

# The Marley Hypothesis: Denial of Racism Reflects Ignorance of History

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## Abstract

This study used a signal detection paradigm to explore the *Marley hypothesis*—that group differences in perception of racism reflect dominant-group denial of and ignorance about the extent of past racism. White American students from a midwestern university and Black American students from two historically Black universities completed surveys about their historical knowledge and perception of racism. Relative to Black participants, White participants perceived less racism in both isolated incidents and systemic manifestations of racism. They also performed worse on a measure of historical knowledge (i.e., they did not discriminate historical fact from fiction), and this group difference in historical knowledge mediated the differences in perception of racism. Racial identity relevance moderated group differences in perception of systemic manifestations of racism (but not isolated incidents), such that group differences were stronger among participants who scored higher on a measure of racial identity relevance. The results help illuminate the importance of *epistemologies of ignorance*: cultural-psychological tools that afford denial of and inaction about injustice.

## Keywords

sociocultural factors, social perception, minority groups, knowledge level, intergroup dynamics

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If you know your history/then you will know where  
you're comin' from/and you wouldn't have to ask me/  
who the heck do I think I am.

—Marley & Williams (1983)

Observers consistently note that people from dominant racial groups perceive less racism in mainstream society than do people from subordinate racial groups (e.g., Brown et al., 2003; Durrheim, Mtose, & Brown, 2011; see Newport, 2012). Conventional understandings locate this difference in forces that lead subordinate-group observers to exaggerate the extent of racism in mainstream society (see Wise, 2006, on “playing the race card”).<sup>1</sup> Besides portraying perception of racism as the deviant phenomenon that requires explanation, these accounts imply that dominant-group tendencies to perceive less racism constitute an unremarkable standard that does not require explanation because it faithfully reflects objective reality (Hegarty & Pratto, 2004). In contrast, a cultural-psychology analysis emphasizes two strategies to reveal and critique the particular cultural understandings and identity-defensive ideologies that are implicit in conventional or mainstream accounts of psychological phenomena (Adams & Salter, 2007).

## Denaturalizing Denial of Racism: Identity Relevance

One strategy is to critically examine patterns that conventional understandings portray as normative standards. A growing literature on denial of privilege suggests that dominant-group minimization of racism is not an unbiased reflection of objective reality, but instead reflects identity-defensive motivations (e.g., Adams, Tormala, & O'Brien, 2006; Unzueta & Lowery, 2008). More generally, perception and denial of racism bear the influence of identity-relevant processing. Research in North American settings suggests that perception of racism is negatively correlated with identification as White, but positively correlated with identification as Black (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Crocker, Luhtanen, Broadnax, & Blaine, 1999; O'Brien et al., 2009; Operario & Fiske, 2001).

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## Normalizing Perception of Racism: Reality Attunement

Another strategy is to “normalize” patterns of subordinate-group experience that conventional understandings portray as abnormal. Group differences in perception of racism may arise because subordinate-group respondents are attuned to knowledge that dominant-group respondents lack. Given the importance of historical representations for understanding of current events (Fischhoff & Beyth, 1975; Liu & Hilton, 2005), we propose that subordinate-group respondents may perceive current racism because they have accurate knowledge about documented incidents of past racism. In contrast, dominant-group respondents may deny racism because they are ignorant about this historically documented reality (Nelson, Adams, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2010). This proposal implies the *Marley hypothesis*:

Accurate knowledge about documented incidents of past racism will be greater in subordinate-group communities than in dominant-group communities, and this difference in reality attunement will partly account for (i.e., mediate) group differences in perception of racism in current events.

## The Current Study

To assess the reality attunement of racism perception, we adapted a paradigm from signal detection theory (Green & Swets, 1966). Participants completed a history test in which they made true/false judgments for plausible statements about past racism. Some statements concerned well-documented incidents that experts consensually agree are true (i.e., *factual signal*). Other statements concerned incidents that we fabricated to resemble documented incidents (i.e., *fictional noise*). The Marley hypothesis suggests that participants from subordinate-identity communities will perform better on such a test than will participants from dominant-identity communities—specifically, that subordinate-group participants will have a greater tendency to correctly identify well-documented incidents as true (i.e., *hits*), but no greater tendency to incorrectly claim fabricated incidents are true (i.e., *false alarms*)—and that this group difference in reality attunement will (partially) mediate group differences in perception of racism.

