

# Acknowledging or Erasing Societal Power Differentials: A Motivational Perspective

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## Introduction

### Background

- **Structural racism:** An empirical reality present within institutions around the United States (e.g. criminal justice) creating measurable power differentials (Rucker & Richeson, 2021).
- **Progress Myth:** The public has adopted the idea that racial progress has made this issue negligible on a societal scale. This minimizes how pervasive systemic barriers are (Richeson, 2020) and promotes Color-Blind Racial Ideology (Neville et al., 2013).
- **Identity Management:** Systemic inequality acts as a psychological threat to individuals with a privileged identity. When confronted, they can choose to deny, distance themselves from, or try to dismantle the inequality (Knowles et al., 2014).

### Deny

- Rejecting inequality

### Distance

- Removing personal association

### Dismantle

- Acknowledge and seek change

### Shortcomings in Current Research

- Extensive research exists on interpersonal prejudice and microaggressions (Mujica et al., 2023), but the cognitive mechanisms driving acknowledgements vs. denials of structural inequalities are under-explored.
- No precise information on how internal values and external pressures predict responses (Internal & External Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice; Plant & Devine, 1998).

### Purpose and Hypothesis

- **Purpose:** Explore psychological drivers (IMS/EMS) that affect one's willingness to acknowledge or deny systemic racism.
- **Hypothesis:** Internal motivation (IMS) will predict greater acknowledgment, while external motivation (EMS) will predict greater denial.

## Methods

### Participants

- 100 FSU psychology students recruited via Sona

### Materials

- **IMS/EMS:** 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)
  - IMS: "I attempt to appear nonprejudiced toward Black people in order to avoid disapproval from others."
  - EMS: "I attempt to act in nonprejudiced ways toward Black people because it is personally important to me"
- **Likelihood and Social Acceptability ratings of Denial and Acknowledgement statements:**
  - Likelihood: "Rate the LIKELIHOOD that you could imagine yourself saying the following statements 1 (not likely at all) to 7 (very likely)."
  - Acceptability: "Rate how ACCEPTABLE you think it is in society to say the following statements 1 (totally unacceptable) to 7 (perfectly acceptable)."

Acknowledgement Example:

"Everyone is treated the same by the legal system."

Denial Example:

"Because of race, racial minorities do not have the same chance to succeed."

- In-person lab session: Participants asked to provide open-ended responses to a series of prompts:

### Procedure

Pre-Survey

24-48 hours before  
the in-person session

Open  
Response  
Coding

In-Person Lab  
Session

### Institutional Prompts:

- "Do you believe race influences people's experience with the legal system?"
- "Do you believe that everyone has access to the same opportunities (e.g., educational, employment), regardless of race or ethnicity?"

### Neutral (Control) Prompts:

- "Do you think people who live in the U.S. have a different quality of life than those who live in other countries?"
- "Do you believe that a person's attractiveness influences how they are treated by others?"

## Preliminary Results

- Data collection for the project is still ongoing.
- Preliminary results provide evidence of Acknowledgement, Denial, and Ambiguous (Mixed) statements.

### Coding scheme: Response Examples

#### Denial

"I do not believe that race influences experiences with the legal system. Experiences with the legal system differs on a case-by-case scenario."

#### Mixed/Unclear

"I believe that in today's society race plays a minor role in shaping someone's opportunities. I feel that the opportunities themselves are present for all races but the ease of capitalizing on these opportunities may vary slightly between races."

#### Acknowledgement

'No because there are a lot of biases towards people of color or religious minorities etc. Some people of color live in poor areas as well causing them to have less access to things like education and employment...'

## Discussion

Preliminary findings align with Progress Myth and Identity Management theories. Specifically, they suggest that there are differences in likelihood to acknowledge, deny, and/or use mixed statements when addressing systemic barriers.

### Strengths and Limitations

#### Strengths:

- Open-response methods give participants the opportunity to express their views on systemic inequality
- Controlled, in-person environment with time controls for thoughtful responses
- A pre-survey of baseline participant attitudes

#### Limitations:

- Only FSU students

### Future Considerations

- Should expand participant pool beyond a university setting
- Assess other individual differences (e.g., age and explicit attitudes)
- Develop more precise models for predicting reactions to structural racism

## References

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