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Symbolic Racism and Whites' Attitudes Towards Punitive and Preventive Crime Policies*

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Abstract This study analyzes the determinants of Whites' support for punitive and preventive crime policies. It focuses on the predictive power of beliefs about race as described by symbolic racism theory. A dataset with 849 White respondents from three waves of the Los Angeles County Social Survey was used. In order to assess the weight of racial factors in crime policy attitudes, the effects of a range of race-neutral attitude determinants were controlled for, namely individual and structural crime attributions, perceived seriousness of crime, crime victimization, conservatism and news exposure. Results show a strong effect of symbolic racism on both types of crime policies, and in particular on punitive policies. High levels of symbolic racism are associated with support for tough, punitive crime policies and with opposition to preventive policies. Sub-dimensions of symbolic racism qualified these relationships, by showing that internal symbolic racism (assessing perceived individual deficiencies of Blacks) was most strongly predictive of punitiveness, whereas external symbolic racism (denial of institutional discrimination) predicted opposition to structural remedies. On the whole, despite the effects of race-neutral factors, the impact of symbolic racism on policy attitudes was substantial. Thus, White public

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opinion on both punitive and preventive crime policies is at least partially driven by racial prejudice.

Keywords Symbolic racism · Crime punishment · Crime prevention · Crime policies · Public opinion

Introduction

In contemporary North American society, crime is in many ways linked to questions of race and ethnicity. For instance, racial bias in media coverage of crime is well documented, in particular coverage of street crime such as theft, physical aggression or homicide (Campbell, 1995; Mendelberg, 2001). First, non-White minority group members are presented more often than Whites as offenders in the media (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b; Roberts & Stalans, 1997). Blacks in particular are disproportionately portrayed as crime suspects in news featuring violent crime (e.g., Campbell, 1995; Peffley, Shields, & Williams, 1996). Second, in news reports Blacks and Latinos are presented more often as law breakers than as law defenders (e.g., police officers), whereas the opposite is true for Whites (Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b). Third, comparisons of television news with official crime and employment reports reveal racial bias (Dixon, Azocar, & Casas, 2003; Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b). Blacks are overrepresented as offenders in the television news compared to the official crime rates, and underrepresented as police officers. Whites, in turn, are overrepresented as victims and as police officers. Finally, experimental research on racial bias in the media also reveals that Blacks are more likely to be misidentified as perpetrators of violent crime than of nonviolent crime (Oliver & Fonash, 2002; Oliver, Jackson, Moses, & Dangerfield, 2004).

Evidence of racial discrimination in the American criminal justice system is more controversial, however. Members of ethnic minority groups represent a strongly disproportionate share of current prison inmates (Currie, 1998; Gilliam, 1998; Johnson, Farrell, & Stoloff, 2000; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Evidence about the effects of the race of defendants on decisions within the criminal justice system (the “race-of-defendant effect”) is nevertheless equivocal. Although results of a study carried out in Georgia provides incomplete evidence of race-of-defendant effects in jury decision making (Baldus, Woodworth, & Pulanski, 1990), a similar study in Philadelphia reveals a substantial race-of-defendant effect after controlling for aggravating and mitigating circumstances (Baldus, Woodworth, Zuckerman, Weiner, & Broffitt, 1998): If the perpetrator was Black, sentences were harsher than when the perpetrator was White. In capital cases, however, there is clear evidence that defendants whose victims are White face an enhanced risk of receiving a death sentence compared to defendants whose victims are Black (Baldus et al., 1990; Blume, Eisenberg, & Johnson, 1998; Gross & Mauro, 1984).

Race is clearly important in media portrayals of crime and in the legal system. However, it may be difficult to conclude with certainty that the overrepresentation of minority group members as crime perpetrators and defendants is due to racial discrimination in the criminal justice system. Individual differences among officials in the justice system surely exist. But their behavior is supposed to be race-neutral. Are punitive officials also more racially prejudiced, and therefore more likely to single out Blacks for especially punitive treatment?

To answer this question, one starting point is to study the role of racial prejudice in public opinion. Previous evidence for a link between punitive attitudes and racial prejudice comes mainly from studies on the death penalty. Americans’ support for the death penalty remains high (Ellsworth & Gross, 1994; Gallup Poll Analyses, 2003; Warr, 1995). The desire for retribution underlies support for capital punishment more than does the belief in deterrence (Ellsworth &

Gross, 1994; see also Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002). Racial intolerance (both antipathy and stereotyping) is linked to greater support for death penalty and other harsh punishments among Whites, even after controlling for relevant demographic and attitudinal variables (Aquirre & Baker, 1993; Barkan & Cohn, 1994; Peffley & Hurwitz, 2002; Roberts & Stalans, 1997; Soss, Langbein, & Metelko, 2003; Young, 1991). Moreover, policy attitudes only marginally reflect a response to real threats such as feeling vulnerable to crime (Sears, Lau, Tyler, & Allen, 1980; Tyler & Boeckmann, 1997; Tyler & Weber, 1982).

The primary goal of this paper is to explore the extent to which Whites' attitudes towards a broader range of crime policies reflect racial bias. Our general contention is that a modern form of racism—symbolic racism—is a key factor in predicting crime policy support. In the present study, we focus on attitudes towards street crime because this type of crime is most pervasively present in public discourse, and also because it is commonly associated with Blacks and other ethnic minorities (e.g., Gordon, Bindrim, McNicholas, & Walden, 1988). We therefore expect symbolic racism to play a major role in explanations of attitudes towards policies aimed to address street crime in particular.

As indicated above, prior research has comprehensively demonstrated the relationship between racial prejudice and support for capital punishment. Our research goes beyond capital punishment to investigate opinions on various other crime policies as well. We distinguish between two fundamental societal answers to the problem of crime: punitive and preventive policies. Punitive remedies for crime (e.g., death penalty or “three-strikes and you’re out” policies¹) aim to punish wrongdoing and to minimize the likelihood of future criminal behavior (Carlsmith et al., 2002). On the basis of a rational choice model of criminal behavior, tough punishments are intended to make the alternative of committing a crime as costly as possible (Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). Preventive policies, in contrast, aim at reducing crime by addressing structural conditions that are thought to produce crime such as poverty, unemployment, or lack of education (Currie, 1998; Roberts & Stalans, 1997; Young, 1999). Punitive policies tend also to be individualized, directed towards particular wrongdoers, whereas preventive policies are targeted at entire social categories such as the unemployed.

