

# Racial Cues and Racial Identity: Implications for How African Americans Experience and Respond to Racial Discrimination

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Lori S. Hoggard<sup>1</sup>, Shawn C. T. Jones<sup>1</sup>,  
and Robert M. Sellers<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

Previous research suggests racial identity and racial cues, such as the extent to which an event is blatantly or ambiguously race-related, individually shape African American (AA) individuals' experiences with racial discrimination (RD). However, scant attention has been paid to the interactive or transactional influences of these factors. The present study examined the direct effects of racial cues and the interactive effects of racial cues and racial identity—specifically, the extent to which AAs believe others view AAs negatively—on 78 AAs' interpretations of and affective responses to lab-based RD. Findings revealed a direct effect of racial cues on participants' perceptions of the event as being race-relevant and on participants' affect. Moreover, racial identity moderated the associations between racial cues and participants' perceptions and affective responses. These findings suggest that AAs' experiences with RD are not homogeneous and that the interplay or transaction between racial cues and racial identity is vital in such experiences.

## Keywords

racial discrimination, racial cues, racial identity, affect, African Americans

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<sup>1</sup>University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, NC, USA

<sup>2</sup>University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Lori S. Hoggard, Center for Health Equity Research, School of Medicine and Department of Social Medicine, Campus Box # 7240, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7240, USA.

Email: [lhoggard@email.unc.edu](mailto:lhoggard@email.unc.edu)

Despite indicators of racial progress in the United States (e.g., the two-term election of President Barack Obama), the highly publicized killings of Black people living in the United States (e.g., nine people killed in the massacre at a historical Black church in Charleston, SC, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Mike Brown, and Eric Garner) and contemporary scholarship (e.g., Harrell, 2000; Lewis, Cogburn, & Williams, 2015) indicate that African Americans (AAs) continue to be plagued by racism. Indeed, AAs who participated in a 14-day daily diary study experienced one racial discrimination (RD) encounter every other day, on average (Burrow & Ong, 2010). In addition to being common, RD is linked to a number of deleterious consequences, including negative affect, depressive symptoms, and cardiovascular arousal and disease (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Williams & Mohammed, 2013).

While RD experiences are generally pervasive and noxious, there is variability in how AAs interpret and respond to these events (e.g., Hoggard, Byrd, & Sellers, 2015; Jones, Lee, Gaskin, & Neblett, 2014; Operario & Fiske, 2001). For instance, Black individuals who witnessed ambiguously racist hiring decisions experienced greater cognitive depletion than Black individuals who witnessed blatantly racist or nonprejudiced hiring decisions (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007). Moreover, AAs who believe that out-group members view AAs unfavorably reported more frequent past year RD experiences than their counterparts, but were also buffered from the cumulative negative impact of these events (Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006). In the present study, we examine situational (non-race-related vs. ambiguous race-related vs. blatant race-related cues) and person-related (racial identity) characteristics as sources of variability in how AAs interpret and respond to RD.

Despite the promise of situational and person-related characteristics as predictors of AAs' experiences with race-related stressors (e.g., Major & Eliezer, 2011; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007), few scholars have empirically tested the transaction between these characteristics. The present study explores the transaction between situational (non-race-related vs. ambiguous racial vs. blatant racial cues) and person-related characteristics (racial identity) as determinants of AAs' interpretations of and responses to a lab-based stressor. As RD has been consistently linked to anger and distress reactivity and is also predictive of increases in negative affect and psychological distress over time (e.g., Armstead, Lawler, Gorden, Cross, & Gibbons, 1989; Bennett, Merritt, Edwards, & Sollers, 2004; Brody et al., 2006; Broudy et al., 2007), we focused on anger and distress reactivity responses.

### *Situational Characteristics: The Importance of Racial Cues*

According to the transactional model of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), situational characteristics (e.g., novelty), person-related characteristics (e.g., personality), and the interplay between the two influence individuals' interpretations of and responses to potential stressors. In their RD model, Sellers, Morgan, and Brown (2001) apply Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) conceptual framework to their examination of RD. In doing so, they assert that the transaction between racial cues and racial identity shapes how AAs experience RD (Sellers et al., 2001).

Racial cues have been defined as the prejudice-relevant signals in the environment that largely determine whether an event is perceived or experienced as being race-relevant (Inman & Baron, 1996; Major, Quinton, & Schmader, 2003). Some situations provide strong racial cues (e.g., a racial slur) and are very likely to be experienced as race-relevant (Sellers et al., 2001); these situations should be characterized by little variability in interpretation. Other situations provide weaker racial cues and are less likely to be experienced as race-relevant; these situations should be characterized by attributional ambiguity (Crocker & Major, 1989; Major et al., 2002). In such cases, relevant person-related characteristics will be particularly meaningful. Finally, some situations provide no racial cues and will be experienced as race-relevant by few individuals; these situations should also be characterized by little variability in interpretation.

