments of racial progress are due to differences in spontaneous framing, simple effects tests revealed significant racial differences in assessments of progress only in the unframed condition, $F(1, 60) = 9.85, p < .01$. The gap in White and ethnic minority participants' assessments of racial progress was eliminated in the conditions in which the experimenter provided a reference frame for the assessment, $F_s < 1$ (see Figure 1).

The data, summarized in Figure 1, also supported our specific hypotheses about how White and ethnic minority participants would spontaneously frame the assessment of racial progress. White participants' assessments of racial progress differed significantly by framing condition, $F(2, 60) = 7.93, p < .01$. Consistent with the hypothesis that White participants spontaneously focus on the past, their assessments of racial progress in the where we were condition did not significantly differ from those in the unframed condition, $F < 1$. However, White participants' assessments of racial progress in the where we should be condition were significantly lower than those in both the unframed, $F(1, 60) = 9.13, p < .05$, and where we were conditions, $F(1, 60) = 11.82, p < .05$. Ethnic

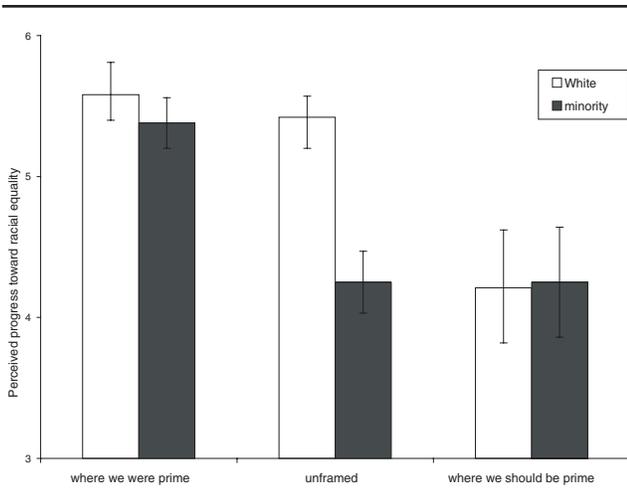


Figure 1 Means and standard errors of judgments of progress toward racial equality by White and ethnic minority participants in the unframed, where we were, and where we should be conditions in Study 2.

minority participants' assessments of racial progress also differed significantly by framing condition, $F(2, 60) = 5.39, p < .01$. Consistent with our hypothesis that ethnic minority participants spontaneously focus their comparisons on an ideal standard of equality, their assessments of racial progress in the where we should be condition did not significantly differ from those in the unframed condition, $F < 1$. As expected, ethnic minority participants' assessments of racial progress in the where we were condition were significantly greater than those in both the unframed, $F(1, 60) = 7.92, p < .05$, and where we should be conditions, $F(1, 60) = 7.90, p < .05$.

STUDY 3

Study 2 primed thoughts about either past racial conditions or ideals of equality to indirectly manipulate the reference points participants used to judge racial progress. In Study 3, we attempted to test this hypothesis more directly by manipulating the temporal reference frame in the explicit wording of the question about racial progress. If the gap in White and ethnic minority perceptions of progress toward equality emerges out of their tendency to select different reference points to assess the magnitude of progress, then racial differences in perceptions of progress should be magnified when a clear reference point is not specified in the wording of the question. However, when the question clearly specifies a reference point framing progress relative to either the way things were in the past or the way things ought to be, these racial differences should be reduced. To test these predictions, the phrasing of the questions about racial progress in Study 3 was manipulated to focus participants on either past racial conditions (where we were) or ideals of racial equality (where we should be).