A second hypothesis concerns the identity relevance of racism perception. Systemic manifestations of racism present a greater challenge to the legitimacy of mainstream society and are more difficult to quarantine from one’s self-image than are isolated incidents of racism (Blodorn, O’Brien, & Kordys, 2012; Unzueta & Lowery, 2008). Accordingly, the identity-relevance hypothesis proposes that (a) group differences in racism perception will be greater for systemic manifestations than for isolated incidents, and (b) the relationship between racism perception and racial identity relevance—negative in direction among racially dominant groups, but positive in direction among racially subordinate groups—will be stronger

for perception of racism in systemic manifestations than for perception of racism in isolated incidents.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were students in introductory psychology courses. They included 199 European American students from a predominantly White, public university in the midwestern United States and 74 African American students from two historically Black universities in the United States.

### Procedure

Participants reported to the lab in small groups; an experimenter (who was always of the same race as the people in the group) administered the following measures.

**Historical knowledge.** Participants completed a “Black history” quiz. Our focus was a measure of critical knowledge, which consisted of 11 true statements about past racism (e.g., “The F.B.I. [Federal Bureau of Investigation] has employed illegal techniques (e.g., hidden microphones in motels) in an attempt to discredit African American political leaders during the civil rights movement”) and 5 false statements about past racism (e.g., “African American Paul Ferguson was shot outside of his Alabama home for trying to integrate professional football”).<sup>2</sup> Participants indicated whether each item was true or false and reported their level of certainty on a scale from 1 (*guessing*) to 5 (*certain*).<sup>3</sup>

**Racial identity relevance.** Participants completed the four-item Private Collective Self-Esteem subscale of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSE; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) with reference to their racial identity (e.g., “In general, I’m glad to be a member of my racial group”). The response scale ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*;  $\alpha = .67$ ).

**Perception of racism.** We adapted a measure of racism perception from previous research (Adams et al., 2006; Branscombe et al., 1999). Participants used a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*certainly*) to indicate the degree to which 14 items described cases of racism. Nine items referred to *systemic manifestations* (e.g., “the portrayal of African Americans in U.S. entertainment media”;  $\alpha = .87$ ). Five items referred to *isolated incidents* (e.g., “Several people walk into a restaurant at the same time. The server attends to all the White customers first. The last customer served happens to be the only person of color”;  $\alpha = .82$ ).

## Results

To examine group differences in racism perception, we conducted a mixed-model analysis of variance (ANOVA) with participant’s self-reported racial categorization as a between-subjects factor (Black or African American vs. White or

European American) and racism type (isolated vs. systemic) as a within-subjects factor. This analysis revealed the hypothesized Racial Category  $\times$  Racism Type interaction,  $F(1, 274) = 7.12, p = .008, \eta_p^2 = .03$ . To interpret this interaction, we examined the between-group difference for each type of racism perception. Results were consistent with the identity-relevance hypothesis; specifically, the tendency for European Americans to perceive less racism than African Americans was stronger for systemic manifestations,  $t(271) = 10.19, p < .001, d = 1.24$ , than for isolated incidents,  $t(271) = 6.55, p < .001, d = 0.80$  (see Table 1).

Consistent with the hypothesized difference in knowledge of historically documented racism, results indicated that African Americans had a higher hit rate (i.e., confidently responding “true” to consensually true items), but not a higher false alarm rate (i.e., confidently responding “true” to fabricated items), compared with European Americans (see Table 1).<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, scores on the measure of reality attunement—the discrimination index ( $d'$ ), indicating the ability to separate truthful signal from fictional noise—were nearly 3 times better for African Americans than for European Americans,  $t(271) = 7.70, p < .001, d = 0.93$  (see Table 1).

### Test of the Marley hypothesis

To test the Marley hypothesis—the idea that group differences in perception of current racism reflect group differences in attunement to documented historical knowledge—we conducted a mediation analysis for each type of racism perception (Baron & Kenny, 1986).<sup>5</sup> These analyses confirmed reliable relationships between racial category and knowledge of historically documented racism ( $d'$ ), between knowledge of historically documented racism and each type of racism perception, and between racial category and each type of racism perception (Fig. 1). Analyses with racial category and historical knowledge as simultaneous predictors of racism perception revealed that their relationships to both types of racism perception became smaller, but were still significant (Fig. 1). Consistent with the Marley hypothesis, a Sobel (1982) test confirmed that the indirect effect of racial category on racism perception via knowledge of historically documented racism

differed from zero for both isolated events ( $z = 4.80, p < .001$ ) and systemic manifestations ( $z = 5.47, p < .001$ ).