Racial cues may also influence individuals' responses to potentially race-relevant events (Sellers et al., 2001). In their study, Mendes, Major, McCoy, and Blascovich (2008) demonstrated that AA participants were more likely to attribute feedback to discrimination when the evaluators were White than when the evaluators were AA. Moreover, the AA participants who experienced rejection by the White confederate were more likely to feel angry than AAs who were rejected by an AA confederate (Mendes et al., 2008). These findings are consistent with several scholars' assertions that RD may be a distinct stressor in the lives of AAs with consequences that exceed those of non-race-related stressors (e.g., Banks, Kohn-Wood, & Spencer, 2006; Harrell, 2000). Conversely, Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, and Major (1991; Study 2) found that Black individuals who received negative feedback from an evaluator and who believed that race was a factor (i.e., the evaluator saw them) experienced fewer decreases in self-esteem than the Black individuals who did not believe race was a factor (i.e., the evaluator did not see them). Given these mixed findings, it is important to continue to assess whether, and to what extent, AAs will respond to race-relevant and non-race-relevant events differently.

Another empirical question is whether AAs respond to ambiguous forms of RD more negatively than blatant forms of RD. This question bears importance as racist acts in the United States have generally shifted from being more overt and blatant in nature to being more subtle and ambiguous (Harrell, 2000). In one lab study, AA men exhibited higher levels of diastolic blood pressure in response to an ambiguously racist speech task than to a blatantly racist speech task (Merritt, Bennett, Williams, Edwards, & Sollers, 2006). Using the same data set, Bennett et al. (2004) showed that participants reported more negative mood in the blatantly racist condition. According to several researchers, subtle and ambiguous RD may be the most deleterious forms of RD in the post-Jim Crow era (e.g., Essed, 1991). A likely explanation is that subtle and ambiguous forms of RD are characterized by attributional ambiguity that lead to distress and cognitive depletion, which in turn, may prolong the activation of the emotional and autonomic nervous systems (Brosschot, Gerin, & Thayer, 2006; Major et al., 2002). Indeed, in one study, Black individuals who witnessed ambiguously racist hiring decisions experienced greater cognitive impairment than Black individuals who witnessed either blatantly racist or nonprejudiced hiring decisions (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007).

### *Person-Related Characteristics: The Role of Public Regard*

Racial identity has been defined as individuals' attitudes and beliefs about the significance and meaning of race in their lives (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). In their Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity, Sellers et al. (1998) propose three stable dimensions of racial identity: centrality, regard, and ideology. The researchers note that *public regard*, the extent to which an individual believes that out-group members view AAs negatively, may be particularly important in understanding the variability in AAs' interpretations of race-related events (Sellers et al., 1998; Sellers et al., 2001). Consistent with this claim, scholars have increasingly provided evidence for the importance of public regard beliefs in the experience of RD (e.g., Neblett & Roberts, 2013; Outten, Giguere, Schmitt, & Lalonde, 2010; Seaton, Yip, & Sellers, 2009; Sellers et al., 2006). For instance, Outten et al. (2010) found that AAs who believed that out-group members viewed AAs negatively (i.e., low public regard) were more likely to perceive two ambiguous lab-based situations as being race-relevant.

Sellers et al. (2001) also affirm that public regard is important in understanding the heterogeneity in AAs' responses to race-relevant events. Mounting evidence indicates that low public regard is protective against the psychological impact of RD (e.g., Fuller-Rowell et al., 2012; Lee & Ahn,

2013; Sellers, Caldwell, Schmeelk-Cone, & Zimmerman, 2003; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Specifically, low public regard may mitigate the association between experiences of RD and indicators of depressive symptoms, perceived stress, and well-being (Sellers et al., 2006). Holding a worldview that incorporates a high likelihood of experiencing discrimination may make individuals less vulnerable to the cumulative negative effects of such experiences (Major, Kaiser, O'Brien, & McCoy, 2007). However, few studies have examined the impact of public regard in the context of specific instances of RD. Instead, many studies have focused on: (1) the role of public regard when investigating the consequences associated with AAs' accumulative (e.g., past year) experiences with RD or (2) the importance of racial centrality or identification in the context of a specific race-relevant lab event. It therefore remains unclear how public regard attitudes and beliefs operate in the context of a single RD event or incident.

### *Interplay Between Situational and Person-Related Characteristics*

To our knowledge, there has been virtually no empirical investigation of the transaction between AA racial identity and racial cues as a determinant of how AAs experience event-level RD (for exceptions, see Jones et al., 2014; Neblett & Roberts, 2013). The present study goes beyond the examination of racial/ethnic identification and centrality by investigating the ways in which public regard operates in the context of a specific ambiguous and blatant race-relevant event. In doing so, we also attempt to extend the literature by exploring the possibility that public regard may be a *protective* factor when an AA individual experiences a blatant RD event, but a *vulnerability* factor when an AA individual experiences an ambiguous RD event. Although the study is exploratory and is among the first to empirically examine whether high and low public regard individuals interpret and respond to a specific instance of RD differently, we made several predictions. We affirm that low public regard may be an *exacerbating or vulnerability* factor in the context of a specific ambiguous race-relevant event as: (1) AAs who are lower on public regard may be more likely to perceive that ambiguous situations are race-related than individuals who are higher on public regard (Outten et al., 2010) and (2) An event may be experienced more negatively when it is experienced as being race-related than when it is experienced as being non-race-related, at least in terms of affect (e.g., Mendes et al., 2008). Conversely, public regard may be a *protective* factor in the context of a specific blatant race-relevant event. This may be the case as (1) There will likely be little or no variability in the interpretation of the blatant event and (2) AAs who are

lower on public regard may be relatively more prepared to cope with RD and will thusly be less vulnerable to the impact of these encounters than AAs who are higher on public regard (e.g., Fuller-Rowell et al., 2012; Lee & Ahn, 2013).