Using survey data from the Los Angeles County Social Survey (LACSS), we assess the role of symbolic racism in Whites' attitudes towards punitive and preventive crime policies. We infer a possible causal role of beliefs about race on policy attitudes, if the correlations between racism and policy preferences survive controls on a range of race-neutral factors that could provide alternative explanations for crime policy attitudes.

Symbolic racism

Symbolic racism theory has been extensively applied to explain public opinion towards social policies. Research has provided evidence that attitudes towards racially targeted social policies (e.g., affirmative action, welfare policies) are strongly predicted by symbolic racism, over and above race-neutral factors such as political conservatism and self-interest (see Sears & Funk, 1991; Sears, van Laar, Carrillo, & Kosterman, 1997). According to the symbolic racism approach (Kinder & Sears, 1981; Sears & Henry, 2005), racism has not disappeared despite the decrease of traditional forms of racism such as institutional discrimination and segregation or Whites' beliefs in the biological inferiority of Blacks. Instead in present-day America, where abstract principles

¹ Many of the states in the United States now mandate more or less extensively increased sentences for repeat offenders under laws called “Three Strikes and You’re Out.” Under this law, anyone convicted of three felonies is subject to a mandatory prison sentence of 25 years to life. The present study was carried out in California, where this law is one of the strictest in the country.

of racial equality are a powerful norm, a new less flagrant form of racism has emerged (see also Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Katz & Hass, 1988; McConahay, 1986; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). It manifests itself in beliefs that discrimination no longer poses a major problem, that Blacks have inferior work ethics, that they have had undeserved advantages, and that they are too demanding (e.g., Henry & Sears, 2002; Sears & Henry, 2005).

According to this theory, symbolic racism stems from a blend of anti-Black affect and traditional values (Sears & Henry, 2003). Anti-Black affect is a spontaneous and often unacknowledged negative emotion that reflects fear, anger, distaste, or simple dislike (Sears, 1988). Moreover, Blacks are perceived to violate, more than Whites, traditional American values such as self-reliance, the work ethic, and respect for authority. Symbolic racism thereby reflects Whites' moral codes prescribing socially desirable behaviors in an orderly society. Putting the two elements together, symbolic racism derives from perceiving Blacks as threatening a social order based on conformity to a broad value-consensus. Recent research has indeed demonstrated that anti-Black affect and traditional values, individualism in particular, underlie symbolic racism (Sears & Henry, 2003). The term "symbolic" underlines the presumed roots of the construct in abstract moral values rather than in personal experience or in a calculating defense of the material interests of Whites (e.g., Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Kinder & Sears, 1981; Sears & Funk, 1991). Hence, it also underlines the reference to Blacks as an abstract collectivity rather than to specific Black individuals.

Although symbolic racism has usually been studied as a one-dimensional construct, a two-dimensional view distinguishing an internal and an external variant has recently received empirical support (Henry & Sears, 2002; Tarman & Sears, 2005). Internal symbolic racism deals with beliefs in individual deficiencies of Blacks. Blacks are perceived as responsible for their personal failures, and making excessive demands for equality. This variant evokes the idea that Blacks do not work hard enough and that Blacks complain too much about being victims of racism. External symbolic racism, in contrast, describes perception of past and present structural conditions, as well as institutional treatment of Blacks without explicit reference to an active role of Blacks in producing those conditions. Thinking that discrimination is no longer a problem in the United States and that Blacks get too many special favors are examples of external symbolic racism. These two variants have slightly diverging relationships with other attitudinal constructs, but they are highly correlated (Tarman & Sears, 2005). They are thus thought to describe two dimensions of the same underlying belief system.

We use symbolic racism as our primary vehicle for assessing the role of prejudice in crime policy attitudes for two reasons, then. One is that it has consistently proven to be the version of racial prejudice that has the most powerful effects on preferences in the political arena (e.g., Bobo, 2000; Sears et al., 1997; Sidanius, Levin, Rabinowitz, & Federico, 1999). The other is that it is substantively relevant to ostensibly nonracial policy issues, both because such issues are implicitly racial, as we have argued, and because it is thought to be rooted in perceptions that Blacks violate consensual societal values, in this case norms against criminal behavior.

Supporting punishment and opposing prevention through symbolic racism

Research has demonstrated that symbolic racism contributes significantly to Whites' opposition to racially targeted policies such as affirmative action and other minority-friendly policies (Sears & Henry, 2005; Sears et al., 1997; Tarman & Sears, 2005). But these studies focus on policies that are explicitly targeted for Blacks. Crime policies are not explicitly targeted for Blacks or any other demographic group. Nevertheless, we expect symbolic racism to predict support for

crime policies which punish Blacks or deny them improved structural conditions. The expected association between symbolic racism and support for punitive policies has a distinctively moral quality. In the conception underlying symbolic racism, the social order is threatened by Blacks' inherent tendency not to "play by the rules." Similarly, the conception underlying punitive responses to crime views immoral and disrespectful attitudes as generating delinquent behavior, and so threatening social order (Feather, 1996; Roberts & Stalans, 1997; Tyler & Boeckmann, 1997; Tyler & Weber, 1982). Blacks' presumed deviations from common moral values generate the desire for social control of unacceptable and threatening behavior (Hamilton & Rauma, 1995). Punitive policies are a powerful device to assert and bolster common values. Therefore this study tests for a broader possible set of effects of symbolic racism than do past studies on the implicitly racial issue of crime.

