

Responses to Other-Imposed Pro-Black Pressure: Acceptance or Backlash?

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Although previous work suggests that exposure to other-imposed pressure to respond favorably toward Black people may reduce at least overt expressions of prejudice, the consequences of such pressure beyond initial compliance has not been explored. Across three studies, we examined the implications of complying with pro-Black pressure for people's affective, attitudinal, and behavioral responses as a function of their source of motivation to respond without prejudice. The findings indicate that those who are primarily externally motivated to respond without prejudice (low internal, high external motivation) feel constrained and bothered by politically correct pressure (Study 1). In addition, whether the pressure was imagined (Study 1 and 2) or real (Study 3), these participants responded with angry/threatened affect when pressured to comply with other-imposed pro-Black pressure. Finally, these affective responses resulted in backlash (both attitudinal and behavioral) among the low internal, high external participants, presumably in an attempt to reassert their personal freedom. © 2001 Academic Press

Over the past 50 years, landmark legislative decisions (e.g., 1954 Supreme Court ruling on school desegregation and the Civil Rights Laws of the early 1960s) have made discrimination based on race illegal and, as a result, made overt expressions of prejudice socially unacceptable. In the aftermath of these legislative changes, traditionally racist norms were replaced with a pervasive norm discouraging prejudice toward Black people and instead promoting opportunities for Black people in the United States (see Blanchard, Lilly, & Vaughn, 1991; Monteith, Deneen, &

Tooman, 1996; Plant & Devine, 1998). This rather stringent norm manifested itself in the 1990s, as the “politically correct” or “PC” standards. These standards mandate proper speech and behavior and create intense social pressure to respond favorably toward Black people (e.g., Adler et al., 1990; Bronner, 1999; D’Souza, 1991; Leo, 1999). The hope of many was that such legal and social pro-Black pressure would decrease overt expressions of prejudice and, over time, lead to the internalization of nonprejudiced or pro-Black standards among those with high-prejudice attitudes.

Social scientists quickly became interested in documenting the impact of these legislative and normative changes encouraging favorable responses to Black people. In general, in the latter half of the 20th century, Whites’ self-reported attitudes toward Blacks have become significantly more positive (Greeley & Sheatsley, 1971; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Schuman, Steeh, & Bobo, 1985; Taylor, Sheatsley, & Greeley, 1978). Further, when exposed to normative pressure to respond favorably toward Black people, both low- and high-prejudice people tend to report less prejudiced attitudes and opinions than when not exposed to such pressure (Blanchard, Crandall, Brigham, & Vaughn,

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1994; Blanchard, Lilly, & Vaughn, 1991; Monteith, Deneen, & Tooman, 1996). These findings are promising, suggesting that exposure to other-imposed pro-Black pressure may reduce at least overt expressions of prejudice, even among those who have not internalized the norms. However, the consequence of such pressure beyond the initial compliance remains unclear and, as we argue presently, caution is warranted.

Although the ideal consequence of eliciting compliance with other-imposed pressure to respond favorably toward Black people would be the internalization of these standards, there are at least two other plausible possibilities. First, the response to pro-Black pressure could be mere compliance with no repercussions. In this case, such social pressure would be an effective tool to decrease overt expressions of prejudice and promote opportunities for Black people. Alternatively, compliance with pro-Black pressure could lead to a number of counterintentional, negative consequences. Consider, for example, that reactance theory posits that when people perceive a threat or loss of their freedom of choice, they are likely to become motivated to act against the constraint upon their freedom (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). This motivation may result in a direct response, such as behavioral action in the direction counter to the perceived control, or in an indirect response, such as hostility directed at the source of pressure or increased preference for the removed option. Further, reactance theory argues that external pressure is particularly likely to result in reactance if the pressure threatens punishment, such as social disapproval, and if it is perceived as likely to restrict future freedoms. Therefore, to the degree that people view pro-Black pressure as a constraint on their freedom of response and anticipate that noncompliance will result in punishment as well as future restrictions on behavioral freedom, they are particularly likely to respond with reactance to such pressure.

One does not have to look far to find examples of such negative reactions to pro-Black pressure in everyday life. For example, the Internet is replete with websites espousing anger and frustration at political correctness and out-group members generally. Another example of negative responses to pro-Black pressure is the well-publicized Texaco scandal several years ago. Texaco's annual report at the time stated: "Our commitment to diversity is an inclusive process, grounded in our core values of respect for the individual and in our long standing policies of equal opportunity for all employees" (as cited in Page, 1996, p. A22). Unfortunately the sentiments expressed in the annual report stood in stark contrast to the outwardly hostile statements made about Black employees that were secretly recorded during a private meeting of top Texaco executives discussing a discrimination lawsuit brought against the company. The lawsuit alleged that the company had unfair policies for determining advancement that disadvantaged Black employees. The tape

recording reveals frustration in response to the lawsuit and strong resistance to Black employee's ascension into upper management positions in the corporation. Moreover, the comments revealed animosity toward corporation efforts to provide employees with diversity training. It seems clear that such responses are at odds with the intention of the company's public policy as stated in the annual report. This example serves to highlight the possibility that some people respond to pressure encouraging opportunities for Black people with frustration and resentment, which will be freely expressed when not under the watchful eyes of those enforcing the pressure.

Although a variety of responses to pro-Black pressure may be likely, anticipating from whom to expect the alternative responses has been difficult. Recently, however, Plant and Devine (1998) developed individual difference measures that may moderate the tendency to show positive, neutral, or more negative responses to other-imposed pro-Black pressure. These measures assess the source of people's motivation (internal and external) to respond without prejudice. Considering the joint influences of these alternative sources of motivation, we argue, may inform our understanding of people's immediate and subsequent reactions to other-imposed pressure to respond favorably toward Black people.

Plant and Devine (1998) developed and validated separate scales assessing the level of internal motivation to respond without prejudice (IMS) and external motivation to respond without prejudice (EMS). Whereas internal motivation to respond without prejudice arises from internalized, personally important nonprejudiced beliefs, external motivation to respond without prejudice arises from a desire to avoid negative reactions from presumably nonprejudiced others. Sample items from the IMS include "I attempt to act in nonprejudiced ways toward Black people because it is personally important to me" and "Being nonprejudiced toward Black people is important to my self-concept." Sample items from the EMS include "I attempt to appear nonprejudiced toward Black people in order to avoid disapproval from others" and "I try to act nonprejudiced toward Black people because of pressure from others." Plant and Devine demonstrated that the IMS and EMS were reliable and provided compelling evidence regarding the scales' convergent, discriminant, and predictive validity.¹ They also found

¹ Although presenting all the validation work is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that Plant and Devine (1998) found that their IMS measure was strongly related to traditional measures of racial attitudes, such as Brigham's (1993) Attitude Toward Blacks measure (ATB) such that high-prejudice people are far less likely to report being motivated to respond without prejudice for internal reasons than their low-prejudice counterparts. Plant and Devine also found that the EMS is modestly related to measures of self-presentation (e.g., Leary, 1983) and unrelated to measures of social desirability (e.g., Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Thus, the EMS appears to assess something beyond a general concern with social appearance.

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