Furthermore, the few studies that have examined the transactional relationships between situational and person-related factors have primarily focused on AAs' psychological or physiological responses to *analogues* of RD. Thus, it is still an open question as to whether racial identity is differentially related to outcomes in the context of non-race-relevant, ambiguous race-relevant, and blatant race-relevant events that *actually* occur, rather than events that are merely *imagined*. We believe making such a distinction is important as hypothetical scenarios may lack contextual details and require individuals to report on emotions they are not actually experiencing (Lazarus, 1995; Robinson & Clore, 2001). Ultimately, the use of *imagined* scenarios may not accurately reflect the impact of non-race-relevant stressors as compared with ambiguous race-relevant or blatant race-relevant stressors.

## Present Study

The present study utilizes a novel, ecologically valid experimental design wherein we manipulate racial cues (no race, ambiguous, or blatant) for a situation in which AAs *actually* experience everyday unfair treatment. In doing so, we address two understudied questions. First, we examine the direct effect of racial cues and the interactive effect of racial cues and public regard on the extent to which individuals experience the unfair treatment as being race related (race-based attributions). We expect that participants will interpret the events as being more race-related as the blatantness of the racial cues increases (i.e., higher in the blatant racial cues condition vs. the ambiguous racial cues condition vs. the no race cue condition). We also expect that participants who believe that out-group members hold less positive attitudes toward AAs (low public regard) will experience the ambiguous event as being more race-related. Conversely, we expect little variability in participants' interpretations of the blatant and no race cue conditions, and do not anticipate that public regard will be meaningful in these situations.

Second, we examine the direct effect of racial cues and the interactive effects of racial cues and public regard on participants' affect. We expect that participants in the ambiguous cues condition will report the highest levels of postmanipulation negative affect (upset/distress and continuous negative affect) and the participants in the no race cue condition will report the lowest levels of postmanipulation negative affect (upset/distress and continuous negative affect). We also expect individuals who are lower on public regard

to report feeling less negatively in the blatant condition (i.e., protective factor). Conversely, we expect individuals who are lower on public regard to report feeling comparatively more negatively in the ambiguous condition (i.e., vulnerability factor). Finally, we expect no interactive effects in the no race cue condition, as racial identity should only be related to outcomes in the context of race-related situations (Sellers et al., 1998).

## Method

### *Participants*

One hundred and one self-identified AA college students were recruited at a large public university in the Midwest through the Office of the Registrar and the Psychology Subject Pool. Data for 23 participants were excluded due to software glitches/procedural issues ( $n = 6$ ), missing data ( $n = 3$ ), or a failure to believe the experimental deception ( $n = 14$ ). The final sample included 78 AA participants (59% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 19.03$  years,  $SD = 0.82$ , age range = 18-21). Participants earned \$15 or an hour of course credit for participating in the hour-long experiment.

### *Procedure*

The present study was conducted in compliance with the institutional review board at the university. Upon arriving at the lab, each participant was told that s/he was taking part in a study examining mood responses to three visual stimuli<sup>2</sup> presented on a computer screen. The experimenter—a White male— informed the participant that another participant (actually a study confederate) was due to arrive, that apparently she was late, and that they would wait a few moments for her arrival. After 2 to 3 minutes, the late second “participant”—a White or AA female—arrived at the lab. After providing informed consent, the participant reported his or her baseline affect using the Digital Analogue Slider and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule—Short (PANAS-S). Next, the participant viewed the first visual stimulus and simultaneously reported his or her affect using the Digital Analogue Slider. Affect was assessed again for 1.5 minutes using the Digital Analogue Slider and then via the PANAS-S.

Upon the participant’s completion of the PANAS-S, an individual knocked on the door, interrupting the experiment. The individual—a White female confederate—explained that she was working with Apple, Inc. on a 2-minute study that assesses college students’ Mac logo preferences. She explained that she was looking for one final participant and that this participant had a

good chance of winning an iPod if s/he participated. She then asked the experimenter to invite his participant to take part in her Mac logo study. The experimenter explained that he had two participants in the lab and asked how he should select which participant to invite. In the no race cue and ambiguous cues conditions, the other researcher responded, "You should probably choose the person who arrived to your study first, but it's up to you." The experimenter responded, "Okay, I'll go get you someone" and invited the late second "participant" (confederate) to participate in the Mac logo study. In the blatant cues condition, the experimenter responded, "I don't want to invite the participant who arrived first because s/he is Black. Hold on, I'll go get you someone" and then invited the late second "participant" to take part in the Mac logo study. After agreeing to participate, the second "participant" left the lab with the other researcher. After 3 minutes, she returned with an iPod.

The first participant then watched the second visual stimulus and reported his or her continuous affect using the Digital Analogue Slider. The participant also reported his or her continuous affect for the 1.5 minutes thereafter and then completed the PANAS-S. Next, the participant viewed the third and final visual stimulus and reported his or her continuous affect during and immediately after the presentation of the visual stimulus. The participant then completed the PANAS-S. Finally, the participant completed the race-based attribution and manipulation check question. S/he was then verbally debriefed and given the debriefing form.