We thus expect symbolic racism to be strongly related to support for tough, punitive crime policies, but also to opposition to preventive policies. Moreover, the relationship between crime policy attitudes and symbolic racism should be qualified by symbolic racism's internal and external variants. Although both variants of symbolic racism should be associated with Whites' support for punitive crime remedies in general, the link should be stronger for the internal variant, which taps into beliefs about individual deficiencies of Blacks (Tarman & Sears, 2005; see also Peffley & Hurwitz, 2002). On the other hand, external symbolic racism should be related more strongly than internal symbolic racism to opposition to preventive crime policies. Both the denial of the disadvantaged position of Blacks in society as well as their perceived undeservingness should motivate resistance to bettering the social conditions.

Race-neutral factors and support for crime policies

Although we claim in this paper that symbolic racism is a key determinant of crime policy attitudes, it is not the only determinant. Yet, if symbolic racism makes a unique contribution to explaining punitive and preventive crime policy attitudes, its predictive power should remain high even after controlling for the effects of the most commonly advocated alternative explanations of crime policy attitudes. It is particularly important to disentangle the specific role of racial beliefs from other, mostly race-neutral predictors of crime policy attitudes. The most often cited include attributions for crime, perceived seriousness of crime, self-interest, political conservatism, and media consumption.

One important competing motive for crime policy attitudes involves lay causal explanations, or attributions, for crime (e.g., Currie, 1998; Weiner, 1995; Young, 1991). Individual explanations reflect perceptions that criminal behaviour stems from individuals' own attributes and one's immediate environment. Blame for crime is thus attributed, for example, to lax child rearing, loss of "family values," and the resulting irresponsible and aggressive personalities (e.g., Bennett, DiIulio, & Walters, 1996; Murray & Herrnstein, 1994). Such explanations should favour harsh punishment rather than preventive remedies, out of desire to correct individual wrong-doings. In contrast, we would expect structural attributions of crime, based on blaming the societal context (e.g., Jost & Banaji, 1994), to predict support for preventive structural remedies that aim to improve the conditions of the disadvantaged (e.g., Cullen et al., 1998; Hamilton & Rauma, 1995; Young, 1999).

Perceptions that the crime problem is getting more serious could also motivate support for punitive crime policies. Some may believe that the crime problem has gotten out of hand and that harsh punishment is the most effective way to decrease crime rates, irrespective of the race of the perpetrators. This could reflect a rational reasoning process rather than racist motives for support of punitive policies. In order to test this explanation, we need to include a measure of

perceived seriousness of random street violence in the explanatory model, to see if it overrides symbolic racism.

A third category of explanations consists of self-interest motives. Self-interest in the crime domain could be derived from personal experiences of crime victimisation. In addition, low-income people tend to be the most vulnerable to street crime because they often live in unsafe neighbourhoods. If self-interest is a major driving force behind tough crime policy preferences, then people with a prior history of victimisation as well as members of low-income groups should support such policies.

A fourth motive behind crime policy attitudes may be race-neutral political conservatism (e.g., Sniderman & Carmines, 1997). If support for tough crime policies is a reflection of conservatism, then the impact of symbolic racism on crime policy attitudes should be minimal once conservatism is controlled for.

A final possible source of policy attitudes is exposure to television news reports about crime. It could be argued that exposure to local news coverage routinely portraying minority members as crime suspects and offenders may reinforce a tough stance towards crime (e.g., Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000; Mendelberg, 2001). Experimental studies have indeed demonstrated that news coverage of crime implicitly activates racial attitudes (Valentino, 1999; Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002).

Overview of study

This study investigates the relationship between symbolic racism and the endorsement of punitive and preventive crime policies while simultaneously accounting for the effects of race-neutral factors. We expect symbolic racism to predict support for punitive and opposition to preventive crime policies. However, internal and external variants of symbolic racism should have somewhat different effects. On the one hand, when punitive policies are a response to individual misbehaviors, then the internal variant of symbolic racism (reflecting perceived internal deficiencies of Blacks) should be the stronger predictor of policy support. On the other hand, for people who tend to deny disparities between Whites and Blacks, the structural changes involved in preventive policies may not seem very relevant. For such policies, external symbolic racism should be the stronger predictor. We also expect the effects of symbolic racism to hold even when controlling for such race-neutral factors as individual and structural crime attributions, perceived seriousness of crime, self-interest, political conservatism, and exposure to crime news.

Method

The study used data from the 1997, 1998 and 1999 Los Angeles County Social Surveys (LACSS). The LACSS is an annual computer-assisted, random-digit-dial, telephone omnibus survey representing adults living in Los Angeles County. Only the subset of items relevant to crime was used in these analyses.

Participants

The overall sample consisted of 849 White adults ($n = 277$ in 1997, $n = 282$ in 1998, and $n = 290$ in 1999). Because symbolic racism has been theorized in terms of Whites' racism towards Blacks, the surveys assessed symbolic racism for White participants only. As a result, only Whites could be included in our analysis.

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Table 1 Principal components analysis on crime policies, after varimax rotation

| Items | 1. Component | 2. Component |
|----------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Three Strikes | .83 | |
| Death penalty | .81 | |
| Reduce poverty | .15 | .76 |
| Education of inmates | –.15 | .76 |

Note. Loadings > .10 are reported.

Fifty-six per cent of participants were female. The age of respondents varied from 18 to 91 years, with a mean of 47 years. Sixty percent of respondents had a college-level degree. Annual family income was measured on a 12-category ordinal-level measure ranging from 1 (*less than \$10,000*) to 12 (*over \$150,000*). The median annual family income category was \$51,000–\$60,000. The three surveys did not differ in respondents' sociodemographic characteristics, except that in 1998 the average income ($M = 6.62$, $SD = 3.35$) was slightly higher than in 1997 ($M = 5.94$, $SD = 2.92$), $F(2, 813) = 3.24$, $p < .05$. Preliminary analyses revealed few differences across the three surveys. As a result, they were pooled in order to gain statistical power.

