Research Article

AVERSIVE RACISM AND SELECTION DECISIONS: 1989 and 1999

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Abstract—*The present study investigated differences over a 10-year period in whites' self-reported racial prejudice and their bias in selection decisions involving black and white candidates for employment. We examined the hypothesis, derived from the aversive-racism framework, that although overt expressions of prejudice may decline significantly across time, subtle manifestations of bias may persist. Consistent with this hypothesis, self-reported prejudice was lower in 1998–1999 than it was in 1988–1989, and at both time periods, white participants did not discriminate against black relative to white candidates when the candidates' qualifications were clearly strong or weak, but they did discriminate when the appropriate decision was more ambiguous. Theoretical and practical implications are considered.*

In part because of changing norms and the Civil Rights Act and other legislative interventions that have made discrimination not simply immoral but also illegal, overt expressions of prejudice have declined significantly over the past 35 years (Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997). Discrimination, however, continues to exist and affect the lives of people of color and women in significant ways (Hacker, 1995). What accounts for this discrepancy? One possibility is that it represents a change in the nature of racial prejudice. Contemporary forms of prejudice may be less conscious and more subtle than the overt, traditional form (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Sears, van Laar, Carillo, & Kosterman, 1997). For these more subtle forms of prejudice, discrimination is expressed in indirect and rationalizable ways, but the consequences of these actions (e.g., the restriction of economic opportunity) may be as significant for people of color and as pernicious as the consequences of the traditional, overt form of discrimination (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998).

In the present research, we examined the issue of changes in expressed prejudice and discrimination from the perspective of one modern form of prejudice, aversive racism. Aversive racism (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986) is hypothesized to characterize the racial attitudes of many whites who endorse egalitarian values, who regard themselves as nonprejudiced, but who discriminate in subtle, rationalizable ways. Specifically, the present research explored both the overt expression of racial attitudes and discrimination in simulated employment decisions for two samples across a 10-year period, from 1988–1989 to 1998–1999.

According to the aversive-racism perspective, many people who explicitly support egalitarian principles and believe themselves to be nonprejudiced also unconsciously harbor negative feelings and beliefs about blacks and other historically disadvantaged groups. Aversive racists thus experience ambivalence between their egalitarian beliefs and their negative feelings toward blacks. In contrast to the traditional emphasis on the psychopathological aspects of prejudice, the aversive-racism framework suggests that biases related to normal cognitive, motivational, and sociocultural processes may predispose a person to develop negative racial feelings (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). Nevertheless, egalitarian traditions and norms are potent forces promoting racial equality (e.g., Kluegel & Smith, 1986). As a consequence of these widespread influences promoting both negative feelings and egalitarian beliefs, aversive racism is presumed to characterize the racial attitudes of a substantial portion of well-educated and liberal whites in the United States (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986).

The aversive-racism framework further suggests that contemporary racial bias is expressed in indirect ways that do not threaten the aversive racist's nonprejudiced self-image. Because aversive racists consciously recognize and endorse egalitarian values, they will not discriminate in situations in which they recognize that discrimination would be obvious to others and themselves—for example, when the appropriate response is clearly dictated. However, because aversive racists do possess negative feelings, often unconsciously, discrimination occurs when bias is not obvious or can be rationalized on the basis of some factor other than race. We have found support for this framework across a range of experimental paradigms (see Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986).

Because the negative consequences of aversive racism are expressed in ways that are not easily recognizable (by oneself, as well as by others) as racial bias, traditional techniques for eliminating bias by emphasizing the immorality of prejudice and illegality of discrimination are not effective for combating contemporary racism: "Aversive racists recognize prejudice is bad, but they do not recognize that they are prejudiced . . . . Like a virus that has mutated, racism has also evolved into different forms that are more difficult not only to recognize but also to combat" (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998, p. 25). Thus, direct and overt expressions of prejudice, such as self-reported attitudes, are more amenable to change and pressures of increasingly egalitarian norms (Kluegel & Smith, 1986) than are indirect manifestations of racism because they are more easily recognized as racial biases.