*Racial cues manipulation.* There were two manipulations: (1) the race (White or AA) of the late second "participant" and (2) the absence or presence of the primary experimenter explicitly stating that he did not want to select the participant for the Mac logo study because the participant is Black. The no race cue condition ( $n = 29$ ) included an AA second "participant" and no statement by the primary experimenter as to why he did not select the participant. The ambiguous condition ( $n = 30$ ) included a White second "participant" and no statement by the primary experimenter as to why he did not select the participant. The blatant condition ( $n = 19$ ) included a White second "participant" and a statement by the primary experimenter that he did not select the participant because s/he is Black. A similar task involving actual everyday RD or unfair treatment has been previously employed by Hoggard, Hill, Gray, and Sellers (2015), and has been shown to elicit physiological responses.

During the first year of data collection, participants were randomly assigned to the no race cue or ambiguous racial cues condition using an online random number generator (<https://www.randomizer.org>). Upon collecting these data and conducting preliminary analyses, we thought it would

be both interesting and important to include a blatant racial cues condition. As such, we sought additional data and recruited a second subsample of participants that was similar to the first subsample. All participants were assigned to the blatant racial cues condition. The two subsamples did not significantly differ with regard to age,  $F(1, 76) = .03, p = .87$ , gender composition,  $\chi^2(1, N = 78) = .14, p = .24$ , or public regard,  $F(1, 76) = .04, p = .84$ .

## Measures

**Demographics.** Participants provided information about their age, gender, and race.

**Affect.** Participants completed a shortened state version of the PANAS-S (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) at four different time points: two pre-manipulation and two postmanipulation. The PANAS-S is a 10-item questionnaire that assesses positive and negative affective dimensions. An upset/distress subscale was created from two of the five negative affect items: upset and distress, which were weakly to moderately correlated with one another at each of the four time points ( $r = .43; r = .54; r = .40; r = .44$ ). Responses were made on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). An average upset/distress score was created for the two post-manipulation time points. A higher score is indicative of feeling more upset/distressed.

**Race-based attributions.** Participants rated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that they were not selected to participate in the Mac logo study because of their race. Responses to the item were made on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A higher score is indicative of more agreement that race was the reason for the unfair treatment. A very similar race-based attribution item was also used in previous research employing a paradigm similar to that of the present study (Hoggard, Hill, et al., 2015).

**Racial identity.** Participants completed the shortened version of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (Martin, Wout, Nguyen, Gonzalez, & Sellers, 2010), a 27-item questionnaire that assesses the three stable dimensions of the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). We focused on public regard. A sample item for the public regard scale is "Overall, Blacks are considered good by others" (4 items;  $\alpha = .80$ ). Responses to all items were made on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Higher scores indicate that the individual believes out-group members hold more positive attitudes toward AAs. There were no condition differences in public regard.

## Apparatus

*Digital Analogue Slider.* Participants rated their continuous positive versus negative affect by sliding the knob of the Digital Analogue Slider (Empirisoft Corporation, New York) from left to right along a 0 to 100 continuum: 0 is most negative, 50 is neutral, and 100 is most positive. The device recorded participants' data by taking snapshots of the position of the knob every 10th of a second and then transmitted the data to the computer. The average continuous affect was computed across the four postmanipulation time points: presentation of second stimulus, 1.5 minutes thereafter, presentation of third stimulus, and 1.5 minutes thereafter.

## Analytic Strategy

Univariate analysis of variance was used to analyze the effect of racial cues on race-based attributions. Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to analyze the effect of racial cues on average upset/distress and continuous affect, controlling for baseline affect. Hierarchical moderated regressions were performed to test the interactions between racial cues and public regard. In Step 1, we entered the dummy coded variables for the no race cue and blatant conditions, using the ambiguous condition as the referent. Public regard was also entered at Step 1. In the affect models, we also entered baseline affect (upset/distress or continuous) as a covariate. At Step 2, we entered the interactive terms. All continuous predictors were mean centered. The moderator, public regard, was examined at high (+1 *SD*) and low (-1 *SD*) levels. We plotted the associations between racial cues and public regard and performed the simple slopes analyses following the procedures of Aiken and West (1991).

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. The PANAS-S upset/distressed affect and continuous affect scores were mildly and negatively correlated at baseline ( $r = -.31, p = .006$ ), whereas the average postmanipulation PANAS-S upset/distressed affect and continuous affect scores were moderately and negatively correlated ( $r = -.63, p < .001$ ).