Measures

Dependent variables

Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with four crime remedies ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*): (1) Enforcement of death penalty for persons convicted of murder ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.45$), (2) "Three strikes and you're out" legislation ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.29$), (3) Reducing poverty ($M = 1.78$, $SD = .95$), and (4) Providing prison inmates with education and job training ($M = 1.97$, $SD = 1.02$). Death penalty and three strikes legislation were used as measures of punitive crime policies, while reducing poverty and education of inmates were indicators of preventive remedies. A principal components analysis with Varimax rotation supported this distinction. Two factors were extracted with the eigenvalue > 1 criterion. Although death penalty and three strikes legislation ($r = .38$, $p < .001$) had high loadings on the first factor, explaining 34.8% of variance after rotation, reducing poverty and education of inmates ($r = .17$, $p < .001$) loaded on the second factor, explaining 28.9% of the variance (see Table 1). Therefore, punitive and preventive crime remedy composite scores were created. Overall, participants supported preventive ($M = 1.88$, $SD = .78$) more than punitive crime remedies ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.17$), $t(848) = 11.02$, $p < .001$.

Symbolic racism

Symbolic racism was assessed in each survey with a range of items (10 items in 1997, 9 items in 1998 and 7 items in 1999) from the Symbolic Racism 2000 Scale (Henry & Sears, 2002) measuring internal and external symbolic racism. The scales varied from 1 (*strongly agree/a lot/all of it*) to 4 or 5 (*strongly disagree/not at all/not much at all*). In the 1997 and 1999 waves, one of the items was measured on a 3-point scale.

Symbolic racism as a whole is conceptualized as composed of four main themes. Internal symbolic racism was assessed with items referring to two of these themes: (1) work ethic and

Table 2 Summary of fit measures of confirmatory factor analyses across waves

| Wave | Model | χ^2 | <i>df</i> | GFI | AGFI | CFI | RMSEA |
|------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----|------|------|-------|
| 1997 | 1 factor | 128.25*** | 35 | .90 | .84 | .89 | .10 |
| | 2 factor | 63.81*** | 34 | .95 | .92 | .96 | .06 |
| 1998 | 1 factor | 98.74*** | 27 | .92 | .86 | .85 | .10 |
| | 2 factor | 43.65* | 26 | .97 | .95 | .96 | .05 |
| 1999 | 1 factor | 48.32*** | 14 | .95 | .90 | .89 | .09 |
| | 2 factor | 12.07 | 13 | .99 | .97 | 1.00 | .00 |

Note. *df*: degrees of freedom, GFI: goodness-of-fit index, AGFI: adjusted goodness-of-fit index, CFI: comparative fit index, RMSEA: root mean square error of approximation.

* $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$.

individual responsibility, and (2) excessive demands. External symbolic racism was assessed with items tapping (3) denial of discrimination, and (4) undeserved advantage. Exploratory principal component analyses with Oblimin rotations yielded two factors consistent with the distinction between internal and external symbolic racism across the three waves (see Appendix for items in all waves). In preliminary analyses, the items measuring internal symbolic racism loaded on one factor and the external symbolic racism items on another, with the exception of two items in the 1998 wave. Although these two items were omitted from further analyses, the results were identical when they were included.

To confirm the validity of this two-factor solution, confirmatory factor analyses were carried out with AMOS 5.0 separately in all three waves (see also Tarman & Sears, 2005). Table 2 shows a series of fit indices in addition to chi-square statistics. The Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index (AGFI), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) range from 0 to 1, with values above 0.9 indicating a good fit to the data. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) with smaller values indicates a good fit. An acceptable RMSEA must be less than .10, with a value smaller than .08 denoting a reasonable fit and a value smaller than .05 a very good fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). Because a general symbolic racism factor is assumed to underlie internal and external symbolic racism, we tested models representing symbolic racism as a second-order factor. The results in Table 2 indicate that the two-factor model fits better than the one-factor model in all waves. Although the two-factor model showed a good fit, the one-factor model was on the boundary of acceptability. Nevertheless, the internal and external symbolic racism factors were highly correlated (1997: $\Phi = .73$; 1998: $\Phi = .65$; 1999: $\Phi = .56$).

The factor analyses confirmed the validity of the distinction between internal and external symbolic racism. Therefore internal ($\alpha = .67$) and external ($\alpha = .73$) symbolic racism scales were computed. They were highly intercorrelated ($r = .46$, $p < .001$). An overall composite scale, including items of both internal and external symbolic racism, was also computed ($\alpha = .78$). To remain consistent with previous work on symbolic racism, both the overall scale and its two variants were employed in the analyses. Our results replicate the exact assignment of specific items to the two variants obtained in the confirmatory models presented by Tarman and Sears (2005), and almost exactly the a priori assignments presented by Henry and Sears (2002).

Finally, as six out of nine items representing external symbolic racism were worded such that agreement indicated opposition to racism, and seven out of nine items representing internal symbolic racism were worded such that agreement reflected racism, we tested whether the factor structure was merely a product of an acquiescence response bias (Green & Citrin, 1994). An acquiescence measure was created from evenly balanced scales measuring attitudes other than

racism (patriotism in 1998 and crime attributions in 1997 and 1999, each with six to eight items) in which half the items were keyed in the “agree” direction and the other half in the “disagree” direction. The acquiescence score was calculated by simply adding the number of “agree” responses of each participant regardless of the direction of item wording. Each symbolic racism item was then regressed on this score, thereby yielding residual scores from which acquiescence bias had been partialled out. Factor analysis of these residual symbolic racism items still yielded the same two-factor structure.

Alternative predictors

Respondents were given a list of causes to which crime could be attributed. Failure of some groups in society to instill proper morals and values in their children ($M = 1.82$, $SD = 1.06$) and Breakdown of the family structure ($M = 1.60$, $SD = .87$) were used as individual attributions of crime, $r = .43$, $p < .001$. The statements Not enough decent paying jobs ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 1.39$) and Lack of good schools were used as indicators of structural attributions of crime ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.24$), $r = .28$, $p < .001$. The response scale varied from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). A principal components analysis with Varimax rotation supported the distinction between individual and structural crime attributions across the three waves. Therefore, individual and structural crime attribution composite scores were formed. Respondents agreed with individual ($M = 1.71$, $SD = .82$) more than with structural crime attributions ($M = 2.56$, $SD = 1.06$), $t(846) = 18.92$, $p < .001$.