Study 3 was also designed to address some alternative interpretations of the results in the preceding studies. It is possible that White and ethnic minority participants' judgments of racial progress in Studies 1 and 2 diverged not because they were using different reference points but because they were using different standards of equality. Specifically, White participants may have used equality of opportunity as the standard for assessing racial progress, whereas ethnic minority participants may have used equality of outcomes as their standard for assessing racial progress. This interpretation is supported by results from the 1993 General Social Survey (GSS), in which 88.4% of White Americans but only 76.6% of Black Americans endorsed equality of opportunity over equality of outcomes as the standard for social justice (Davis et al., 2000). Clearly the majority of Americans of all races endorse equality of opportunity as their preferred standard. However, the fact that ethnic minority Americans are slightly more inclined to select equality of outcomes suggests that differing standards of equality may contribute to racial differences in perceptions of progress toward equality. Research by Bobo and Kluegel (1993) also demonstrated that White Americans' evaluations of race-based government programs are sensitive to whether those programs are framed in terms of equalizing opportunities or outcomes. These results suggest that the distinctions between these two standards of equality are meaningful to many Americans. To minimize the influence of differing standards of equality, Study 3 more clearly specified equality of opportunity as the form of equality that participants were to assess. We specified equality of opportunity as the standard because the GSS results suggested that this was the standard endorsed by the majority of both White and ethnic minority respondents.

The racial differences in use of reference points in Studies 1 and 2 may also have been exacerbated by the provision of a temporal frame of reference in the phrasing of the question eliciting participants' judgments of racial progress. Specifically, in the preceding studies participants were asked to judge the magnitude of progress toward equality "since the 1960s." This phrasing may have inadvertently anchored participants' judgments on comparisons with racial conditions of the past. Thus, the fact that in Study 2 White participants' judgments of progress in the unframed condition resembled their judgments in the where we were condition may have been influenced by the provision of a past frame of reference in the phrasing of the question. It is possible that White participants would not spontaneously anchor on comparisons with past conditions if their judgments of racial progress were elicited with a question that did not explicitly mention the past. To rule out this measurement artifact, the questions eliciting judgments of racial

progress in Study 3 did not specify an explicit temporal frame of reference.

Method

Participants. In Study 3, 45 White (60.0% female) and 45 ethnic minority (53.3% female) Cornell University students participated. The ethnic minority participants included 15 Black students, 12 Hispanic/Latino students, and 18 students of Asian descent. Participants received \$5 in exchange for their participation.

Procedure. Participants received a questionnaire that asked two questions about progress toward equality of opportunity for racial minorities in the United States. First, equality of opportunity was defined as “the opportunity to compete for jobs and wealth on a fair and even basis with no race-based discrimination.” The wording of this definition was adapted from a question about equality of opportunity in the 1993 GSS. After equality of opportunity was defined, participants answered two questions about progress in equal opportunity. The phrasing of these questions was varied in three conditions. In the unframed condition, participants were asked, (a) “How much progress would you say there has been toward equality of opportunity for racial minorities in the United States?” and (b) “How much has equality of opportunity for racial minorities improved in the United States?” Participants circled responses on an accompanying scale that ranged from 0 (*very little progress*) to 7 (*a great deal of progress*) for the first question and 0 (*little improvement*) to 7 (*greatly improved*) for the second question. Participants assigned to the where we were frame answered these same two questions, but the wording was slightly altered to prime past conditions as the reference point for judging progress by attaching the following phrase to the beginning of each question: “Compared to what racial conditions were like in the past.” Participants assigned to the where we should be frame also answered the same two questions, but the wording was slightly altered to prime ideals of racial equality as the reference point for judging progress by attaching the following phrase to the beginning of each question: “Compared to what conditions should be like.” Except for these differences in the opening phrases of the two questions assessing participants’ judgments of racial progress, the where we were and where we should be conditions were identical to the unframed condition.

Results/Discussion

Responses to the two questions about progress toward racial equality were significantly correlated, $r(88) = .67$, $p < .001$, and so were averaged together for a composite measure of perceived racial progress. We submitted participants’ assessments of racial progress to a 2 (race: White or ethnic minority) \times 2 (sex: male vs. female) \times 3

(reference frame: unframed, where we were, or where we should be) ANOVA, obtaining a significant main effect of reference frame, $F(2, 78) = 9.59$, $p < .01$, which was qualified by a significant Race \times Reference Frame interaction, $F(2, 78) = 4.23$, $p < .05$. No other main effects or interactions were significant.