**Table 1.** Means and Standard Deviations for Study Variables for Overall Sample and by Condition.

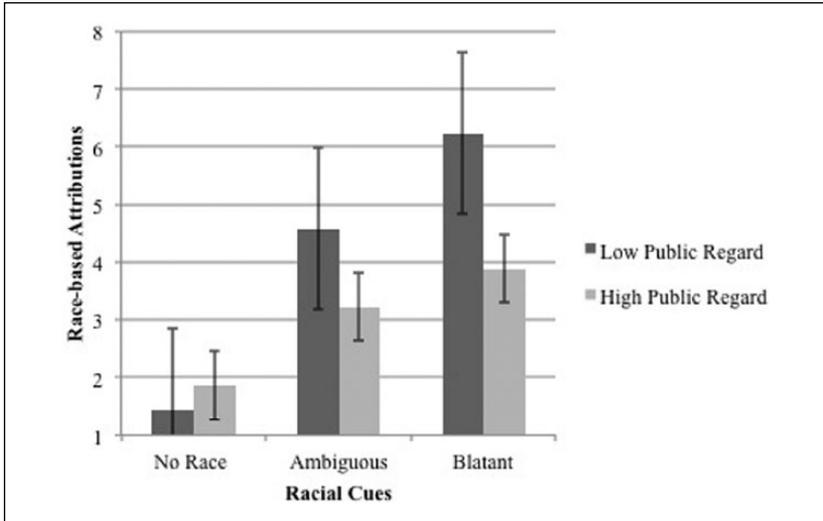
Variables	No race cue, n = 29		Ambiguous race cue, n = 30		Blatant race cue, n = 19		Overall sample, n = 78	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Public Regard	3.47	1.28	3.54	0.94	3.45	0.97	3.49	1.07
Race Attributions	1.66	1.04	3.87	1.83	5.11	2.33	3.35	2.21
Upset/Distress Baseline	1.45	0.62	1.87	0.78	1.66	0.75	1.66	0.73
Upset/Distress Pre-M	1.52	0.75	1.98	0.86	1.58	0.82	1.71	0.83
Upset/Distress Average Post-M	1.55	0.65	2.35	0.97	2.14	1.12	2.00	0.96
Continuous Affect Baseline	57.42	11.48	51.38	17.41	56.66	18.98	54.91	5.95
Continuous Affect Pre-M 1	59.43	14.36	57.33	15.97	60.39	15.67	58.86	15.17
Continuous Affect Pre-M 2	53.92	16.21	51.24	17.12	60.00	19.47	54.37	17.50
Continuous Affect Average Post-M	60.48	15.50	48.45	21.41	47.37	21.94	52.66	20.23

Note: M = Manipulation.

### Race-Based Attributions

The analysis of variance revealed a significant main effect of racial cues on race-based attributions,  $F(2, 75) = 24.89, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .40$ . Tukey HSD (honestly significant difference) post hoc tests revealed that participants in the blatant condition were more likely to offer race as an explanation for their unfair treatment ( $M = 5.11, SD = 2.33$ ) than the participants in both the no race cue ( $M = 3.87, SD = 2.33; p < .001$ ) and ambiguous conditions ( $M = 1.66, SD = 1.04; p = .045$ ). Moreover, the participants in the ambiguous racial cues condition were significantly more likely to offer race as an explanation than the participants in the no race cue condition ( $p < .001$ ).

The interaction between racial cues and public regard was significant. The direct effects model accounted for 42% of the variance in race-based attributions,  $F(3, 74) = 17.76, p < .001$ . The interactive effects model accounted for an additional 6% of the variance,  $R^2 = .48, F(5, 72) = 13.51, p < .001$ . The coefficient for the ambiguous interactive term significantly differed from the



**Figure 1.** Racial cues and public regard predicting race-based attributions.

coefficient for the no race cue interactive term,  $b = .82(.41)$ ,  $p = .046$ , but did not significantly differ from the coefficient for the blatant interactive term,  $b = -.46(.52)$ ,  $p = .37$  (see Figure 1). Simple slopes analyses indicated that low public regard individuals were more likely to make race-based attributions than high public regard individuals in the ambiguous (marginally) and the blatant conditions. See Table 2 for complete results from simple slopes analyses.

### *Postmanipulation Average Upset/Distress PANAS-S Affect*

The ANCOVA revealed a significant main effect of racial cues on average postmanipulation upset/distress affect,  $F(2, 74) = 3.66$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .09$ . Pairwise comparisons revealed that the participants in the no race cue condition ( $M = 1.67$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ) reported feeling significantly less upset/distress than the participants in the ambiguous condition ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ;  $p = .038$ ), and marginally less upset/distress than the participants in the blatant condition ( $M = 2.15$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ;  $p = .06$ ). The participants in the ambiguous and blatant conditions did not significantly differ ( $p = .72$ ) from one another.

The interaction between racial cues and public regard was significant. The direct effects model accounted for 31% of the variance in average upset/distress affect,  $F(4, 73) = 8.23$ ,  $p < .001$ . The interactive effects model

**Table 2.** Simple Slopes Analyses and Pairwise Group Comparisons for the Interactive Effects of Racial Cues and Public Regard on Race-Based Attributions.

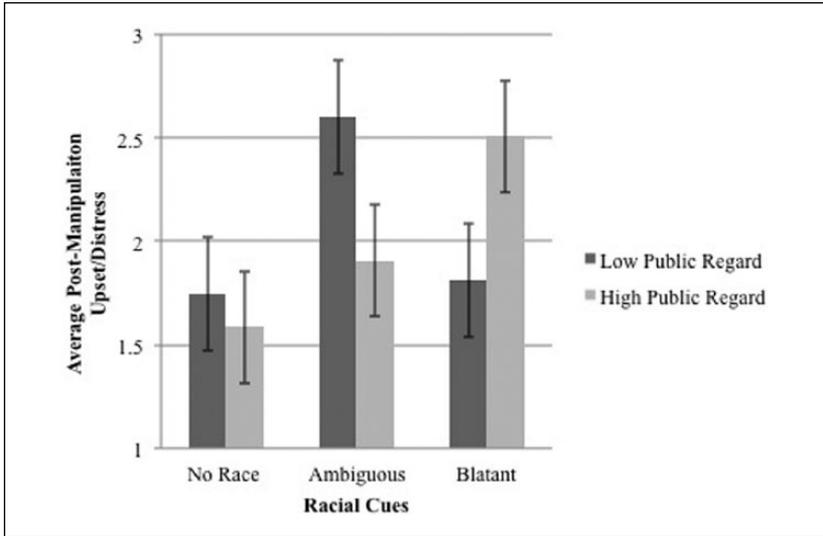
Group and public regard level	t
Simple Slopes for Interactive Effects of Race Cues × Public Regard	
No race cues, low public regard vs. high public regard	0.80
Ambiguous race cues, low public regard vs. high public regard	-1.94†
Blatant race cues, low public regard vs. high public regard	-2.73***
Pairwise Group Comparisons of Race Cues × Public Regard	
Low public regard, no race cues vs. ambiguous race cues	-5.07***
Low public regard, no race cues vs. blatant race cues	6.98***
Low public regard, ambiguous race cues vs. blatant race cues	2.27*
High public regard, no race cues vs. ambiguous race cues	-2.25*
High public regard, no race cues vs. blatant race cues	2.84**
High public regard, ambiguous race cues vs. blatant race cues	0.90