The present research was designed to extend the research on aversive racism by exploring changes, over a 10-year period, in expressed racial attitudes and patterns of discrimination in hiring recommendations for a black or white candidate for a position as a peer counselor. Two measures were taken from two comparable student samples 10 years apart. One measure was self-reported racial prejudice. The other measure involved decisions in a simulated employment context. Participants were asked to use interview excerpts to evaluate candidates for a new program for peer counseling at their university. Three profiles were developed: One reflected clearly strong qualifications (pretested as being accepted 85–90% of the time across two samples), one represented clearly weak qualifications (pretested as being accepted 10–20% of the time), and the third involved marginally acceptable but ambiguous qualifications (pretested as being accepted about 50–65% of the time). Participants evaluated a single candidate

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who was identifiable as black or white from information in the excerpt.

With respect to expressed racial attitudes, we predicted, on the basis of continued emphasis on egalitarian values in the United States (Schuman et al., 1997), that the general trend toward the expression of less prejudiced attitudes (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998; Schuman et al., 1997) would be reflected across our two samples. Whereas expressed prejudice was expected to decline, we hypothesized that subtle, covert forms of discrimination would persist. Specifically, we predicted, on the basis of previous work on aversive racism as well as work showing that racial stereotypes are most influential in ambiguous situations (see Fiske, 1998), that discrimination against black applicants would occur when the match between the candidate's qualifications and the position criteria was unclear—in the ambiguous-qualifications condition—but not when candidates were clearly well qualified or unqualified for the position.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 194 undergraduates at a Northeastern liberal arts college during the 1988–1989 academic year ($n = 112$; 48 white male and 64 white female undergraduates) or the 1998–1999 academic year ($n = 82$; 34 white male and 48 white female undergraduates). Participants were enrolled in the university's introductory psychology class, and admissions data indicated that the student populations were scholastically (e.g., standardized-test scores, high school grades) and demographically (e.g., geographical, sex, and racial distributions; socioeconomic status) comparable across the two time periods. Involvement in the study partially satisfied one option for a course requirement. Self-reported prejudice scores were available for 77% ($n = 86$) of participants in 1988–1989 and 87% ($n = 71$) of participants in 1998–1999.

Procedure

During mass pretesting sessions, participants were administered, along with several other surveys, questionnaires assessing their racial attitudes. For the present study, we examined responses to three racial-attitude items (Weigel & Howes, 1985) that were the same at both testing periods: "Blacks shouldn't push themselves where they are not wanted," "I would probably feel somewhat self-conscious dancing with a black person in a public place," and "I would mind it if a black family with about the same income and education as my own would move next door to my home." Responses were on a scale from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*) (Cronbach's alpha = .71 overall).

Later, during an experimental session, participants (from 1 to 8 per session) were informed that they would be asked questions about "the desirability and feasibility of a peer counseling program and the qualities of personnel." They were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 3 (qualifications: clearly strong, ambiguous, clearly weak) × 2 (race of candidate) design. Thirty to 34 participants were assigned to each condition. After reading a 120-word description of an ostensibly new program, each participant was asked to evaluate a candidate from a previous round of applicants on the basis of interview excerpts. These excerpts were systematically varied to manipulate the strength of the candidate's qualifications. For the candidate with strong qualifications, leadership experiences included being co-captain of the swim team in high school and being a member of the disciplinary board in college; his self-description was "sensitive, intelligent, and relaxed." In response to the question "If a female student came to you because she was pregnant, what would you do?" this candidate was quoted as saying, "Explain options to her and ask her if she would like the telephone number of the health center." For the candidate with ambiguous qualifications, the candidate's leadership experiences included only being co-captain of the swim team in high school; his self-description was "sensitive, intelligent, and emotional." In response to the question about the female student who might be pregnant, this candidate said, "Ask her if she would like the telephone number of the health center." For the candidate with weak qualifications, the leadership experiences included being co-captain of the chess team in high school; his self-description was "independent, forthright, and intense." This candidate's response to the question about the student's pregnancy was, "Tell her that is too personal and that she must talk with her parents."

The race of the applicant was varied by the list of his activities. Black candidates listed membership in the Black Student Union, whereas white students listed fraternity membership (which was almost exclusively white on campus).

