

Thoughtful people more likely to infer improvements in race relations

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According to a recent Pew Research poll, a majority of Americans believe that there is still at least some racism against African Americans in this country. But new research by Jane L. Risen of the University of Chicago Booth School of Business shows that people are more likely to deny the persistence of racism after being exposed to a successful African American. Notably, people who are most thoughtful seem to be the ones who are most vulnerable to making these quick inferences.

In "If He Can Do It, So Can They: Exposure to Counterstereotypically Successful Exemplars Prompts Automatic Inferences," from the March issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Risen and colleague Clayton R. Critcher of the University of California at Berkeley demonstrate that when white people are exposed to images of exceptionally successful blacks, they quickly infer that racial disparity is not due to the persistence of racism, but rather due to shortcomings in the African American Community.

"When Obama was elected there was a narrative suggesting that his election somehow proved that we live in a post-racial world where African Americans face no disadvantages. People seem to infer that, 'If he can do it, anyone can,' implying that if other black people are not successful, it's not because of continued racism, but instead, because of something about them."

Critcher and Risen conducted eight different experiments in which participants were exposed to images of successful people and then, in

what they thought was an unrelated task, answered questions about the current state of race relations. Even when only one of the many images was of an exceptional African American, such as Barack Obama or Oprah Winfrey, the conclusions subjects drew about the state of [racism](#) were affected.

However, these automatic inferences, as the researchers describe them, do not reflect the participants' explicit reasoning or beliefs and in fact occur outside of their awareness. Once they were explicitly asked about the meaning of these exemplars for race relations in America, the subjects stated that these exceptional Blacks should not be taken as evidence that race does not get in the way of success.

The researchers show that the disparity between the participants' quick conclusions and their beliefs is strongest for subjects who are most thoughtful and deliberate. We typically think that errors in judgment occur because people simply do not think enough. But the study suggests that the same characteristics that make people think carefully also are more likely to cause those same people to make automatic inferences because they are more sensitive to subtle information.

More information: [psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=b...
uy&id=2014-07574-001](https://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=b...uy&id=2014-07574-001)

Provided by University of Chicago Booth School of Business

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