Note: Low public regard = 1 SD below the mean; high public regard = 1 SD above the mean.  
 † $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

accounted for an additional 6% of the variance,  $R^2 = .37$ ,  $F(6, 71) = 6.95$ ,  $p < .001$ . The coefficient for the ambiguous interactive term significantly differed from the coefficient for the blatant interactive term,  $b = .65(.25)$ ,  $p = .01$ , but did not significantly differ from the coefficient for the no race cue interactive term,  $b = .25(.20)$ ,  $p = .21$  (see Figure 2). In the ambiguous condition, low public regard individuals reported being significantly more upset/distressed than high public regard individuals. At low levels of public regard, individuals who were in the ambiguous condition reported being significantly more upset/distressed than individuals who were in the no race cue and blatant conditions. Conversely, at high levels of public regard, individuals who were in the blatant condition reported being significantly more upset/distressed than individuals who were in the no race cue condition. See Table 3 for complete results from simple slopes analyses.

**Postmanipulation Average Continuous Affect**

The second ANCOVA revealed a significant main effect of racial cues on average continuous postmanipulation affect,  $F(2, 74) = 3.24$ ,  $p = .045$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .08$ . Pairwise comparisons revealed that the participants in the no race cue condition ( $M = 59.67$ ,  $SD = 15.50$ ) reported feeling significantly more positively than the participants in the ambiguous ( $M = 49.60$ ,  $SD = 21.41$ ;  $p = .048$ ) and blatant ( $M = 46.80$ ,  $SD = 21.94$ ;  $p = .03$ ) racial cues conditions. The



**Figure 2.** Racial cues and public regard predicting average postmanipulation upset/distress affect (controlling for upset/distress at baseline).

participants in the ambiguous and blatant conditions did not significantly differ ( $p = .62$ ).

The interaction between racial cues and public regard was significant. The direct effects model accounted for 16% of the variance in average continuous affect,  $F(4, 73) = 3.47, p = .01$ . The interactive effects model accounted for an additional 5% of the variance,  $R^2 = .21, F(6, 71) = 3.16, p = .008$ . The coefficient for the ambiguous interactive term did not significantly differ from that of the no race cue interactive term,  $b = .64(4.62), p = .89$ , and marginally differed from that of the blatant interactive term,  $b = -10.67(5.97), p = .08$  (see Figure 3). The coefficient for the blatant interactive term significantly differed from the no race cue interactive term,  $b = -11.31(5.47), p = .04$ . At high levels of public regard, individuals who were in the blatant condition reported feeling significantly less positively than individuals in the no race cue condition. See Table 4 for complete results from simple slopes analyses.

## Discussion

A primary objective of the present study was to explore the direct effects of racial cues (non-race-related, ambiguous race-related, or blatant race-related) and the interactive effects of racial cues and racial identity (public regard) on

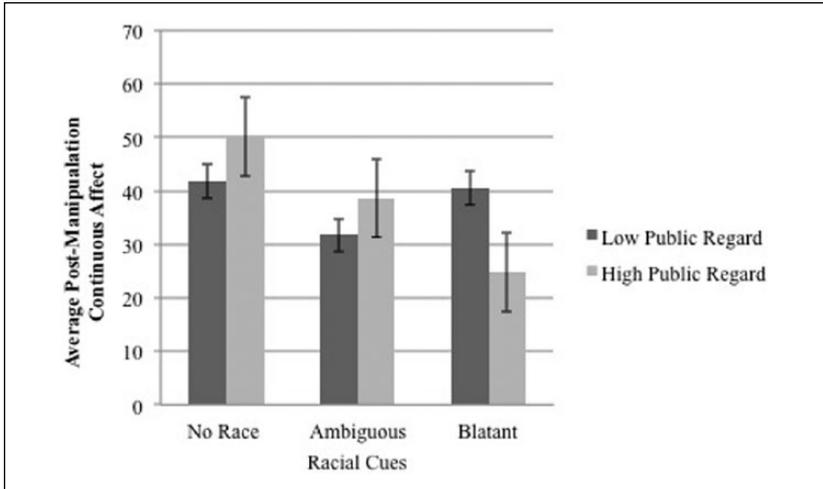
**Table 3.** Simple Slopes Analyses and Pairwise Group Comparisons for the Interactive Effects of Racial Cues and Public Regard on Postmanipulation Average Upset/Distress Affect.

