

Hip-Hop and Unconscious Racism

Andrew Rojecki
Associate Professor
Department of Communication
University of Illinois at Chicago
312.996.4460
arojecki@uic.edu

Testimony provided to the Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection
Hearing: From Imus to Industry: The Business of Stereotypes and Degrading Images.
House Committee on Energy and Commerce, September 25, 2007.

The Don Imus affair is the most recent example of a pattern in the way Americans think about race. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s not only changed the legal framework for issues of race, it also changed the way Americans spoke in public about race. In the terms of the social sciences, the norms had changed. It became socially unacceptable for white Americans to give voice to black stereotypes in anger or even in jest. By the early 1990s the term political correctness (PC) had been coined to make fun of an exaggerated sensitivity to personal feelings attached to group identity.

The concept of political correctness is less important for naming a hypocritical repression of speech than for identifying an incomplete transformation. Specifically, a change in public norms has not been accompanied by a change in private attitudes. Political correctness could not exist absent the tensions between what is expected and what is believed or felt. For example large majorities of whites say that blacks should have equal opportunity, but major American cities remain highly segregated (the ten largest at 75 percent), black children continue to get inferior education and medical care, and black unemployment remains twice as high as white.

How do whites explain these differences? In the early 1940s surveys found that majorities of white Americans explained lower black achievement as evidence of intellectual inferiority (Kinder & Sanders, 1996). Today, only a small minority claim that is true (Schuman et al., 1997). The shift in perception from innate, biological differences to social injustice fueled the success of the Civil Rights movement. Unfortunately, it also gave whites license to discount discrimination as an explanation for the difference between black and white achievement.

Majorities of whites now believe that the lesser position of African Americans is due to individual moral failing or flaws in black culture itself (Sears & Henry, 2005). In our own research on the black image in the white mind (Entman & Rojecki, 2000), whites we interviewed spontaneously referred to media images of sexuality and violence that supported their negative views. These images substituted for the absence of sustained contact between whites and blacks, inevitable in a society that remains segregated by race (Massey & Denton, 1993; Mumford Center, 2001). This is especially true among those persons whom we call the ambivalent majority, those whites who are sympathetic to aspirations of black Americans but who are influenced by images that highlight irresponsibility and violence. In short, majorities of white Americans have good intentions but not the settled inner convictions to put their ideals into practice, perhaps because the forms of discrimination routinely experienced by African Americans have become less visible (e.g. Feagin, 1991; Myers & Passion Williamson, 2001).

Social psychologists who study social cognition—how people see and process the social world—explain this ambivalence by invoking the premise that we need simplified mental representations (schemata) to deal with the social world. Schemata are mental shortcuts that allow us to economize on expenditures of brain power. They also distort our perceptions. So powerful are these mental pictures that they may be activated without the person's conscious control or awareness, a phenomenon widely reported by research in a broad range of contexts.

For example, whites take less time to associate traits such as intelligence and kindness for a white face than for a black face because those traits are consistent with their mental representations of whites (see Gaertner & McLaughlin, 1983 for the pioneering study; see also <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>). These experimental results have important real

world implications. In one study (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004) researchers sent resumes, identical except for stereotypically white or black names to employers and found that the Greg or Emily were 50 percent more likely to get callbacks than Jamal or Lakisha. In another, experimenters gave an identical test to black and white college students. In one condition students were told the tests would assess intelligence; in the other students were told the tests would measure a lab problem-solving task. Blacks performed identically in the latter condition but did more poorly when they were told the test measured intelligence (Steele, 1997). In other words, blacks may unconsciously hold same stereotypes as whites and behave accordingly. More alarmingly, experimental research shows that police officers, both white and black, are more likely to shoot at black suspects than white suspects (Correll, et al., 2002).