We hypothesized that White and ethnic minority Americans differ in their assessments of racial progress because they tend to spontaneously adopt different reference frames for assessing progress. Specifically, we hypothesized that when they assessed racial progress in the unframed condition White participants would spontaneously focus on comparisons with the past, whereas ethnic minority participants would spontaneously focus their comparisons on some ideal standard. Consistent with the hypothesis that the differences in White and ethnic minority assessments of racial progress are due to differences in spontaneous framing, simple effects tests revealed significant racial differences in assessments of progress only in the unframed condition, $F(1, 78) = 5.97$, $p < .05$. There were no significant differences in White and ethnic minority participants’ assessments of racial progress in the where we should be, $F(1, 78) = 2.68$, $p > .1$, and the where we were conditions, $F < 1$.

The data, summarized in Figure 2, also supported our specific hypotheses about how White and ethnic minority participants would spontaneously frame the assessment of racial progress. White participants’ assessments of racial progress differed by framing condition, $F(2, 78) = 11.18$, $p < .01$. Consistent with the hypothesis that White participants spontaneously focus on the past, their assessments in the where we were condition did not significantly differ from those in the unframed condition, $F < 1$. However, White participants’ assessments in the where we should be condition did differ significantly from those in the unframed, $F(1, 78) = 12.70$, $p < .01$, and where we were conditions, $F(1, 78) = 15.57$, $p < .01$ (see Figure 2).

Ethnic minority participants’ assessments of racial progress differed marginally by framing condition, $F(2, 78) = 2.44$, $p < .1$. Consistent with our hypothesis that ethnic minorities spontaneously focus their comparisons on an ideal standard of equality, their assessments in the where we should be condition did not significantly differ from those in the unframed condition, $F < 1$. However, ethnic minority participants’ assessments in the where we were condition were marginally greater than those in the unframed, $F(1, 78) = 3.72$, $p < .1$, and where we should be conditions, $F(1, 78) = 3.95$, $p = .05$ (see Figure 2).

The hypothesis that White Americans anchor their judgments of progress toward racial equality on comparisons with past conditions while ethnic minorities anchor their judgments on comparisons with ideal stan-

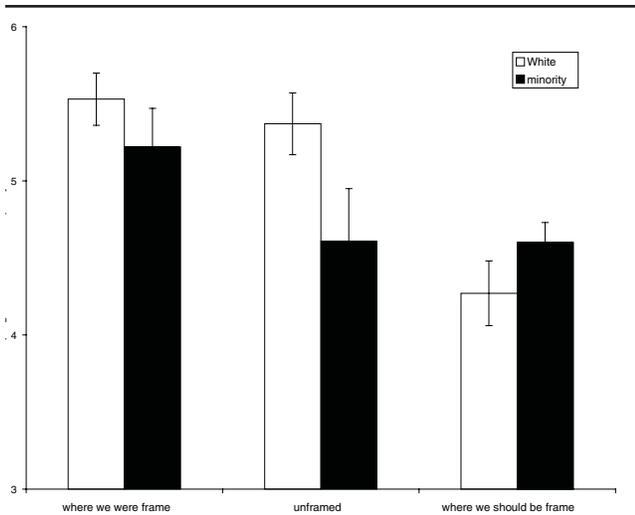


Figure 2 Means and standard errors of judgments of progress toward racial equality by White and ethnic minority participants in the unframed, where we were, and where we should be conditions in Study 3.

dards of racial equality received correlational support in Study 1 and experimental support in Studies 2 and 3. Studies 1 through 3 also supported the hypothesis that this difference in reference points accounts for differences in the groups' global assessments of the magnitude of racial progress. If the tendency to anchor on different reference points is a cause of the gap in White and ethnic minority perceptions of racial progress, then this gap should be affected by manipulations that typically strengthen or dampen anchoring effects. This implication is tested in Study 4.

