

Changes in Racial Identity Among African American College Students Following the Election of Barack Obama

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The current study considered the influence of the 2008 presidential election on the racial identity of African American college students ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.3$ years; 26.3% male). The design of the study consisted of 2 components: longitudinal and daily. The longitudinal component assessed 3 dimensions of racial identity (centrality, private regard, and public regard) 2 weeks before and 5 months after the election, and the daily diary component assessed racial identity and identity exploration on the days immediately before and after the election. Daily items measuring identity exploration focused on how much individuals thought about issues relating to their race. Analyses considered the immediate effects of the election on identity exploration and the extent to which changes in exploration were shaped by racial identity measured prior to the election. We also considered immediate and longer term changes in racial identity following the election and the extent to which longer term changes were conditioned by identity exploration. Findings suggest that the election served as an “encounter” experience (Cross, 1991, 1995, pp. 60–61), which led to increases in identity exploration. Moreover, analyses confirmed that changes in identity exploration were most pronounced among those with higher levels of racial centrality. Results also suggest that the election had both an immediate and a longer term influence on racial identity, which in some instances was conditioned by identity exploration.

Keywords: racial identity development, social identity change, 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama

The election of Barack Obama as the first Black president of the United States was a significant race-related event, offering an important opportunity to study the developmental processes of identity change. While prominent sociopolitical events have been hypothesized to influence racial identity among African Americans (see e.g., Cross, 1991, 1995; Dawson, 2001), few studies to date have been conducted to empirically document such changes using longitudinal methods. Capitalizing on the election as an important race-related event, the current study considered (1) whether the election served as an “encounter” experience (Cross, 1991, 1995, pp. 60–61) that stimulated identity exploration among African Americans and (2) the immediate and longer term influence of the election on racial identity. The questions addressed are of direct relevance to theories of identity formation and change and to the significance of race in the lives of African Americans.

Developmental Perspectives on Identity

Identity development is a major psychosocial task of late adolescence with important implications for healthy psychological

development (Kroger, 2007). For college students in particular, with entry into the adult world on the immediate horizon and a wide range of life possibilities to choose from, the late adolescent years are a time when identity work takes on a unique urgency and significance (McLean, 2005; Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999). Furthermore, for ethnic minority students such as African Americans, negotiating racial identity is a critical aspect of overall identity development (Hardiman & Jackson, 2006; Helms, 1995) with important implications for achievement (Chavous et al., 2003), psychological adjustment (Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998), and physical health (Brondolo, Brady ver Halen, Pencille, Beatty, & Contrada, 2009).

Foundational theories of identity development (Erikson, 1963, 1968; Marcia, 1966, 1980) as well as leading developmental models of racial and ethnic identity (see e.g., Cross, 1971, 1991; Helms, 1995; Phinney, 1990) emphasize the importance of identity exploration in the formation of a healthy identity. Building on Erikson’s (1963, 1968) and Marcia’s (1966, 1980) perspectives, Jean Phinney proposed a general model of ethnic identity development, relevant to all ethnic groups (Phinney, 1989, 1990). Phinney’s (1989, 1990) model describes a three-stage process where individuals start in an *unexamined* state and can potentially move into a period of exploration, or identity *search*, followed by a state of identity *achievement*. Individuals in the unexamined stage are described as either holding no strong ideas about their ethnicity (a *diffused* identity) or ascribing to attitudes taught by adult authority figures (a *foreclosed* identity). The second stage, ethnic identity search, involves individuals exploring and seeking to understand the meaning of ethnicity for themselves (moratorium). The exploration stage then leads to a third and final stage, ethnic identity achievement, where individuals have arrived at a deeper under-

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standing and appreciation of their own ethnicity. With respect to developmental timing, Phinney has suggested that many ethnic minority adolescents will reach an achieved ethnic identity by late adolescence or early adulthood (Phinney, 1989, 1990; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990).

Unlike Phinney's (1989, 1990) theory, Cross's (1971, 1991) Nigrescence model was born out of work on oppression and liberation struggle (see e.g., Fanon, 1963, 1967) and was developed to describe the psychological development of Black Americans as members of a socially devalued racial group. Cross's model describes a process whereby individuals move from having an unexamined (and sometimes negative) emphasis on Black identity, to a high-emphasis, positive, and internalized perspective (Cross, 1971, 1991, 1995; Cross & Cross, 2008; Cross & Vandiver, 2001). While Cross's model was originally developed to describe identity conversions among adults, it has since also been applied to developmental changes that take place from childhood to late adolescence (see e.g., Spencer, 1995; Tatum, 1997). Along these lines, since young children start out naive to the realities of discrimination and institutional racism, they are discussed in relation to Cross's preencounter stage. In their daily lives, children are then gradually exposed to various experiences relating to race. These experiences are interpreted through the perspectives of the family and other influential figures to create an initial system of meaning relating to race.