There is a way out of the implicit attitude bind: consciously resisting the stereotype. Research across a range of disciplines converges on the same result: lessen the power of the stereotype by bringing it out of the unconscious dark into the conscious light. Thus the Willie Horton ad lost its effectiveness when Jesse Jackson made a public issue of its malicious intent (Mendelberg, 2001). Social psychologists find that whites who harbor unconscious stereotypes are able to overcome their influence when they are made aware of them and they have sufficient time to process those mental images. Medical researchers who do brain scan imaging find that the fear centers of the limbic system (sometimes referred to as the lizard brain) are stimulated even among unprejudiced whites when the stimulus is brief--30 milliseconds of a black face (Cunningham et al., 2004). Lengthen the stimulus to half a second and the power of the stereotype is resisted by the conscious prefrontal cortex. This explains in part why police officers who have little time to react are more likely to be influenced by unconscious attitudes.

On the issue of hip-hop music, we know that Don Imus did not coin the phrase he used to describe the Rutgers women's basketball team. It is also clear that he would not have used that phrase had he thought about it for a second or two. That image was planted in his mind through a complex sequence of events that began in a culture of poverty that thrives in the black ghettos of America. Hip-hop is a musical expression of a segment of lived experience that resonates with a significant number of African Americans who grew up under conditions of privation. The lived experiences of African-American life have inspired a range of musical innovation and artistic expression, as in jazz and the blues. Sadness and tragedy are common to the human condition, but in the United States they have been disproportionately experienced by African Americans who have developed musical forms to give artistic expression to their lived experience.

The music industry is always on the hunt for innovative forms of music that may be marketed and sold to the largest audiences. Hip-hop has for over twenty-five years been an immensely popular genre of music, and its largest audience is white. Marketing to that audience follows the path of least resistance: sensational images of sex and violence are easier to package and promote than more thoughtful and critical messages. Thus gangster rap has enjoyed much more commercial success than the more politically oriented conscious rap. DJs use a mix of hip-hop to manage the mood of a club, but gangster rap is catnip to an audience more interested in sexual release than raising political consciousness.

Therein lie the incentives to artists, promoters, industry executives, and white consumers. The music industry offers one of the few paths out of poverty available to African Americans, sex and violence offer proven paths to commercial success, and black experience continues to provide vicarious thrills for white audiences. Today's suburban adolescents will in time move to influential positions within corporate America. The

question this panel needs to address is whether the stream of imagery and language in gangster rap is more or less likely to get Lakisha and Jamal a callback. And if the answer is no, how can the system of incentives be changed to make that more likely.

References

- Bertrand, M. & Mullainathan, S. (2004). Are Emily and Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal? National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper No. 9873.
- Correll, J., Judd, C. M., Park, B., & Wittenbrink, B. (2002). The police officer's dilemma: Using ethnicity to disambiguate potentially threatening individuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 83*: 1314-39.
- Cunningham, W. A., Johnson, M. K., Raye, C. L., Gatenby, C., Gore, J. C., & Banaji M. R. (2004) Separable neural components in the processing of black and white faces. *Psychological Science, 15*: 806-13.
- Entman, R. M., & Rojecki, A. (2000). *The black image in the white mind: Media & race in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Feagin, J. (1991). The Continuing significance of race: Antiblack discrimination in public places. *American Sociological Review, 56*: 101-116.
- Gaertner, S. L., & McLaughlin, J. P. (1983). Racial stereotypes: Associations and ascriptions of positive and negative characteristics. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 44*: 192-203.
- Kinder, D. R., & Sanders, L. M. (1996). *Divided by color: Racial politics and democratic ideals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Massey, D. S., & Denton, N. A. (1993). *American apartheid: Segregation and the making of the Underclass*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Mendelberg, T. (2001). *The race card*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mumford Center. (2001). Ethnic diversity grows, neighborhood integration lags behind. Available online: <http://mumford1.dyndns.org/cen2000/WholePop/WPreport/MumfordReport.pdf>
- Myers, K A., & Passion Williamson, B. S. (2001). Race talk: The perpetuation of racism through private talk. *Race and Society, 4*: 3-26.

Schuman, H., Steeh, C., Bobo, L., & Krysan, M. (1997). *Racial attitudes in America: Trends and interpretations*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Sears, D. O., & Henry, P. J. (2005). Over thirty years later: A contemporary look at symbolic racism and its critics. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 37: 95-150.

Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69: 797-811.