STUDY 4

We contend that a proper assessment of progress toward a goal must compare present conditions to two critical reference points: the starting point and the endpoint. However, information processing limitations may make it difficult to perform these two critical comparisons simultaneously. More likely, each comparison is made sequentially, and then the results are integrated into a final global assessment of goal progress. Judgments of goal progress may thus resemble an anchoring-and-adjustment process (Epley & Gilovich, 2002; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974) in which people begin by anchoring on an assessment of distance from one of the two critical reference points and then adjust this initial assessment to take into account distance from the remaining reference point. Judgments that depend on sequential mental operations are vulnerable to disruptions that interfere with the completion of later stages of the sequence (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). When people have insufficient time, ability, or motivation to complete subsequent stages of the sequential process, judgments

tend to remain anchored on the output of earlier stages.

The results of the previous studies suggest that White Americans tend to anchor their judgments of racial progress on an assessment of distance from past conditions while ethnic minorities anchor their judgments on an assessment of distance from full racial equality. If the groups start by anchoring on these different reference points and only subsequently adjust their initial assessments to take into account distance from the other critical reference point, then their final assessments of racial progress should tend to diverge most strongly when their capacity or motivation to complete the secondary adjustment stage is limited. We tested this prediction in the present study by manipulating the time participants could devote to assessing racial progress. Past research suggests that judgments under time pressure tend to remain close to an initial anchor point, whereas allowing time to reflect leads to greater adjustment away from that anchor (Epley, Keysar, van Boven, & Gilovich, 2004). We predicted that when participants were instructed to judge progress quickly, the anchoring effect would be enhanced and White and ethnic minority judgments would consequently diverge. By contrast, when participants were given ample time and encouragement to reflect carefully on the issue, we expected the anchoring effect to diminish.

Method

Participants. In Study 4, 36 White (55.6% female) and 36 ethnic minority (33.3% female) Yale students participated. The ethnic minority participants included 14 Black students, 10 Hispanic/Latino students, and 12 students of Asian descent. Participants received \$5 in exchange for their participation.

Procedure. Participants were assigned to one of three conditions: the control, reflexive, and reflective conditions. In the reflexive condition, participants were instructed to respond to questions about racial progress as quickly as possible. Participants were instructed to circle the response on each scale that best matched their immediate, initial reaction to the question. They were instructed to take no more than a few seconds to answer each question and to resist the urge to edit their responses to reflect any additional considerations beyond their immediate assessment. By contrast, in the reflective condition participants were instructed to reflect on the issues for a few minutes before circling a response to each question. They were instructed to circle the response on each scale that best matched their opinion after a period of thoughtful reflection. In the control condition, participants merely answered the questions about racial progress without any additional instructions to respond quickly or more thoughtfully.

After reading these instructions about the manner in which they were to respond, participants then answered the same two questions about progress toward equality of opportunity for racial minorities that were used in Study 3. Responses to these two questions about progress toward racial equality were significantly correlated, $r(70) = .62, p < .001$, and so were averaged together for a composite measure of perceived racial progress.

Results/Discussion

We first submitted ratings of progress toward equality of opportunity to a 2 (race: White vs. ethnic minority) \times 2 (sex: male vs. female) \times 3 (condition: control vs. reflexive vs. reflective) ANOVA, obtaining a marginally significant main effect of race, $F(1, 60) = 3.93, p = .052$, which was qualified by the predicted Race \times Condition interaction, $F(2, 60) = 4.09, p < .05$. There was also an unpredicted but significant Sex \times Condition interaction, $F(2, 60) = 5.14, p < .01$.¹

We hypothesized that when participants' judgments were rushed, the gap in White and ethnic minority perceptions of racial progress would be exacerbated. By contrast, we hypothesized that the encouragement to think carefully in the reflective condition would reduce the impact of the tendency of White and ethnic minority Americans to anchor on different reference points and thereby decrease racial differences in assessments of progress. As predicted, White participants perceived significantly greater progress toward equality than ethnic minority participants in the reflexive condition, $F(1, 60) = 9.02, p < .01$, but not the control, $F(1, 60) = 2.04, p > .1$, or reflective conditions, $F < 1$ (see Figure 3). Surprisingly, the pattern of means for White and ethnic minority participants in the reflective condition appears to have reversed, though nonsignificantly. It is possible that the instructions to reflect further led participants to overadjust their judgments away from their initial anchors.

