Can Historical Learning Generate Belief in Structural Racial Inequality and Reduce Racial Resentment?

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This document describes a pre-analysis plan for a survey experimental test of whether information about the historical and structural roots of present-day inequalities can generate belief in structural racial inequality and reduce racial resentment. This pre-analysis plan was written and filed prior to experimental data collection.

1 Overview and Motivation

Political theorists, historians, and racial justice activists have argued that learning about the historical and structural roots of contemporary racial inequalities (which, for the sake of brevity, we refer to throughout this document as "historical learning") is necessary to perceive contemporary racial inequalities as systemic policy problems that require systemic policy solutions. Despite the ubiquity of this claim across multiple scholarly traditions, the extent to which Americans accept (or reject) historical information when making sense of contemporary racial inequality and how this information affects policy beliefs and attitudes regarding racial inequality are questions that are not well-understood empirically.[1]

Understanding this question empirically has become increasingly important as the United States becomes increasingly polarized and sorted along racial lines. Scholars have documented how overlapping partisan and social identities have become mutually reinforcing in a way that can amplify out-group animus (Mason, 2018), induce ideological and racial motivated reasoning (e.g., Morin-Chasse, Suhay and Jayaratne, 2017), and result in either ignoring factually correct (historical) information that conflicts with one's view or doubling down on misperceptions in spite of exposure to correct historical information (e.g., Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). If information about the historical and structural roots of racial inequality have divergent effects on racial policy beliefs and attitudes, then such information may fail to persuade and fail to cause convergent beliefs, and instead amplify intergroup conflict between partisans and racial groups.

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[1] A notable exception in the broader domain of intergroup conflict is Nyhan and Zeitzoff (2018) who study the effects of correcting historical misperceptions in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

To address the need to establish empirical facts about the effects of historical learning about racial inequality, we have designed a survey experiment, to be fielded on a nationally representative sample of American adults where subjects will be randomly assigned to read information about the historical and structural roots of racial inequalities that grew out of landmark public policies in one of two policy domains (housing or jobs), their immediate effects on racial inequalities in the past, and the processes by which those effects endured to affect racial inequalities in the present. We will assess how this information affects two main sets of policy beliefs that are arguably central for shaping durable policy attitudes: (1) belief in the existence of racial inequality (i.e., belief in the existence of the problem) and (2) beliefs in structural versus individualistic (or cultural) causes of racial inequality today (i.e., belief that the problem is systemic). This document describes the design and pre-analysis plan for this experiment.

2 Research Design

2.1 Subjects

Subjects will be recruited from Lucid, an online survey sampling vendor that will provide a census-balanced convenience sample of Internet survey respondents.[2]

2.2 Treatments and Randomization Procedure

Subjects will be randomly assigned with equal probability to one of three conditions: (1) a pure control condition, in which no information was shown, (2) a treatment script about racial inequality in housing (which we label the "housing" treatment), or (3) a treatment script about racial inequality in jobs and income (which we label the "jobs" treatment). We will use randomization inference to verify whether the randomization procedure is valid.

Table 1 displays the full text of the treatment scripts. Both treatments have been constructed to convey similar information using the same succinct, three paragraph structure while being of similar length.

To introduce the topic, subjects are told in the first paragraph of the treatment script that in their assigned policy area ("housing" or "jobs and income"), "important public policies discriminated against African Americans" seeking economic opportunities ("seeking to buy or rent homes" for the housing treatment; "seeking educational and employment opportunities" for the jobs treatment).

The second paragraph of the treatment script then provides a historical example of a policy in that issue area (the National Housing Act for the housing treatment and the G.I. Bill for the jobs treatment), states the policy's general aim, but points out that it also generated immediate racial inequalities between blacks and whites by discriminating against blacks and by allowing whites to be the main beneficiaries of the policy.

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[2]Coppock and McClellan (2019) has shown that replications of descriptive and experimental results using Lucid samples track well with benchmarks employing national probability samples.