### Implications of identity relevance

Identity relevance scores did not differ as a function of racial category,  $t(271) = 1.35, p < .10$  (see Table 1). We conducted multiple regression analyses with racial category, knowledge of historically documented racism ( $d'$ ), identity relevance (CSE score), and their interaction terms as simultaneous predictors of racism perception.<sup>6</sup> The analysis for perception of racism in isolated incidents revealed no interactions,  $ps > .14$ . The main-effects model indicated that only racial category,  $\beta = 0.27, p < .001$ , and historical knowledge,  $\beta = 0.24, p < .001$ , were significantly related to perception of racism in isolated incidents. Identity relevance (CSE) was not a significant predictor of racism perception in isolated incidents,  $\beta = 0.03, p = .56$ .

The analysis of perception of racism in systemic manifestations revealed a significant Racial Category  $\times$  CSE interaction,  $\beta = 0.18, p = .002$ , and the orthogonal main effect of knowledge about historically documented racism,  $\beta = 0.21, p < .001$ . A plot of the interaction, created using an online tool (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006), appears in Figure 2. To interpret this interaction, we conducted separate regression analyses for African American and European American participants with CSE score, historical knowledge, and their interaction term as predictors of racism perception. The interaction effects were not significant,  $\beta s < 0.12, ps > .43$ ; historical knowledge was a significantly positive predictor of racism perception for both African Americans and European Americans,  $\beta s > 0.22, ps < .03$ ; and CSE showed the hypothesized opposite-direction relationships with racism perception: a positive relationship among African Americans,  $\beta = 0.32, p = .025$ , but a negative one among European Americans,  $\beta = -0.18, p = .011$ .

### Discussion

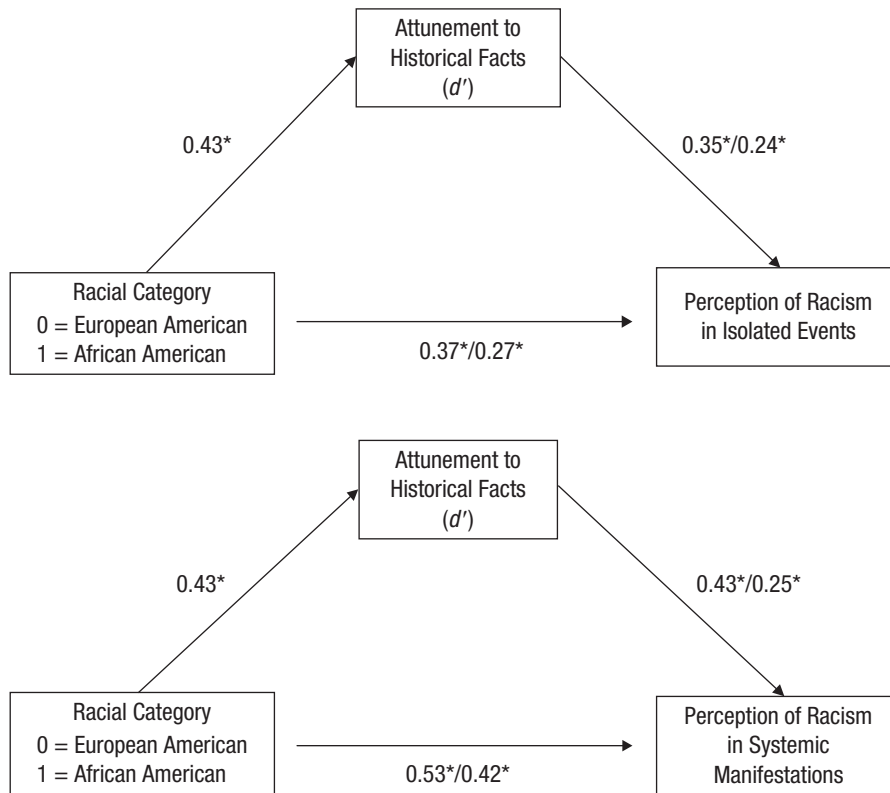
Regression analyses confirmed hypotheses regarding the identity relevance of racism perception. Racism perception was differentially related to CSE scores in the two groups of