Group and public regard level	<i>t</i>
Simple Slopes for Interactive Effects of Race Cues × Public Regard	
No race cues, low public regard vs. high public regard	-0.63
Ambiguous race cues, low public regard vs. high public regard	-2.06*
Blatant race cues, low public regard vs. high public regard	1.66
Pairwise Group Comparisons of Race Cues × Public Regard	
Low public regard, no race cues vs. ambiguous race cues	-2.80**
Low public regard, no race cues vs. blatant race cues	0.20
Low public regard, ambiguous race cues vs. blatant race cues	-2.21*
High public regard, no race cues vs. ambiguous race cues	-1.08
High public regard, no race cues vs. blatant race cues	2.66*
High public regard, ambiguous race cues vs. blatant race cues	1.69

Note: Low public regard = 1 SD below the mean; high public regard = 1 SD above the mean.  
<sup>†</sup>*p* < .10. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

AAs' interpretations of lab-based RD. As hypothesized, the participants were most likely to experience the unfair treatment as race-related when in the blatant condition and were least likely to experience the unfair treatment as race-related when in the no race cue condition. Indeed, as compared with the no race and ambiguous racial cues conditions, the blatant event was characterized by relatively strong racial cues. The ambiguous event, as compared with the blatant event, was characterized by relatively weaker racial cues, and the non-race-related event was characterized by very few or no racial cues. Surprisingly, the average race-based attributions score for the participants in the blatant racial cues condition was only a 5.11 on a 7-point Likert-type scale, suggesting that the blatant racial cues were relatively strong, but not as strong as anticipated. The most plausible explanation for the lower race-based attribution average is that six participants in the blatant condition did not make race-based attributions. It is important to note that five of these six participants scored *highly* on the public regard dimension, suggesting that stronger or more overt racial cues may have been required for these individuals to make race-based attributions.

Relatedly, during the debriefing process, several participants indicated that “in-your-face racism just doesn’t happen anymore.” Consequently, these individuals failed to believe that the blatant event was real. It may therefore be important to replicate this study in the current sociopolitical context.



**Figure 3.** Racial cues and public regard predicting average postmanipulation continuous positive versus negative affect (controlling for continuous affect at baseline).

**Table 4.** Simple Slopes Analyses and Pairwise Group Comparisons for the Interactive Effects of Racial Cues and Public Regard on Postmanipulation Average Continuous Affect.

Group and Public Regard Level	<i>t</i>
Simple Slopes for Interactive Effects of Race Cues × Public Regard	
No race cues, low public regard vs. high public regard	1.40
Ambiguous race cues, low public regard vs. high public regard	0.88
Blatant race cues, low public regard vs. high public regard	-1.60
Pairwise Group Comparisons of Race Cues × Public Regard	
Low public regard, no race cues vs. ambiguous race cues	1.43
Low public regard, no race cues vs. blatant race cues	-0.15
Low public regard, ambiguous race cues vs. blatant race cues	1.04
High public regard, no race cues vs. ambiguous race cues	1.64
High public regard, no race cues vs. blatant race cues	-3.09**
High public regard, ambiguous race cues vs. blatant race cues	-1.67

Note: Low public regard = 1 SD below the mean; high public regard = 1 SD above the mean.  
 $\dagger p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Indeed, the present data were collected prior to a number of events that may be experienced collectively by AAs as racially motivated, including the killings of Tamir Rice, Mike Brown, Renisha McBride, Laquan McDonald, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, and Freddie Gray. It is quite possible that these events and their respective social justice movements have resulted in increased vigilance and vulnerability for many AAs. Consequently, our results would potentially be quite different if the study was conducted in the current racial climate.

There was also a significant interaction between racial cues and public regard. As anticipated, public regard was not meaningful in the no race cue condition. In contrast, public regard was meaningful in the blatant racial cues condition, counter to our prediction, as well as in the ambiguous racial cues condition (marginally). Specifically, individuals who endorsed that out-group members view AAs less favorably were more likely to make race-based attributions than their high public regard counterparts across both race conditions. This finding is consistent with our discovery that five of the six aforementioned participants in the blatant condition scored highly on the public regard dimension and did not experience the event as race-related. Overall, however, the findings are consistent with previous research documenting the negative association between interpreting events as racially discriminatory and public regard (e.g., Outten et al., 2010). Moreover, these findings further suggest there is variability in how AAs experience RD.

Another primary objective of the present study was to examine the direct effects of racial cues and the interactive effects of racial cues and racial identity on AAs' affective responses to lab-based RD. Individuals in the ambiguous and blatant conditions generally reported feeling more negatively than the participants in the no race cue condition. As such, RD, in its various forms, may be experienced more negatively than non-race-related stressors. Counter to our hypothesis, the ambiguous stressor was not experienced more negatively than the blatant stressor. Perhaps the most straightforward explanation is that the cross-over interaction (Racial cues  $\times$  Public regard; see Figures 2 and 3) led to a nonsignificant main effect; there was an opposite effect of racial cues at low and high levels of public regard. Another possibility is that ambiguous RD may be the most deleterious form of RD—not because any specific instance of ambiguous RD is more noxious than any specific instance of blatant RD—but because ambiguous RD is experienced more frequently than blatant RD, and consequently has greater *accumulative* effects. In any event, the present findings contribute to the mixed literature and equivocal findings with regard to the impact of ambiguous racial stressors as compared with blatant racial stressors (e.g., Bennett et al., 2004; Merritt

et al., 2006). Future studies might examine whether ambiguous and blatant forms of RD are experienced differently using paradigms involving *actual*, not imagined, experiences.