Table 1: Treatment Scripts

Housing Treatment	Jobs Treatment
In housing, important public policies discriminated against African Americans seeking to buy or rent homes.	In jobs and income, important public policies discriminated against African Americans seeking educational and employment opportunities.
For example, the National Housing Act (1934) was passed during the Great Depression to help make housing and home mortgages more affordable. However, this policy also allowed for the "redlining" of many black neighborhoods, which severely restricted housing opportunities for African Americans but not whites.	For example, the G. I. Bill (1944) encouraged long-term economic growth by offering job training and educational support to large numbers of returning World War II veterans. However, this policy offered substantially more benefits to white veterans than it did to black veterans.
This is because black homebuyers were marked as bad credit risks and lenders were discouraged from lending in predominantly African American neighborhoods. At the same time, many black homebuyers were excluded from more favorable neighborhoods inhabited by whites. Studies have found that the long term effect of such discriminatory policies is that black households remain disproportionately located in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates, lower home values, declining infrastructure, and fewer employment opportunities compared to predominantly white neighborhoods.	This is because black veterans did not have access to the same segregated schools and training opportunities as whites. Black veterans from the southern states – where three-quarters of African Americans lived – made no gains in educational attainment. Studies have found that the ultimate outcome of the policy was to increase inequality in economic and educational attainment between black and white Americans. This gap in educational and employment opportunities for African Americans compared to whites has largely endured despite recent efforts to close it.

The third paragraph further explains the processes through which each policy created immediate racial disparities, as well as the how those immediate policy impacts have led to enduring, long-term racial inequalities between blacks and whites that persist to this day.

Several additional features of the treatment scripts are notable. First, we designed the treatments to provide specific policy information (i.e., specific policies, short-term impacts, and information about processes that cause both historical and present-day racial inequality) rather than abstract arguments in order to reduce the likelihood that the information and argument presented to subjects would be ambiguous or vague. Second, we designed two different treatments that vary by issue, rather than a single treatment providing information about a single policy-specific historical cause of present-day racial inequality, in order to explore whether effects might differ by the policy (and associated argument) present and by the relative salience of the policy and argument in contemporary political discourse. The housing treatment makes salient the long history of redlining and racial housing discrimination in the United States, topics which have garnered considerable media attention in the United States in recent years (e.g., Coates, 2014), whereas the jobs treatment script concerns black-white inequalities and intergenerational racial stratification created by the G.I. Bill, topics and arguments which are virtually absent from recent U.S. political discourse, but are important components of Katznelson's (2005) argument.

2.3   Outcomes

We examine two main sets of outcome measures: (1) subjects' belief in the existence of black-white inequality and (2) subjects' beliefs in various structural versus individual or cultural causes of present-day racial inequality.

To measure subjects' belief in the existence of black-white inequality, we first ask: "Do you believe that racial differences in jobs, income, and housing between African Americans and whites exist?" Response options are "Yes", "No", and "Don't Know", which are coded 1, 0, and 0.5, respectively.

We operationalize subjects' beliefs in various structural versus individual or cultural causes of present-day racial inequality in two ways.

First, we employ the racial resentment scale (Kinder and Sanders, 1996), which consists of the following items and which we interpret as a measure of structural versus individual attributions for Black Americans' economic and social status following Kam and Burge (2018):

- Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors.

- Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class.

- Over the past few years blacks have gotten less than they deserve.

- It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as whites.

For each item, which is presented in a randomized order, subjects rate their agreement with each statement on a 5-point scale (-2=strongly disagree to 2=strongly agree). The second and third items are reverse coded, then all items are combined into a mean index scale ranging from -2 to 2.

Second, we directly measure subjects' belief in structural versus individual (or cultural) causes of black-white inequality using an augmented battery of items that the General Social Survey (GSS) has asked since 1977 and that have long been studied by social scientists (e.g., Kluegel, 1990). Each question begins with the statement: "On average, African Americans have worse jobs, income, and housing than white people." Subjects are then asked if they think these differences are due to:

- Mainly due to discrimination

- Because most African Americans have less in-born ability to learn

- Because most African Americans don't have the chance for education that it takes to rise out of poverty

- Because most African Americans just don't have the motivation or willpower to pull themselves out of poverty