The final versions of the three "interview excerpts" were pretested with 20 undergraduate students from each time period. They were given all three excerpts, in random order and without racially identifying information. Undergraduates at both time periods clearly distinguished among strong, ambiguous, and weak qualifications. The strongly qualified candidate was recommended for the peer counselor program by 85% and 90% of the pretest participants at the two time periods, respectively; the candidate with ambiguous qualifications was recommended by 50% and 65% of these participants; and the candidate with weak qualifications was recommended by 20% and 10% of these students.

In the main study, students evaluated the candidates by rating them on a series of scales. The first item assessed perceptions of whether the candidate was qualified for the position, on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*extremely*); this item served as a check on the manipulation of the interview excerpts. The last two items represented the primary dependent measures. They asked whether participants would recommend the candidate for the position (yes or no) and how strongly they would recommend the candidate (on a scale from 1, *not at all*, to 10, *very strongly*). On the last page of the booklet, participants read, "When reading a resumé or transcript, people often form a visual image of a person. Based on the information provided, what image of the applicant have you formed?" A question about the candidate's race was included among other items about his imagined physical characteristics.

RESULTS

The manipulations of race and qualifications were effective. Participants identified the candidate as being white 100% of the time in the white-candidate condition and as being black 97% of the time in the black-candidate condition. Preliminary analyses of the yes/no recommendations and their strength revealed no systematic effects for the sex of the participant. Consequently, this factor was not included

in subsequent analyses. A 3 (qualifications: clearly strong, ambiguous, clearly weak) × 2 (race of candidate) × 2 (time: 1988–1989, 1998–1999) analysis of variance demonstrated the expected main effect of manipulated qualifications on perceived qualifications, $F(1, 182) = 62.92$, $p < .001$ (Ms = 7.21 vs. 6.38 vs. 3.98; see Table 1). This main effect was uncomplicated by any interactions. Each of the three qualifications conditions differed significantly from the other two according to Scheffé post hoc tests.

The 3 × 2 × 2 analysis of variance performed on the strength of recommendations revealed the anticipated main effect for qualifications, $F(1, 182) = 81.15$, $p < .001$ (see Table 1). Participants recommended candidates in the strong-qualifications condition most highly ($M = 6.85$), candidates in the ambiguous-qualifications condition next most highly ($M = 5.36$), and those in the weak-qualifications condition least highly ($M = 3.15$). Scheffé tests demonstrated that these means differed significantly from each other. There was no main effect for the candidate's race ($F < 1$), but the predicted Qualifications × Race of Candidate interaction was obtained, $F(2, 182) = 6.08$, $p < .003$. Planned comparisons revealed no significant difference in the strength of recommendations for black and white candidates who had strong qualifications (Ms = 7.18 vs. 6.52, $p > .10$) or who had weak qualifications (Ms = 3.50 vs. 2.81, $p > .10$). However, as predicted, ambiguously qualified black candidates were recommended significantly less strongly than were comparable white candidates (Ms = 4.82 vs. 5.91), $t(64) = 2.79$, $p < .001$. In addition, Scheffé tests comparing the strengths of participants' recommendations revealed that when the applicant was white, participants responded to ambiguous qualifications more as if these qualifications were strong (difference between means = 0.61, n.s.; Table 1) than as if they were weak (difference = 3.10, $p < .05$). When the applicant was black, however, participants reacted to ambiguous qualifications more like weak qualifications (difference between means = 1.32, n.s.) than like strong qualifications (difference = 2.36, $p < .05$).

Moreover, the Qualifications × Race of Candidate interaction was comparable across participants in the 1988–1989 and the 1998–1999 samples: The Qualifications × Race of Candidate × Time interaction did not approach significance, $F(2, 182) = 0.61$, $p > .54$. The Qualifications × Race of Candidate interaction was marginally significant for participants in 1988–1989, $F(2, 106) = 2.54$, $p < .083$; it was significant for participants in the 1998–1999 sample alone, $F(2, 76) = 3.94$, $p < .024$ (see Table 1).