As we hypothesized, low public regard was psychologically protective in the blatant condition, but was a vulnerability factor in the ambiguous condition. In the ambiguous condition, low public regard individuals reported being significantly more upset/distressed than their high public regard counterparts. Low public regard individuals in the ambiguous condition also reported being significantly more upset/distressed than low public regard individuals in the blatant condition. Therefore, individuals whose worldview incorporates a high likelihood of experiencing discrimination (i.e., low public regard) may be comparatively less vulnerable to the negative effects of *blatantly* racist events. It may be that such blatant events serve as archetypes of those with low public regard, making them relatively more expectant of such scenarios. Conversely, high public regard individuals may require stronger racial cues (i.e., blatant) to experience or interpret an event as being an instance of RD, are relatively “caught off guard” when they experience these events, and are likely less prepared to cope.

### Implications

The present study makes several theoretical and methodological contributions. First, to our knowledge, this is the first experimental study to directly assess the differential impact of *actually* experiencing ambiguous, blatant, and non-race-related events. The study findings revealed that most participants believed the lab induction was a real-life event. We were therefore able to assess participants’ emotional responses to RD in vivo and to elucidate how the transaction between situational and person-related characteristics operates in the context of “real life” RD.

Second, the findings suggest that AAs may respond to RD more negatively than non-race-related stressors. Although these findings are a cause for concern given the frequency with which AAs report experiencing RD events (e.g., Sellers & Shelton, 2003), they provide researchers and practitioners with a better understanding of the extent of the impact of RD in AAs’ lives. That these findings situate themselves squarely in the temporal landscape of a cascade of recent racism-related events (e.g., killings of AAs), as well as the proactive, reactive, and active responses to said events (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter, Emotional Emancipation Circles) further accentuates the crucial nature of this research.

Third, our findings highlight the importance of the sociopolitical context. During the debriefing process, several AAs indicated that “in-your-face racism just doesn’t happen,” and they consequently failed to believe that the

blatant event was real. Our data were collected prior to the occurrence of many highly publicized racially salient killings of AAs that gave rise to a number of highly visible political responses (#BlackLivesMatter). It would be interesting to speculate as to whether the findings of the present study would differ significantly if the data were collected today. For example, it may be the case that AA students would make greater racial attributions to the unfair treatment in the blatant condition (and perhaps the ambiguous condition) today. Future research is needed to investigate this speculation.

Fourth, the findings extend scholarship focusing on racial cues and racial identity. Public regard may be psychologically protective for AAs in the context of blatant RD, but may be a vulnerability factor in the context of ambiguous or subtle RD. It is therefore vital that researchers go beyond the examination of racial identification or racial centrality to examine more nuanced dimensions of what it means to be Black in America. Similarly, research must examine RD, not only in the aggregate, but also at the level of the event. Indeed, racial identity (i.e., public regard) may operate differently in the context of accumulative versus specific instances of RD.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

We encourage future research to build on our novel findings while also addressing the limitations of the present study. First, future studies might compare responses to *actual* RD with responses to parallel vignettes. Such comparisons may allow researchers to ascertain whether designs employing *actual* and *imagined* paradigms converge or yield different effects. Second, although our subsamples did not differ from one another, future studies might replicate the present study by randomly assigning participants to all three experimental conditions. Third, the blatant condition only included 19 participants; as is the case with all studies, a larger sample size would be ideal. This limitation notwithstanding, we are relatively confident that we have minimized our probability of committing a type I error. Indeed, post hoc power analyses (G Power 3.1) revealed medium to large effect sizes and indicated that our statistical power exceeded 80% (Cohen, 1988). Fourth, although previous research has employed similar race-based attribution items (Hoggard, Hill, et al., 2015), future studies might include more than one item assessing race-based attributions. This addition would allow researchers to assess the extent to which AAs experience a lab event as race-relevant in various ways.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the study limitations, the present study has several strengths. The present study adopted an approach that focused on AAs' psychological experience of two potentially race-related events. Our approach represents a significant departure from the traditional psychological literature that studied prejudice, stigma, and stereotyping from the perpetrators' perspective and largely ignored the perspective of the victims who are burdened by these phenomena. We were also able to examine the heterogeneity in how AAs experience these events and to underscore the importance of situational and person-related factors. It is our hope that this study advances the field's understanding of the factors involved in the experience of RD, an insidious and persistent issue for Black people in today's society.

## **Authors' Note**

Lori S. Hoggard is now at the Center for Health Equity Research, School of Medicine and Department of Social Medicine, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Email: lhoggard@email.unc.edu.

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## **Notes**

1. Please note that the authors used the terms AA and Black interchangeably throughout the article. Our decision to use AA versus Black was, in part, based on whether certain citations dictated the use of one or the other.

2. Seven screen savers were individually edited to 2 minutes in length. Twenty-three acquaintances rated the screen savers on how positively or negatively they made the individuals feel. The three most neutrally rated screen savers (*Paper Shadows, Fields, and Dancing Spirals*) were used in the experiment to insure that the screen savers were not eliciting any changes in affect.

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