- Because there is more family instability in the African American community

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The first four of these are directly from the GSS[3], and the fifth item is based on a cause explored in a modified version of the GSS battery developed by Lopez Bunyasi and Smith (2019). For each of these items, which are randomly ordered, subjects can respond "Yes", "No", or "Don't Know". We recode each item into a binary variable where 1=Yes and 0=otherwise. In this battery, the first and third items are commonly interpreted as belief in structural explanations of racial inequality whereas the second, fourth, and fifth items are commonly interpreted as belief in individualist or cultural explanations of racial inequality (Kluegel, 1990; Lopez Bunyasi and Smith, 2019). While other scholars have previously combined these items into two scales (one for belief in structural explanations and another for belief in individualist explanations) (Kluegel, 1990; Lopez Bunyasi and Smith, 2019), we choose not to do so because in a pilot study the items exhibited poor internal consistency (α=0.49 for the structural explanation items and α=0.44 for the individualist/cultural explanation items). Instead, for our main analysis we treat each item as a separate outcome variable for the sake of transparency. In an appendix, we will present additional analyses where the outcome measures are the index scales and assess whether we find qualitatively similar results.

By employing two different operationalizations of beliefs in structural versus individual causes of racial inequality, we are able to assess the degree to which our findings are robust to alternative measurement strategies. Consistent evidence of effects across similarly-defined measures would provide greater confidence in the validity of results.

We randomize the order in which the racial resentment battery and the modified GSS battery are asked in case one set of outcome questions affects responses to the other by priming different considerations. We will assess order effects to address concerns about measurement error arising from such priming effects.

2.4 Manipulation Check Items

We have designed the following manipulation check questions, to be asked in a randomized order. These will be shown after the outcome questions:

- **Which of the following is true of the National Housing Act of 1934?**
  Mark all that apply. If you don't know, select "I don't know."

    - It was intended to make housing and home mortgages more affordable
    - It allowed for the redlining of many black neighborhoods
    - It mandated the federal government to fund and build public housing

- **Which of the following are true of the G.I. Bill of 1944?**
  Mark all that apply. If you don't know, select "I don't know."

    - It offered job training and education to World War II veterans
    - Blacks and whites who were eligible to receive policy benefits were able to benefit from the policy at similar rates

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[3]These items correspond to the GSS variables named `racdif1`, `racdif2`, `racdif3`, and `racdif4`.

– It prohibited racial discrimination in employment

– I don't know

3   Hypotheses

We test three main hypotheses on the effects of historical learning (i.e., learning about the historical and structural roots of contemporary racial inequalities). These hypotheses map onto the following quantities of interest:

H1: **Effect of historical learning on belief in the existence of structural black-white inequality.**

H2: **Effect of historical learning on belief in structural causes of present-day racial inequality.**

H3: **Effect of historical learning on belief in individualistic or cultural causes of present-day racial inequality.**

Because the political parties in the contemporary United States are racially sorted and polarized (see, e.g., Mason, 2018, for an overview), we assess these hypotheses separately by the subject's party identification (including leaners with partisans). Thus the estimands of interest are conditional average treatment effects by party. We do not estimate average treatment effects pooling across party lines, nor are we interested in the differences in treatment effects between partisan subgroups since those quantities are not of theoretical interest.

For each of the hypotheses, we are agnostic about the direction of the expected effect because there are competing theoretical expectations about whether the information provided in the treatments would be persuasive and lead to updating in the direction of the information, lead to backfire, or have no effect.

4   Estimation and Inference

4.1   Main Analysis

For each of our outcomes, we partition the data by partisan subgroup (Democrats, Independents, and Republicans) and for each subgroup estimate the following equation using OLS:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1(H_i) + \beta_2(J_i) + \varepsilon_i$$

where i indexes subjects, Y is the outcome of interest, H is a binary indicator coded 1 for assignment to the housing treatment and 0 otherwise, J is a binary indicator coded 1 for assignment to the jobs treatment and 0 otherwise, and ε is the error term.

For any given outcome and party subgroup examined, the quantity β_1 is the conditional average treatment effect of the housing treatment (relative to control), and the quantity β_2 is the conditional average treatment effect of the jobs treatment (relative to control). We test the null hypotheses that each of these quantities is equal to zero using a two-sided test.

4.2 Robustness Check

As a robustness check, we repeat the main analyses but additionally condition on subjects who identify as white.

4.3 Exploratory Analysis

We additionally conduct exploratory analyses of the difference in effects between the two treatment conditions (i.e., $\beta_1 - \beta_2$ from the estimating equation above). We do not have theoretical expectations about whether one treatment should have a larger effect on outcomes than the other, and therefore test the null hypothesis that $\beta_1 - \beta_2 = 0$ using a two-sided test.

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