**Table 1.** Between-Group Differences in Means for Key Variables

Variable	African Americans ( <i>n</i> = 74)	European Americans ( <i>n</i> = 199)	<i>t</i> (271)
POR (isolated incidents)	5.91 (1.02)	4.80 (1.31)	6.55*
POR (systemic manifestations)	5.30 (1.10)	3.76 (1.11)	10.19*
Historical knowledge: hit rate	0.76 (0.20)	0.51 (0.24)	7.96*
Historical knowledge: false alarm rate	0.31 (0.20)	0.33 (0.23)	0.67
Reality attunement ( $d'$ )	1.40 (0.85)	0.53 (0.83)	7.70*
Identity relevance	6.31 (0.75)	6.14 (1.00)	1.35

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses. POR = perception of racism.

\* $p < .01$ .



**Fig. 1.** Results of mediation analyses testing the Marley hypothesis. The diagrams depict mediation models of racial-category differences in perception of racism for isolated events (top panel) and systemic manifestations (bottom panel), as mediated by the measure of reality attunement (i.e., knowledge of historically documented racism). In cases of coefficient pairs, the coefficient to the left of the slash refers to the simple relationship between the predictor and outcome (i.e., without the other predictor present in the model), and the coefficient to the right of the slash refers to the independent relationship of the predictor and outcome when the other predictor was present in the model. Asterisks indicate significant coefficients ( $p < .01$ ).

participants—negatively among European Americans, but positively among African Americans—and these relationships emerged for racism perception in systemic manifestations, but not isolated incidents. In addition, the analyses illuminated the relationship between historical knowledge and racism perception. Consistent with the Marley hypothesis, results showed that knowledge about historically documented incidents of racism significantly predicted racism perception in both isolated incidents and systemic forms—a robust effect that did not vary with racial category or racial identity relevance.

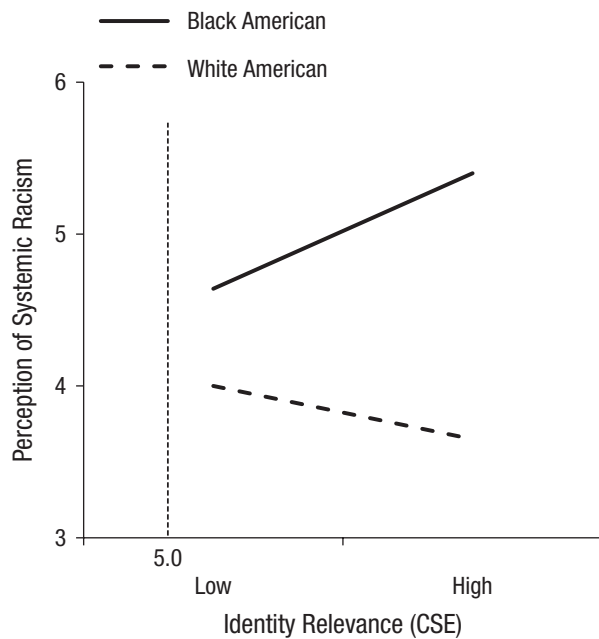
### Collective memory and collective identity

Although our results are consistent with the Marley hypothesis, the design does not permit the conclusion that knowledge about historically documented racism is the ultimate source of differences in racism perception; instead, both historical knowledge and perception of present racism may reflect the influence of a third variable. For example, scholars of collective memory emphasize that experience of collective identity both reflects and promotes particular representations of history (Liu & Hilton, 2005; Loewen, 1995; Sahdra & Ross,

2007), which suggests that glorifying constructions of identity may underlie both ignorance of relevant history and denial of present injustice. In any case, the purpose of the present study was not to demonstrate that historical knowledge (or ignorance) is an “ultimate” cause of racism perception (or denial); instead, we used historical knowledge as a normative standard for attunement to consensual reality.<sup>7</sup> Our results indicate that better attunement to this standard is associated with greater perception of racism rather than with greater denial of racism, which suggests that the latter—not the former—requires explanation.