Additional simple effects tests revealed that White participants' judgments of progress marginally differed by condition, $F(2, 60) = 2.60, p < .1$. Specifically, White participants' judgments in the reflective condition significantly differed from those in the reflexive, $F(1, 60) = 5.28, p < .05$, and control conditions, $F(1, 60) = 4.83, p < .05$. However, White judgments in the reflexive and control conditions did not significantly differ, $F < 1$. Ethnic minority participants' judgments did not differ overall by condition, $F(2, 60) = 2.08, p > .1$. Although the reflexive condition was the only condition in which significant racial differences emerged, the simple effects tests revealed that the pattern of judgments in the reflexive condition did not differ from those in the control condition. It was the pattern of judgments in the reflective condition that differed from the other conditions.

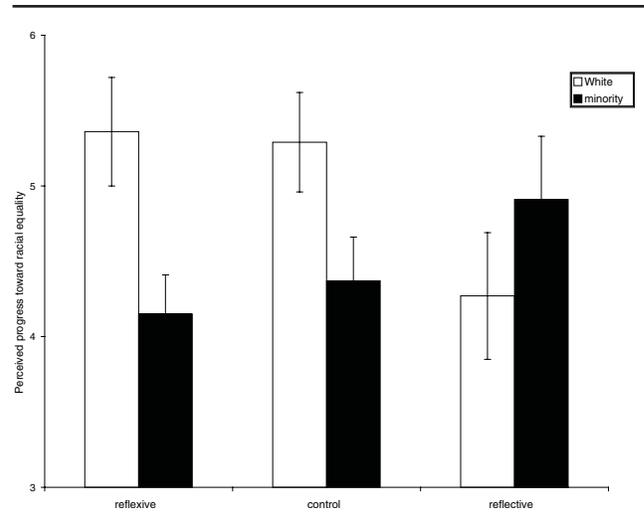


Figure 3 Means and standard errors of judgments of progress toward racial equality by White and ethnic minority participants in the control, reflexive, and reflective judgment conditions in Study 4.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Assessing public opinion about President Lincoln's antislavery efforts, Frederick Douglass wrote,

Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined. (Foner, 1950-1955, p. 316)

It seems that different perspectives on racial equality influenced assessments of the pace of progress as much in Lincoln's time as they do today. The results of Studies 1 through 3 supported the hypothesis that White and ethnic minority Americans' assessments of progress toward racial equality differ because they tend to use different reference points as comparison standards to assess progress. Like the abolitionists of Lincoln's time, ethnic minorities today tend to use a relatively high standard, assessing progress with respect to what racial conditions ideally should be. From this perspective, the pace of progress does indeed seem "slow" and "tardy." In contrast, White Americans today appear to use a lower standard, assessing progress with respect to what racial conditions were like in the past. From this perspective, the pace of progress can seem "swift" and "radical." Each group's assessment of progress appears perfectly reasonable when one considers the frame of reference each uses. Indeed, in Studies 2 and 3 these groups' assessments of progress converged when they were primed to use a common reference point. The tendency of White Americans to perceive greater racial progress than ethnic minorities was also eliminated in Study 4 when partic-

ipants were instructed to reflect more extensively on the topic before making their judgments, presumably because this procedure stimulated the groups to move beyond their initial perspectives and adjust their judgments to take into account a different reference point.