Log-linear analyses, paralleling those for the strength of recommendations, were conducted on the dichotomous (yes/no) recommendation measure. These analyses yielded the same pattern of results. Overall, candidates in the strong-qualifications condition were recommended most frequently (88%), those in the ambiguous-qualifications condition were recommended next most frequently (61%), and those in the weak-qualifications condition were recommended least frequently (10%), $\chi^2(2, N = 194) = 80.37$, $p < .001$. The Qualifications × Race of Candidate interaction was also obtained, $\chi^2(2, N = 194) = 6.75$, $p < .035$. Black and white candidates were recommended equivalently often in the strong-qualifications (91% vs. 85%) and weak-qualifications (13% vs. 6%) conditions (ps > .50), but blacks were recommended less often than whites in the ambiguous-qualifications condition (45% vs. 76%), $\chi^2(1, N = 66) = 6.35$, $p < .012$. Again, the interaction was not moderated by the time period in which the data were collected; the three-way interaction did not approach significance ($p > .50$). Taken together, the results for the strength of recommendations and the yes/no measure offer support for the hypotheses.

For the participants for whom prejudice scores were available, the 3 (qualifications) × 2 (race of candidate) × 2 (time: 1988–1989, 1998–1999) analysis of variance demonstrated only a main effect for time, $F(1, 145) = 8.31$, $p < .005$. As expected, participants in 1988–1989 had higher prejudice scores than those in 1998–1999 (Ms = 1.84 vs. 1.54). In addition, for both ratings of qualifications and recommendations, 3 × 2 × 2 × 2 (prejudice) analyses of variance, classifying participants in the two samples as high or low in prejudice on the basis of median splits, were performed. There were no significant effects for prejudice qualifying the results reported earlier. However, overall, participants higher in prejudice (as a continuous variable) recommended black candidates less strongly than participants lower in

Table 1. *Perceived qualifications and candidate recommendations as a function of the candidate's qualifications and race*

Condition	Perceived qualifications[a]			Strength of recommendation[a]			Percentage recommended		
	1988–1989	1998–1999	Both	1988–1989	1998–1999	Both	1988–1989	1998–1999	Both
Clearly strong qualifications									
White candidate	7.32	6.93	7.15	6.74	6.21	6.52	89	79	85
	(1.46)	(2.06)	(1.72)	(1.41)	(2.09)	(1.72)			
Black candidate	7.79	6.60	7.27	7.32	7.00	7.18	95	87	91
	(1.23)	(1.77)	(1.58)	(1.67)	(1.60)	(1.62)			
Ambiguous qualifications									
White candidate	6.45	5.85	6.21	6.05	5.69	5.91	75	77	76
	(1.11)	(1.68)	(1.36)	(1.73)	(1.60)	(1.67)			
Black candidate	6.72	6.33	6.55	5.06	4.53	4.82	50	40	45
	(1.32)	(1.59)	(1.44)	(1.39)	(1.64)	(1.51)			
Clearly weak qualifications									
White candidate	3.90	3.67	3.81	3.05	2.42	2.81	5	8	6
	(2.00)	(2.27)	(2.07)	(1.65)	(1.68)	(1.66)			
Black candidate	4.24	4.08	4.17	3.29	3.77	3.50	12	15	13
	(1.75)	(2.06)	(1.86)	(1.69)	(1.69)	(1.68)			

[a]Table entries are means, with standard deviations in parentheses. Responses were on a scale from 1 (*not at all qualified* or *not at all recommended*) to 10 (*extremely qualified* or *very strongly recommended*).

prejudice, $r(79) = -.24$, $p < .05$. The correlation between prejudice and strength of recommendation was nonsignificant for white applicants, $r(74) = .05$, $p > .50$.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the pattern of results supports the hypothesis derived from the aversive-racism framework. As predicted from that framework, and consistent with other theories of modern racism (e.g., McConahay, 1986) and the influence of stereotyping (Fiske, 1998), bias against blacks in simulated hiring decisions was manifested primarily when a candidate's qualifications for the position were ambiguous. When a black candidate's credentials clearly qualified him for the position, or when his credentials clearly were not appropriate, there was no discrimination against him. Moreover, as expected, self-reported expressions of prejudice declined significantly across the 10-year period. Taken together, these contrasting trends for self-reported prejudice and discrimination in simulated employment decisions support our hypothesis that the development of contemporary forms of prejudice, such as aversive racism, may account—at least in part—for the persistence of racial disparities in society despite significant decreases in expressed racial prejudice and stereotypes. However, this finding does not imply that old-fashioned racism is no longer a problem. In fact, the overall negative correlation between expressed prejudice and recommendations for black candidates suggests that traditional racism is a force that still exists and that can operate independently of contemporary forms of racism.