### Toward a psychology of ignorance

The conclusion that denial of racism reflects ignorance of historical facts raises questions about the relevance of the items we used to measure historical knowledge. A critic might argue that these items about documented incidents of racism constitute “specialized” knowledge that is tangential to the primary narrative of history. According to this critique, White participants might score higher than Black participants on some other measure of historical knowledge that is more “standard”



**Fig. 2.** Perception of systemic racism as a function of racial category and racial identity relevance (Private Collective Self-Esteem subscale of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale, or CSE; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). The vertical line represents the lower bound of identity relevance (CSE scores  $\geq 5.0$ , corresponding to  $\geq -1.23$  SD units) at which the observed group differences in perception of systemic racism were significant. *Low* and *high* identity relevance refer, respectively, to scores 1 standard deviation below and 1 standard deviation above the mean.

by mainstream or conventional criteria, and that measure may be unrelated to racism perception.<sup>8</sup> In response, we emphasize that judgments about relevance of historical knowledge are not disinterested reflections of objective reality, but instead are subject to the same identity pressures as racism perception. Indeed, research suggests that White Americans deny the relevance of past racism to present events, especially under conditions of high identity concern (Kurtiş, Adams, & Yellow Bird, 2010).

Moreover, the typical determinant of relevance in mainstream representations of history is not correspondence to truth, but the exercise of authority. People who dominate cultural production impose beliefs and desires about relevance onto material reality, typically choosing to preserve knowledge about collective triumphs while silencing knowledge about collective misdeeds (Trouillot, 1995). As Renan (1882) noted, “forgetfulness . . . and historical error are essential features in the creation of a nation” (p. 7). Through acts of preferential selection, people produce tools for collective memory—and collective ignorance—that resonate with identity-glorifying beliefs and direct activity toward identity-glorifying ends (Loewen, 1995). The investigation of racism perception illuminates the need for a cultural psychology of ignorance not as mere absence of knowledge, but instead as the product of knowledge technologies (i.e., epistemologies of ignorance; Mills, 1997) that obscure awareness of facts that might otherwise be obvious.

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## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

## Supplemental Material

Additional supporting information may be found at <http://pss.sagepub.com/content/by/supplemental-data>

## Notes

1. In noteworthy contrast, research suggests that people from subordinate groups sometimes *minimize* the extent of racism relative to some “objective” baseline (e.g., Taylor, Wright, Moghaddam, & Lalonde, 1990). In this case, observed group differences reflect tendencies for dominant groups to minimize racism in mainstream society to an even greater extent.
2. Table S1 of the Supplemental Material available online lists the items for all measures.
3. The quiz also included a measure of celebratory knowledge, which consisted of eight true statements about noteworthy achievements (e.g., “An African American operated in the first successful open heart surgery”) and six false statements about noteworthy achievements (e.g., “An African American man invented the cotton gin”). Similar to results for critical history items (see the Results section), results for celebratory history items indicated that reality-attunement scores ( $d'$ ) were significantly higher for African Americans ( $M = 1.36$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) than for European Americans ( $M = 0.33$ ,  $SD = 0.61$ ),  $t(271) = 11.58$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, reality-attunement scores for celebratory knowledge, unlike reality-attunement scores for critical history items, were unrelated to racism perception, so we do not discuss this measure of historical knowledge further in this article.
4. Because our interest was knowledge that participants held with some conviction (even if incorrect), we calculated hit and false alarm rates using only “true” responses for which participants indicated confidence of 3 or greater on our 5-point scale. Conclusions did not change when we removed the confidence criterion.
5. Analyses that controlled for CSE and the Racial Category  $\times$  CSE interaction did not qualify results or interpretations, so we present the more parsimonious mediation model here.
6. We conducted these analyses using mean-centered predictors. Table S2 of the Supplemental Material reports zero-order correlations separately for African American and European American samples.
7. Evidence for the influence of historical knowledge as a proximal cause of racism perception comes from concurrent research in which we manipulated exposure to historical facts and confirmed that exposure to knowledge about past racism leads participants to perceive greater racism in current events (Salter & Adams, 2012).
8. Celebratory Black history facts are an example (Table S1 of the Supplemental Material). Although accurate knowledge of celebratory

Black history items was greater among African Americans than among European Americans, this knowledge was unrelated to racism perception and did not mediate group differences.

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