The perceived seriousness of street crime was assessed by asking how serious a problem they thought random street violence was. The response scale varied from 1 (*very serious*) to 3 (*not very serious*) [$M = 1.41$, $SD = .58$].

Conservatism was measured on a continuum ranging from 1 (*liberal*) to 7 (*conservative*). The mean was close to the scale midpoint ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.95$), suggesting that the sample as a whole was roughly evenly divided in ideology.

Participants were asked if they or any member of their household had been a victim of robbery, assault, car theft, or any other type of crimes in the last 12 months. Across waves, 22% had been a victim of crime during the past year. The 1999 respondents had been slightly less touched by crime (16%), $\chi^2(2) = 8.83$, $p < .05$.

Respondents indicated how often they watched local news such as “Eyewitness News” or “Action News” on television. Response alternatives varied from 1 (*almost every day*) to 4 (*hardly ever*). Fifty-six percent of participants watched local news almost every day.

Finally, in order to control for a more direct and blatant form of racism, we also included anti-Black affect. Participants rated their feelings towards Whites and Blacks on a thermometer scale ranging from (0 *very unfavorable*) to (100 *very favorable*). Anti-Black affect was measured by subtracting participants’ feelings towards Blacks from feelings towards Whites. A positive score reflected more favorable affect toward Whites than Blacks, whereas a negative score reflected favoring Blacks over Whites ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 16.52$). This score was correlated with symbolic racism ($r = .23$, $p < .001$).

All scales were standardized for the main analyses.

Results

Overall symbolic racism and crime policies

Regression analyses were carried out to test whether the expected relationship between symbolic racism and crime policies holds in the presence of the other predictors. The overall

Table 3 Simultaneous regression analyses of punitive and preventive crime policies ($N = 707$)

| Predictors | Punitive policies | Preventive policies |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Symbolic racism | .22*** | -.16*** |
| <i>Alternative predictors</i> | | |
| Structural attributions | -.08** | .20*** |
| Individual attributions | .20*** | .10** |
| Perceived seriousness of crime | .14*** | .02 |
| Crime victimization | -.05 | -.01 |
| Conservatism | .15*** | -.16*** |
| News exposure | .14*** | .00 |
| Anti-Black affect | .06 [†] | -.07 [†] |
| <i>Sociodemographics</i> | | |
| Sex (+ male) | .07* | -.04 |
| Age | -.15*** | .09* |
| Education | -.10** | -.00 |
| Income | .01 | .06 |
| R^2_{Adj} | 30.5% | 14.5% |
| F | 26.86*** | 10.99*** |

Note. Signs of age, education and income variables have been reversed to facilitate interpretation. Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; [†] $p < .10$.

symbolic racism score was entered in the models, in addition to crime attributions, perceived seriousness of crime, victimization, conservatism, exposure to crime news, anti-Black affect, and sociodemographic variables. For both crime policies, standardized regression coefficients are reported (Table 3).

Punitive policies

Because the symbolic racism construct focuses on Blacks' perceived violation of consensual values, we expected symbolic racism to predict support for punitive policies, intended to punish persons who deviate from those values. We expected the effect of symbolic racism to remain substantial even though individual attributions for crime, perceived seriousness of crime, conservatism, news exposure and anti-Black affect might also have significant effects.

The regression analysis revealed that symbolic racism was a strong predictor of support for punitive crime policies as shown in Table 3. In addition, individual crime attributions, perceived seriousness of crime, conservatism, as well as watching local crime news all were significantly related to endorsement of punitive remedies. Structural crime attributions predicted rejection of punitive policies. Anti-Black affect was only marginally linked to support for punitive policies when other factors were accounted for. Nevertheless, when symbolic racism was omitted from the regression equation, anti-Black affect had a statistically significant relationship with punitive policies ($\beta = .10$, $p < .01$). These findings suggest that punitive policies are related to racial attitudes, independent of nonracial attitudes. However, symbolic racism is the more powerful version of racial attitudes. Finally, younger and less educated individuals as well as males were more supportive of these policies.

Contrary to a prediction based on self-interest, low income was unrelated to endorsement of punitive policies. In order to further investigate the role of social class in crime policy attitudes, we explored whether income moderates the relationship between symbolic racism and endorsement

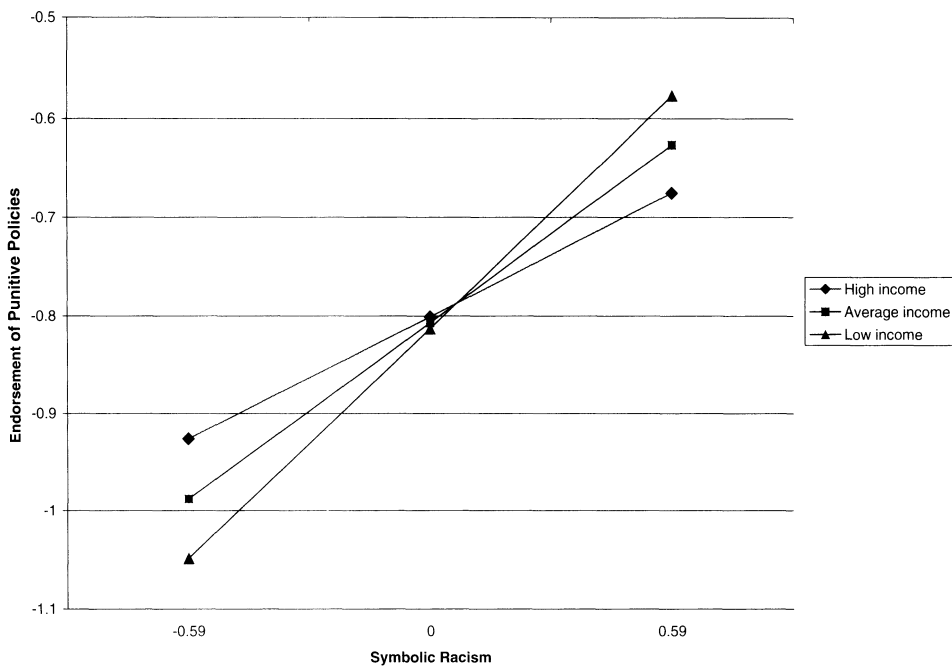


Fig. 1 Endorsement of punitive crime policies as a function of symbolic racism and income. Note. Low, average, and high values represent 1 standard deviation below the mean, the mean, 1 standard deviation above the mean, respectively. Higher numbers represent greater endorsement of punitive policies