One potential alternative explanation for the results of the employment decision is that the credentials in the clear-qualifications condition were so extreme that ceiling and floor effects suppressed the variance in responses and reduced the likelihood of obtaining differences as a function of the candidate's race. Although plausible, this explanation is not supported empirically. The strength-of-recommendation measure could range from 1 to 10, and the means in the strong-qualifications condition (6.52 for white candidates and 7.18 for black candidates) and the weak-qualifications condition (2.81 for white candidates and 3.50 for black candidates) did not closely approach these scale endpoints. This restricted-range interpretation would also suggest that the within-condition standard deviations would be substantially lower in the clear-qualifications conditions than in the ambiguous-qualifications condition. As illustrated in Table 1, this was not the case. The standard deviations were similar for both white candidates (1.72 and 1.66 vs. 1.67) and black candidates (1.62 and 1.68 vs. 1.51); there was no statistical evidence of heterogeneity of within-group variances. Thus, this extremity explanation cannot readily account for the obtained pattern of results.

In addition, although we had predicted, on the basis of the ambiguity versus clarity of appropriate decisions, that discrimination against blacks would be unlikely to occur when qualifications were either clearly weak or clearly strong, other perspectives could suggest that bias would occur in these conditions. In the weak-qualifications condition, the black candidate's clear lack of credentials could have provided an ostensibly nonracial justification for particularly negative evaluations. Although a floor effect offers one potential explanation for the lack of difference in this condition, as we noted earlier, the within-cell standard deviations do not readily support this interpretation. Another possibility is that because the black candidate did not display obviously negative qualities, but rather insufficiently positive ones, excessive devaluation of this candidate was difficult to rationalize. Contemporary racism is hypothesized to involve sympathy for blacks (Katz, Wackenhut, & Hass, 1986), as well as cautiousness by whites about being too negative in evaluations of blacks (and thus appearing biased); either or both of these factors could have limited the negativity of response to blacks when qualifications were weak and could account for the slightly more positive response to black than to white candidates in this condition (see Table 1). In addition, sympathy and concerns about being too harsh in evaluations are particularly likely to occur when the relevance to the evaluator and the challenge to the status quo are minimal (see Dovidio & Gaertner, 1996; McConahay, 1986). Participants were not led to believe that their responses would directly influence the outcome of the particular candidate's application in the current study. Under conditions of greater relevance to the evaluator, greater bias toward either highly qualified or underqualified blacks may occur as a function of direct or symbolic threats (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1996).

The overall pattern of results obtained in the present study also helps to illuminate some of the processes underlying the effects of aversive racism. In particular, participants' ratings of the candidates' qualifications were not directly influenced by race: Participants rated the objective qualifications of blacks and whites equivalently. The effect of race seemed to occur not in how the qualifications were perceived, but in how they were considered and weighed in the recommendation decisions. We (Gaertner et al., 1997) have proposed, for example, that the effects of aversive racism may be rooted substantially in intergroup biases based on social categorization processes. These biases reflect in-group favoritism as well as out-group derogation. Along these lines, Hewstone (1990) found that people tend to judge a potentially negative behavior as more negative and intentional, and are more likely to attribute the behavior to the person's personality, when the behavior is performed by an out-group member than when it is performed by an in-group member. Thus, when given latitude for interpretation, as in the ambiguous-qualifications condition, whites may give white candidates the "benefit of the doubt," a benefit that is not extended to out-group members (i.e., to black candidates). As a consequence, as demonstrated in the present study, moderate qualifications are responded to as if they were strong qualifications when the candidate is white, but as if they were weak qualifications when the candidate is black.

The subtle, rationalizable type of bias demonstrated in the present study, which is manifested in terms of in-group favoritism, can pose unique challenges to the legal system. As Krieger (1998) observed, "Title VII is poorly equipped to control prejudice resulting from in-group favoritism" (p. 1325). Identifying the existence and persistence of subtle bias associated with aversive racism can thus help to demonstrate that discrimination is not "a thing of the past" and can encourage renewed efforts to develop techniques to combat contemporary racial bias.

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