

Deconstructing the Obama Effect: Should We Strive to Be Colorblind?

-- Silver Spring, MD Mar 5 2009

I am often eager to put the brakes on conversations when people start describing the United States as a "post-racial" nation. We still have promises to keep and miles to go before we sleep. Too many Americans from all backgrounds and experiences continue to feel cut off from educational and professional opportunity, socioeconomic advancement, and their birthright - the pursuit of happiness.

An eyebrow-raising new study has documented a decrease in racial prejudice during the Fall 2008 period between the Democratic Party's nomination of Barack Obama and the Nov. 4 election. About 300 non-black (white, Asian or Hispanic) college students in Wisconsin and Florida participated in a variety of experiments and surveys designed to measure stereotyping and implicit prejudice (the kind of prejudice that is typically described as "automatic" or "knee-jerk"). The researchers found that 51 percent of the participants demonstrated automatic preferences for white people. This is significant because previous research typically has found that about 80 percent of white people demonstrate an automatic preference for other whites.

These findings are consistent with evidence from our consulting work with organizations. Exposure to positive role models has both a conscious and unconscious impact on people's perceptions about both dominant and non-dominant group members. What the study doesn't address, but our anecdotal findings show, is that the impact is probably even greater on people in the non-dominant group itself (in this case, African Americans) who also develop historic patterns of unconscious bias towards people like themselves. Over time, repeated images of Mr. Obama as President will undoubtedly have an even stronger impact on reducing the levels of internalized unconscious bias that Blacks may have developed through exposure to negative stereotyping and discriminatory behavior, especially among young children in their formative years.

"Obama embodies and preaches the true and vital message that in today's America, the opportunities available to black people are unlimited if they work hard, play by the rules, and get a good education," wrote Stuart Taylor Jr. in National Journal. But is that really true? Unfortunately, it is not. Merit alone cannot help minorities shatter glass ceilings. Presently, 12 of the 500 CEOs of the Fortune 500 companies are female. Less than one percent (fewer than five) of top CEOs is African-American.

We are entitled to feel optimistic when we read about any number of outcomes being credited to an "Obama Effect." I am glad to lead the chorus in giving the President recognition for refocusing our national priorities. But he has not made our nation colorblind. Nor should he. Race makes a big difference from life expectancy to educational attainment to the ability to hail a taxicab at night.

Every background makes a difference in how we are judged and perceived. Humans are judgment machines and President Obama cannot stimulate or legislate that reality away. We need our public and private institutions to enhance our diversity literacy, not create race and cultural blindness. Our enduring global peace and prosperity requires us to deepen our appreciation, understanding and tolerance of human difference. Not turn a blind eye.

Howard J. Ross is an award-winning diversity training consultant and a nationally recognized expert on diversity, leadership, and organizational change. He is Chief Learning Officer of Cook Ross, Inc., based in Silver Spring, Maryland. For more information visit: www.cookross.com or contact lookingforanswers@cookross.com.