If the gap in White and ethnic minority perceptions of racial progress is indeed due to differences in the reference points on which each group spontaneously anchors when assessing progress, then we might expect similar perception gaps for other groups that are likely to differ in the most accessible reference point for judging racial progress. Specifically, younger respondents should be more likely to focus on the discrepancy between current racial conditions and ideals of racial equality when judging racial progress because their lack of firsthand knowledge of past racial conditions should make the past a less feasible reference point for judging progress than it is for older respondents. If this is true, then older respondents ought to perceive greater racial progress than younger respondents. We tested this prediction using data from the 1998 General Social Survey (Davis et al., 2000) in which respondents were asked to judge whether conditions for Blacks in America had improved over the years. As predicted, 59.1% of respondents aged 18 to 40 years judged that conditions for Blacks had improved, compared to 67.2% of those aged 41 to 60 years and 78.2% of those aged 61 and older.

Implications for Survey Research and Political Conflict

Recently, several scholars and journalists have suggested that an increasing perception gap divides White and Black Americans' opinions on social conditions. We have been told that America is on its way toward becoming "two nations" (Hacker, 1992) and "a country of strangers" (Shipler, 1997). The O. J. Simpson trial is often cited as a particularly dramatic example where White and Black Americans' perceptions of the same event diverged (Crenshaw, 1997). In addition to such anecdotal evidence, several carefully designed, nationally representative opinion surveys have documented significant divergences in White and ethnic minority perceptions of social conditions, including beliefs about racial stratification and unequal opportunities to pursue the American dream (Hochschild, 1995), beliefs about the need and desirability of government programs to remedy racial inequalities (Kinder & Sanders, 1996), and beliefs about the underlying causes of persisting inequalities (Kluegel & Smith, 1982, 1986; Sigelman & Welch, 1991).

Our research suggests that some racial gaps in perceptions of social conditions may not be as wide as they initially appear. Years ago, Asch (1940) pointed out that an apparent difference in attitudes may be due to a difference in "the object of judgment" rather than "judgment

of the object" (p. 458). Consistent with Asch, we find that when White and ethnic minority Americans rate the magnitude of racial progress differently, they are not answering the same question differently. Rather, they are answering two different questions. White Americans tend to assess how much progress we've made compared to the past while ethnic minorities tend to assess how much progress we've made compared to where we should be. When the question of racial progress is framed the same for Whites and ethnic minorities, the gap in their perceptions is reduced or eliminated.

These results have implications for the design of opinion surveys. Specifically, they suggest that the wording of questions should provide a clear frame of reference if researchers wish to ensure that groups are making the same judgment. When the survey question is nonspecific and permits respondents to construct their own interpretation, responses will differ based on the idiosyncratic interpretations respondents apply (Clark & Schober, 1992; Schwarz, Groves, & Schuman, 1998). We found that when participants were asked to judge progress toward racial equality without a clear reference frame, White and ethnic minority participants tended to anchor on different reference points and their judgments consequently diverged. However, we found that this divergence was a function of the ambiguous situation because when a common reference frame was specified, their judgments converged. These results thus reinforce the point that when researchers interpret the results of surveys they need to be attentive to ambiguities in the phrasing of survey questions (Schuman & Presser, 1981). Changes in answers over time and differences between groups may be due to different reference frames that respondents spontaneously adopt to disambiguate the survey questions and not true differences in opinion.

The argument that racial differences in perceptions of progress are exaggerated by survey questions lacking a clear reference point does not necessarily entail that this phenomenon is a mere artifact of survey methodology. In everyday conversation, the reference frames people use to judge racial progress may not be precisely and explicitly stated, and racial differences in perceptions of racial progress may thus be overestimated in everyday life just as they have been in survey research. Moreover, conflict may not end even when White and ethnic minority acquaintances discover that their disagreements about racial progress boil down to differences in framing. Research on naïve realism shows that people tend to assume that their own way of construing an issue is the natural, rational construal and any alternative construals are assumed to be irrational or self-serving (Ross & Ward, 1995). Thus, if White and ethnic minority acquaintances discover that their divergent assessments

of racial progress stem from a simple difference in framing, they may then accuse each other of bias for privileging the wrong reference point and giving insufficient consideration to what seems the more obvious reference point for judging progress.