of punitive remedies. Hierarchical regression analysis was used to address this question. The main effect predictors (symbolic racism and income) were centered. The interaction term was computed as the product of these centered variables (e.g., Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003) and added to the original model in a second step. This interaction term produced a slight, but nevertheless significant, increase in the explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = 0.4\%$, $F(1, 693) = 4.20$, $p = .05$. Though the change in explained variance was modest, the interaction term ($\beta = .07$, $p < .05$) suggests that the relationship between endorsement of punitive remedies and symbolic racism differed slightly as a function of level of income. Figure 1 shows the relationship between endorsement of punitive remedies and symbolic racism at three levels of income (1 SD below the mean, the mean, and 1 SD above the mean; (Cohen et al., 2003). Symbolic racism predicted endorsement of punitive remedies more strongly at lower levels of income.

Preventive policies

Consistent with our expectations, symbolic racism predicted opposition to preventive crime policies: the higher the level of symbolic racism, the lower the endorsement of preventive crime remedies (see Table 3), even after including alternative explanations of policy attitudes in the model. However, structural and individual attributions for crime as well as conservative ideology were associated with support for preventive remedies. When crime was thought to be a result of structural factors, preventive policies were endorsed. Interestingly, individual crime attributions were related to endorsement of preventive remedies as well. Conservatism was associated with rejection of the idea that preventive policies are an effective solution for crime. Perceived seriousness of crime was not related to acceptance of preventive policies (contrary to the case for punitive policies). Anti-Black affect was marginally linked to opposition to preventive

Table 4 Simultaneous regressions of punitive and preventive crime policies (controlling for the alternative predictors and sociodemographics, $N = 706$)

| Predictors | Punitive policies | Preventive policies |
|--------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Internal symbolic racism | .21*** | – .04 |
| External symbolic racism | .06 | – .13** |
| R^2_{Adj} | 31.3% | 14.4% |
| F | 25.68*** | 10.10*** |

Note. Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients.

** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

policies, but when symbolic racism was omitted from the regression equation, anti-Black affect significantly predicted opposition to preventive policies ($\beta = -.10, p < .01$). This again supports the notion that racial attitudes in general are important in attitudes toward crime, but among them, symbolic racism is particularly important. Among the sociodemographic variables, only older age predicted support for preventive remedies.

Finally, a hierarchical regression analysis was carried out to study whether income moderates the link between symbolic racism and opposition to preventive remedies. The interaction term, entered in a second step, did not increase explained variance, $F(1, 693) = .01, ns$.

In sum, our expectation about the impact of symbolic racism on endorsement of crime policies was confirmed. The impact of symbolic racism remained substantial for both punitive and preventive policies, even when the effects of race-neutral political and crime-related factors were controlled for. To provide a final test of the effects of symbolic racism above and beyond these non-racial factors, we tested step-wise regression models, adding symbolic racism to the regression models as a second step, after the non-racial factors had been entered in the first step. Symbolic racism increased the variance explained in both punitive and preventive policy preferences, $\Delta R^2_{Adj} = .03, F(1, 694) = 33.82, p < .001$ and $\Delta R^2_{Adj} = .02, F(1, 694) = 14.52, p < .001$ respectively.

Variants of symbolic racism

Next, we analyzed the predictive power of the two variants of symbolic racism. The internal variant of symbolic racism should be the stronger predictor of support for punitive policies, because it explicitly refers to Blacks as value-violators. The external variant, in turn, should be the stronger predictor of opposition to preventive crime policies, because its very definition refers to structural perceptions concerning race (e.g., denial of systematic discrimination, and belief that society provides Blacks with undeserved advantages).

The results confirmed the diverging predictive power of the two variants, when they were entered simultaneously in the regression models for the two sets of policies, as shown in Table 4. As hypothesized, internal symbolic racism was a stronger predictor than external symbolic racism of support for punitive crime remedies. External symbolic racism, in turn, was more closely linked to opposition to preventive remedies. The effect of the more strongly predicting variant of symbolic racism overrode the effect of the other variant. However, when the two variants were separately entered in the models, they had significant effects on both sets of policy preferences ($\beta = .13, p < .001$ for external symbolic racism when predicting punitive remedies and $\beta = -.08, p < .05$ for internal symbolic racism when predicting preventive remedies). The impact of the alternative predictors remained the same as for the analyses with the overall symbolic racism scale. The variants of symbolic racism and level of income did not interact.

Discussion

Symbolic racism, punishment, and prevention

Although prior research on crime policy attitudes has mostly focused on capital punishment, this study investigated attitudes toward a broader range of crime policies. Punitive and preventive policies reflect two major categories of societal responses to crime. When survey respondents favor either punitive or preventive strategies, they express different visions on how to deal with crime and criminal offenders. Although we only were able to operationalize each category with two questionnaire items, these dimensions nevertheless reflect quite divergent ideological reference points orienting public debates on crime suppression and crime prevention.

The primary goal of this paper was to isolate the effect of racial beliefs on crime policy attitudes independent of the effects of plausible non-racial predictors. Our research strategy was to assess the extent to which symbolic racism, and its internal and external variants, was related to crime policy attitudes after controlling for a range of race-neutral factors. Because of the correlational nature of our data, we are of course not in a position to advance unequivocal causal claims about the impact of symbolic racism or the other factors on policy attitudes. Yet, the symbolic racism theory argues that racial prejudice is acquired early in life and later becomes a crucial determinant of adult race-related policy attitudes (Sears & Henry, 2005; Sears, & Levy, 2003; see also Katz, 2003). If that is true, a causal role for symbolic racism is at least plausible. That notwithstanding, our data sketch out how beliefs about race are associated with punitive and preventive policy attitudes.

