

# Study discovers the downside of African-American success stories

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African-Americans such as Brown University President Ruth Simmons, Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison, and of course President Barack Obama have reached the pinnacle of success in historically white domains. But a new study finds there is a downside to African-American success stories: these positive examples prompt white Americans to think less successful African-Americans simply need to apply more effort to achieve their own success.

The findings are reported in the paper, "If He Can Do It, So Can They: Exposure to Counterstereotypically Successful Exemplars Prompts Automatic Inferences," published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (March 2014) and co-authored by Clayton Critcher, assistant professor at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business and Jane L. Risen, University of Chicago Booth School of Business.

Critcher and Risen find that there is a divide between what people say is the significance of these success stories and the actual conclusions people – white and other non-African-American racial groups – draw about the role of race in modern America after being exposed to these examples of African-American success.

"On the one hand, the fact that it is so notable to see an African-American CEO or university president might be assumed to serve as a reminder of the legacy of racism in this country," says Critcher. "But in actuality, our studies found that being reminded of the success of Obama and others more often prompts the belief that other African-Americans

could succeed if only they tried harder."

Even though research participants said that their beliefs about race relations would not and should not change on the basis of a single person's (e.g., Barack Obama's) experience, carefully designed experiments showed that following exposure to such examples, non-African-Americans tended to become less sympathetic to the idea that African-Americans continue to face race-based challenges in America. In fact, those who most strongly denied that a single example of African-American success justifies a shift in beliefs were those whose beliefs actually shifted the most toward less sympathy for African-Americans in this country.

Furthermore, non-African-Americans drew similar conclusions when told that these examples of African-American success were exceptions to the rule (e.g., that Ken Frazier of Merck is the only Fortune 75 Black CEO).

These findings in particular extend to the workplace by demonstrating a challenge that comes from incremental advances of achieving greater employee diversity. Given the study's results, Critcher suggests the presence of a "token" minority in the workplace could lead to the perception of an egalitarian workplace climate, even though that conclusion is based on only a single example.

In total, the researchers conducted eight experiments using a mix of college students and community participants from various regions of the country. In each study, participants were exposed to different famous people, supposedly as part of an unrelated study on recognizing different celebrities. For most questions, all participants saw the same white exemplars (e.g., John Grisham). But on some questions, some participants saw a successful African-American (e.g., Merck CEO Ken Frazier), whereas other participants saw a matched White exemplar (e.g.,

Lockheed Martin CEO Robert Stevens). Then as part of a supposedly unrelated study, [participants](#) indicated their beliefs about the role of race in modern America.

"What is particularly interesting about this is that people have no idea that their beliefs are changing after exposure to these examples of counter-stereotypical [success](#)," says Critcher. "When people observe African-Americans whom they are used to seeing in highly successful roles, such as NBA athletes, the same thing doesn't happen. But when people see Merck CEO Ken Frazier, who is African-American, they are likely to say that they can't really conclude anything on the basis of one person's experience, but then unknowingly shift their beliefs in a way that suggests they think that disparities in outcomes between whites and African- Americans are mostly the latter's fault."

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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