*Insights Into Goal Commitment of
White and Ethnic Minority Americans*

Although the failure to take into account differences in question framing may exaggerate disagreements between Whites and ethnic minorities, it may also be psychologically revealing that these groups tend to spontaneously anchor on different reference points when assessing racial progress. In Studies 2 and 3, White participants' assessments of racial progress in the unframed condition were not significantly different from those in the condition highlighting the reference point of past racial conditions, but their assessments of progress in both conditions were significantly greater than those in the condition highlighting the end goal of full racial equality. These results suggest that White Americans tend to spontaneously think about racial progress as movement away from racial injustices of the past instead of thinking of progress as movement toward a system of full racial equality. In contrast, ethnic minorities seem to spontaneously think about racial progress as movement toward fully realized racial equality, and their assessments of progress accordingly take into account the distance we have yet to traverse to reach that goal.

The difference in spontaneous framing of the question of racial progress may be due to differences in how White and ethnic minority Americans represent the goal of racial equality. Whites and ethnic minorities may not differ in endorsement of the goal of racial equality. However, the two groups may differ in the degree of psychological investment in this goal. For ethnic minorities, racial equality may be a more personally involving, urgent goal, related to securing long-term well-being. Brodscholl and Higgins (2003) showed that people assess progress toward such security goals by focusing on the distance remaining between one's current position and the goal. In contrast, for many White Americans, the goal of racial equality may be a less urgent aspiration, something they would like to achieve but not the kind of pressing necessity it is for many ethnic minorities. Brodscholl and Higgins showed that people assess progress toward such nurturance goals by focusing on the distance one has moved toward the goal from one's starting point.

Elsewhere we have shown that White Americans tend to construe progress toward racial equality in terms of their group's losses of power and privileges while ethnic minorities tend to construe progress in terms of their group's gains (Eibach & Keegan, 2005). This difference

in focus on losses versus gains accounts for the tendency of White Americans to judge that we have made greater progress toward racial equality. We explain this result by drawing on Kahneman and Tversky's (1984) concept of loss aversion, the tendency of losses to have a greater subjective impact than objectively equivalent gains. The differential focus on White losses versus ethnic minority gains may also help explain differences in reference points documented in the present studies. If White Americans tend to focus on their group's losses when assessing progress toward equality, then this may lead them to think about the past when their power and privileges were intact. By contrast, the gain focus of ethnic minorities may direct their attention to the goals they are striving toward, focusing their thoughts not on where we were but rather on where we should be.

Differences in reference points for judging progress toward racial equality thus may be a window into the psychological forces that polarize groups as they pursue common egalitarian goals with different degrees of investment and consequently, different degrees of satisfaction with the pace of progress. Cumulatively, our results reinforce the point that a balanced assessment of progress needs to consider both the distance we have come and the distance that remains as we travel along the path to a truly egalitarian community. If we remember to "keep our eyes on the prize," our gratification about the progress we've already made will not distract us from seeing the progress yet to be achieved.

NOTE

1. Simple effects tests examined this unpredicted interaction between sex and condition. In the control condition, women perceived significantly greater racial progress ($M = 5.50$) than men ($M = 4.39$), $F(1, 60) = 5.19, p < .05$. By contrast, in the reflexive condition men perceived marginally greater progress ($M = 5.13$) than women ($M = 4.17$), $F(1, 60) = 3.76, p < .1$. Finally, there were no significant gender differences in perceptions of progress in the reflective condition (men's $M = 4.96$; women's $M = 4.34$), $F(1, 60) = 1.59, p > .1$. The significant interaction of sex and condition in the present study is anomalous given that sex of participants did not yield any main or interactive effects in the preceding studies, except for a marginally significant main effect in Study 2. Given that sex effects on these measures do not appear to be reliable across samples and the interaction between sex and condition in the present study does not bear on our central hypothesis, we will not speculate about the interpretation of this interaction.

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