Our results provide clear evidence that respondents cognitively associate Blacks with the problem of crime and its possible remedies. Symbolic racism is strongly associated with support for punitive policies on the one hand and with opposition to preventive policies on the other. Why? The declared goal of both punitive and preventive policies is to reduce or to control crime. But the strategies to reach this goal are radically different. The punitive policies studied in this article (i.e., capital punishment and three-strike imprisonment policy) exclude offenders from society whereas preventive policies intend to prevent the exclusion of the most likely wrongdoers by providing them resources before they risk becoming outcasts of society (Young, 1999). The link between symbolic racism and support for punitive policies could thus denote a desire to protect moral values by punishing the worst offenders, among whom Blacks are over-represented. The relationship between symbolic racism and opposition to preventive policies, in turn, reflects resistance to helping potential offenders in general, and Blacks in particular.

The findings concerning internal and external variants of symbolic racism support this reasoning, and provide insights into how people think about such policies. Internal symbolic racism, assessing the idea that Blacks are personally responsible for their low social status, had the strongest relationship with punitive crime policies, thereby overriding the effect of external symbolic racism which relates to denial of structural disadvantages of Blacks. This pattern of results suggests that perceived individual deficiencies associated to Blacks provide some form of justification for a tough social response to their misdeeds. The external variant of symbolic racism, in turn, was related to opposition to preventive crime remedies, more than was the internal variant. This finding indicates that denial of institutional discrimination of Blacks justifies the rejection of measures designed to promote inclusion of Blacks in the larger society.

Alternative accounts of crime policy attitudes

Above and beyond the effects of symbolic racism, support for punitive policies was predicted, by individual crime attributions, perceived seriousness of crime, conservatism, and exposure

to local crime news. Support for preventive attitudes, in turn, was predicted by low levels of symbolic racism, by structural as well as by individual crime attributions, and by political liberalism. Neither perceived seriousness of crime nor watching local television news were related to endorsement of preventive remedies.

The difference between symbolic racism and crime attributions is that the former is directed towards Blacks, whereas the latter refers to crime in general (see also Kinder & Sanders, 1996). The effects of both internal symbolic racism and of individual crime attributions lend evidence to the argument that perceived value violation is an important rationale for punishing offenders. Expectations of value consensus and demands for conformity seem to underlie support for punishment, thereby underscoring the moral nature of punitive attitudes. Both the external variant of symbolic racism and structural crime attributions focus on recognition of the impact of structural factors on criminal behavior. They converge in explaining attitudes towards prevention as a crime policy.

Individual crime attribution was the only predictor related to support for both punitive and preventive remedies. This is an unexpected result, because individual attributions are usually conceived of as being opposite to structural attributions (Hewstone, 1989). A possible reason for this result is that our measure of individual attributions referred to lack of family moral values and family structure breakdown. Neither are, strictly speaking, attributes of individual offenders, though they are widely regarded as morally blameworthy aspects of specific families and subcultures, particularly the Black sub-culture. As such they apparently call for structural remedies as well as for punishment.

Perceived seriousness of crime significantly increased support for punitive policies. The more people consider street crime as a serious social problem, the more they wish to punish offenders. This finding could indicate that respondents believe that punitive policies reduce crime, whereas preventive policies are ineffective measures of crime control or simply take too long to work. Thus, supporting punitive policies could be seen as a rational and race-neutral strategy to cope with crime. Although racism is a motive underlying endorsement of policy attitudes, rationality implies the logic of calculation. Yet, racism and rationality need not be opposed because the perceptions on which rational calculations are based could themselves be tainted by racial beliefs. This question cannot be settled with our data, however.

Crime victimization did not influence attitudes about either kind of policy. People who had been victims of crime were not more prone to support crime policies than those who had not, even though crime victims could be more motivated to prevent victimization (see Tyler & Weber, 1982). However, the lack of relationship between victimization and crime policies could be due to the fact that the crime policies in question are usually associated with serious crime, whereas the measure of victimization referred to any kind of crime. The ambiguous nature of the question may thus contribute to its lack of explanatory power (although previous studies have obtained similar results; (e.g., Sears et al., 1980).

Political conservatism remained an important predictor of both policy attitudes. All other factors being equal, conservatives favored punitive policies and liberals supported preventive policies. This is hardly surprising because attitudes toward “law and order” have been a central basis for choosing an ideological preference in the United States for several decades.

Exposure to local news disproportionately portraying street crime was related to a punitive stance towards crime. The exact meaning of this finding is hard to pin down, as people may watch local news because they already possess punitive attitudes. However, the impact of the choice of television programs cannot be reduced to a social class effect, as exposure to local news had predictive power over and above education and income level.

The effect of anti-Black affect on crime policy attitudes was absorbed by symbolic racism, because the impact of anti-Black affect was only marginal once symbolic racism was included

in the model. This is consistent with the notion that anti-Black affect is an underlying key component of symbolic racism (Sears & Henry, 2003). Nevertheless, symbolic racism was a more powerful predictor than anti-Black affect.

Finally, although income did not have a direct relationship with the support for crime policies, the effect of the overall symbolic racism scale was slightly moderated by the level of income in the regression model explaining support for punitive crime remedies. This indicates that symbolic racism was a somewhat better predictor of punitive attitudes among low-income individuals than among high-income individuals. However, this effect was not substantial. No other interaction effects involving income and symbolic racism were revealed.

Concluding remarks

On the whole, our results are consistent with those obtained in analyses of attitudes towards racial policies such as affirmative action (e.g., Sears et al., 1997). They show the continuing role of racial prejudice in attitudes towards political issues. In the case of crime policies, this relationship is particularly striking because the crime items used in this questionnaire did not in any way mention racial group membership. Racial prejudice affects attitudes toward matters that are only implicitly racial.

