

# Messages of individual blame for black Americans perpetuate racial inequality

July 8 2015

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A recent [CDC report](#) calls into question the widely reported belief that Black fathers are more absent in their children's lives than White fathers - showing that while more Black fathers live apart from their children, they are just as involved with their children as members of other racial groups in the same living situations. So why is it that messages about Black absentee fathers, such as Obama's 2008 Father's Day address, are so pervasive in society?

A new paper, published today in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, suggests that such messages align with broader beliefs that Black Americans place too much blame on "the system" and instead need to hear messages that encourage individual responsibility. A consequence of that, the researchers say, is that they perpetuate structural racial inequalities.

Phia Salter of Texas A&M University and her colleagues were interested in President Obama's well-known speech on absentee dads, in large part because it was delivered in a predominately African-American church. "We were interested in whether the individual blame account of missing Black fathers gained attention because it was given in front of a Black audience," she explains. "We thought it may not be just what President Obama said in his speech, but to whom he said it to that mattered." It struck them that many of the critiques of his speech for ignoring societal factors were largely coming from the Black community (even this recent [Op-ed](#)).

So led by then-grad students Kelly Hirsch and Luyen Thai, Salter join efforts with her colleague Rebecca Schlegel to design several studies that investigated the interactions between messaging, audience and third-party perceptions. First, to measure general perceptions, they surveyed participants online about whether they thought various groups (e.g., Black, White, Latino, Democrats, Women) believe that society is fair. The participants thought that Blacks reject the idea that society is fair and do so more than other groups.

In a second study, the researchers asked participants to read a statement about racial inequality that either suggested that racial disparities stem from failures and inadequacies of individuals or from failures and inadequacies of systems. They then asked participants to what extent they thought various groups needed or wanted each message. They found that third-party observers preferred individual blame messages delivered to Black audiences, as this is what they perceived Black audiences "need to hear."

In a third set of studies to experimentally test these perceptions, the researchers asked participants to read and respond to an excerpt from a speech given to either a Black or a White audience. The speech was actually an excerpt from Obama's 2008 Father's Day speech that was either the original text emphasizing personal responsibility or an edited version emphasizing a systemic account of missing fathers.

"We found that believing the speech was being delivered to a Black versus White audience increased the appeal of an individual blame account of the speech but not a system blame version of the speech," Salter says. "Although politicians and others who deliver speeches are likely to take into account who may be listening, prior social psychological research had not considered how third parties might take into account the audience's racial composition."

The implication of this work - that people think that Black Americans have a tendency to blame the system too much and are in need of messages that counteract their perceptions of injustice - is troubling for two at least reasons, Salter says. "First, by minimizing or ignoring the ways in which structural inequality persists, we are unlikely to search for, endorse or enact solutions that might address these forms of societal problems."

Second, she says, targeting Black Americans with the idea that they caused their own circumstances by not working hard enough "reinforces the idea that Blacks are ultimately responsible for their own disadvantage, even when structural inequalities persist." Therefore, these individual blame messages are detrimental to efforts to create a fair and just society.

The work fits in with previous research that suggests that events that represent exceptional accomplishments of a few minority group members are used to demonstrate that race does not matter and, in turn, render policies that address [racial inequality](#) irrelevant. Following Obama's presidential victory, for example, [researchers found that](#) people were more likely to conclude that racism was less of a problem and expressed decreased support for policies aimed at furthering racial equality.

Heading into the next Presidential election, this research is an important reminder to be critical consumers of information, Salter says. "Political messages are encoded with a lot of information and the perceived audience is also a part of the message," she says. "People make judgments about whether political speeches contain the 'right' message for the right audience. We should all take a step back and evaluate why we think a particular message is 'right' for a certain audience."

**More information:** The paper, "Who Needs Individual

Responsibility? Audience Race and Message Content Influence Third-Party Evaluations of Political Messages" by Phia S. Salter, Kelly A. Hirsch, Rebecca J. Schlegel and Luyen T. Thai, was published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science* online on July 8, 2015.  
[spp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../50615590447.abstract](http://spp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../50615590447.abstract)

Provided by SAGE Publications

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