Yet, a wide array of questions still needs to be addressed before making a confident judgment about the processes underlying racial thinking and crime policy attitudes. Most importantly, although the type of crime was not explicitly mentioned in the survey, the crime remedies as well as the crime attributions studied in this paper are usually associated with street crime. Different transgressions may indeed be associated with different social groups, and thus exert specific influences on crime attitudes (Roberts & Stalans, 1997). The results of an experimental study by Gordon et al. (1988) showed that Black defendants are more likely than White defendants to be perceived as committing street crime (burglary), whereas the opposite was true for economic and corporate crime (embezzlement). Unfortunately, the data from the Los Angeles County Social Survey do not permit us to disentangle perceived remedies for street and economic crime, so the current research does not allow generalization to all types of crime.

Nevertheless, the study does demonstrate that in a present-day society in which there is broad general support for abstract principles of racial equality (Sears, Henry, & Kosterman, 2000), the influence of racism remains important, even on ostensibly race-neutral issues like crime policy. The impact of racism is substantial even after accounting for race-neutral factors, such as conservatism, that some scholars argue to be the main factor in explaining support for social policies (e.g., Sniderman & Carmines, 1997). In order to draw more definite conclusions about the role of racism in crime attitudes, comparing attitudes towards transgressions of a variety of legal and moral norms (such as domestic violence, theft, rape, vandalism, disorderly behavior, corruption or treason) is imperative. It seems likely that racial attitudes would be less closely related to attitudes about policies designed to combat economic and corporate crime that are not typically associated with Black offenders (see also Feather, Boeckmann, & McKee, 2001; Hamilton & Rauma, 1995).

Second, in this paper, racism was measured as an explicit attitude to which people have conscious access. Implicit and unconscious forms of racism may also be important factors in responses to crime. In a recent experimental study, Graham and Lowery (2004) showed that police and probation officers judged hypothetical offenders more harshly when subliminally primed by race-related words than when primed by neutral words. Explicit racial attitudes

however had negligible effects. In future research on crime policy attitudes both explicit and implicit racial attitudes should therefore be examined.

A third limit was related to the fact that the key measure in the current study, the symbolic racism scale, was not administered to non-White participants in the Los Angeles County Social Surveys. Hence, we could only study Whites' racial beliefs. Nevertheless, because other ethnic groups have access to the same cultural cues associating race and crime, they may perceive Black deviance much in the same way as Whites do. A series of additional analyses on attitudes towards crime policies (ANCOVAs) revealed that when comparing Whites, Hispanics and Blacks, Whites were marginally more punitive than Blacks, whereas Blacks endorsed preventive crime policies more than Whites, even after controlling for political and crime-related attitudes as well as for socio-demographics. The attitudes of Hispanics were intermediate. These results are in line with previous research indicating that Whites are more likely than Blacks to support death penalty (Ellsworth & Gross, 1994; Halim & Stiles, 2001; Roberts & Stalans, 1997; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Young, 1991).

A final limitation concerns the fact that symbolic racism taps a belief system about a particular group, Blacks, in a particular social context, the United States. It remains to be seen how well the findings generalize to contexts outside the United States. Related constructs do, however, have much the same effects elsewhere, such as the impact of "subtle racism" on immigration attitudes in Europe (e.g., Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Future studies might pursue other national contexts, therefore. A comparative research strategy could show to what extent members of different national majorities think of crime as being mainly committed by "others" than themselves (Sanchez-Mazas & Licata, 2005). While in the United States these "others" are non-White ethnic groups, particularly Blacks, in European countries they are presumably foreigners and immigrants, particularly those from non-European cultural backgrounds.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this article has underscored a crucial element of public thinking about crime, namely the scapegoating of Blacks. Studying the social, political and ideological functions of the crime-race link in everyday thinking may contribute to alleviating the detrimental effects of racial bias and discrimination in culturally diverse societies.

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Appendix

Symbolic Racism items

Internal symbolic racism

Work ethic and individual responsibility

1. 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. (1997, 1998, 1999 LACSS)
2. Irish, Italian, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors. (1997 LACSS)
3. Blacks work just as hard to get ahead as most other Americans (R).* (1998 LACSS)
4. Most Blacks who receive money from welfare could get along without it if they tried. (1997 LACSS)
Excessive demands
5. Blacks are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights. (1997, 1999 LACSS)
6. Blacks are demanding too much from the rest of society. (1998 LACSS)

7. Some say that Black leaders have been trying to push too fast. Others feel that they haven't pushed fast enough. (1998 LACSS)
8. How much of the racial tension that exists in the United States today do you think Blacks are responsible for creating? (1998, 1999 LACSS)
9. Blacks generally do not complain as much as they should about their situation in society (R). (1998 LACSS)**

External symbolic racism
Denial of discrimination

10. How much discrimination against Blacks do you feel there is in the United States today, limiting their chances to get ahead (R)? (1997, 1998, 1999 LACSS)
11. Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class (R). (1997, 1998, 1999 LACSS)
12. Discrimination against Blacks is no longer a problem in the United States. (1998 LACSS)
13. Racial and ethnic discrimination is still as serious problem in the United States (R). (1999 LACSS)
14. Some say that the civil rights people have been trying to push too fast. Others feel that they haven't pushed fast enough. (1997 LACSS)
Undeserved disadvantage
15. Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten less than they deserve (R). (1997, 1998, 1999 LACSS)
16. Do Blacks get much more attention from the government than they deserve? (1997 LACSS)
17. Government officials usually pay less attention to a request or complaint from a Black person than from a White person (R). (1997 LACSS)
18. Over the past few years, Blacks have gotten more economically than they deserve (R). (1998 LACSS)**

Note. With one exception, these items are listed in the four themes as in the a priori categorization of Henry and Sears (2002). Later empirical analysis (Tarman & Sears, 2005) suggested that the “civil rights people have been trying to push too fast” item better falls into the “denial of discrimination” rather than the “excessive demands” theme, so that change has been made above.

*(R) indicates items that are reverse-coded.

**Items discarded from final symbolic racism scores.

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