During adolescence, individuals may experience one or more identity *encounters* (Cross, 1991, 1995). An encounter is a significant personal or social race-related event that is inconsistent with an individual's existing frame of reference. Such an event is thought to move individuals into a period of racial identity exploration (immersion-emersion), challenging them to think through their existing attitudes and beliefs and to consider various other possible perspectives relating to their race. This process of identity exploration is thought to lead to a more examined and stable racial identity that is referred to as internalized (Cross, 1991). While a range of identity exploration processes are likely to still be taking place during late adolescence (e.g., the college years), by this stage, developmentally speaking, some individuals would be expected to have arrived at a racial identity that is at least partially internalized (Cross & Cross, 2008).

The process of identity development is not, however, complete when an internalized identity has been reached. In fact, because any individual's identity is only able to adequately interpret a finite set of experiences, individuals may have *additional encounters* that challenge their existing perspectives on race and lead them to "recycle" through the stages of identity development (Cross & Cross, 2008; Parham, 1989). In particular, specific important race-related events can push individuals back into a period of identity exploration or immersion, resulting in the modification of an existing racial identity and the emergence of a newly internalized identity that is capable of more adequately interpreting a broader range of situations or events.

While Cross's (1971, 1991) and Phinney's (1989, 1990) developmental models each offer unique emphasis and insight, it is clear that there is also considerable overlap. In particular, the concept of identity exploration as a driving force behind identity change is consistent across the two models. Furthermore, the two perspectives are also consistent with respect to the developmental timing of an identity that is "internalized" or "achieved." In the current

study, we predicted that, as an important race-related event (or encounter experience), the election of Barack Obama would trigger identity exploration among African American college students. In particular, we hypothesized that levels of identity exploration would increase significantly in the days immediately following the election and that these increases in exploration would, in turn, have important implications for the further development of an individual's racial identity.

Identity Centrality as a Predictor of Exploration

The extent to which an important race-related event would be expected to influence identity exploration may depend on how much individuals define themselves in relation to their race. However, conflicting perspectives exist on the direction of this effect. Cross's Nigrescence model offers one perspective on this relationship, suggesting that individuals whose identity does not emphasize race are more likely to experience an identity conversion characterized by a period of intense exploration or immersion into issues of race following an encounter (Cross, 1991, 1995; Cross & Cross, 2008). One possible interpretation of this theory is that those who report lower levels of racial centrality would be more likely to experience an important race-related event as an encounter and therefore be more likely to show increases in exploration immediately following the election.

An alternative perspective on how racial identity might influence exploration following important events can be derived from social-cognitive interpretations of identity. These perspectives view the self as a set of knowledge structures, or self-schemas (Markus & Wurf, 1987), within which specific domains of social identity can be activated by particular events or features of the social environment (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Furthermore, the tendency of a particular domain of identity to be activated is thought to depend on the existing identity characteristics of the individual (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker & Serpe, 1982, 1994; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). For example, individuals who emphasize their racial identity as an important part of their self-concept may be more likely to interpret events through a racial lens (Shelton & Sellers, 2000; Yip, 2008). In line with this perspective, research has shown that individuals with higher levels of racial centrality are more likely to attribute ambiguous negative events to racism (Operario & Fiske, 2001; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Shelton & Sellers, 2000) and are more likely to report awareness of their race following everyday interactions (Aries et al., 1998; Yip, 2005). Furthermore, it is possible that race-central individuals, who are interpreting events through a racial lens, are also more likely to explore their racial identity following events that are potentially race-relevant. This perspective therefore suggests that individuals with higher levels of centrality may show greater increases in exploration immediately following the election. By exploring the influence of identity centrality on changes in identity exploration following the election, the current study seeks to provide empirical evidence relating to the relative adequacy of these differing interpretations.

Influences of the Election on Racial Identity

Drawing on the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997), the

current study considered immediate and longer-term changes in three dimensions of racial identity: centrality, private regard, and public regard. *Centrality* refers to the extent to which individuals normatively define themselves with regard to race and the extent to which race is an important part of their self-concept. Private and public regard refer to individuals' affective and evaluative judgments of their race. In particular, *private regard* is defined as the extent to which individuals feel positive or negative toward African Americans and their membership in that group, and *public regard* refers to the extent to which individuals feel that others view African Americans positively or negatively.

While the conceptual model developed by Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, and Chavous (1998) focuses on the status of individuals' racial identity as opposed to its development, the authors of this model have also acknowledged that other researchers have conceptualized the dimensions of racial identity in the model as indicators of individuals' racial identity development. Sellers and colleagues also noted that the MMRI was designed to complement developmental perspectives and that the dimensions of racial identity discussed may help validate the assumptions associated with other approaches. Since the concept of centrality is closely related to what Cross referred to as a high salience identity (Cross & Cross, 2008), and Cross's concept of self-hatred (an indicator of a preencounter identity) is similar to an oppositely coded version of private regard (Cross & Vandiver, 2001), it is therefore reasonable, for example, to shed light on aspects of Cross's theoretical model using the aspects of the measurement model developed by Sellers and colleagues.

A range of perspectives exist relating to how racial identity may have been affected by the presidential election. First, self-categorization theory suggests that important race-related events will tend to make race salient and thus activate the racial domain of the social self-concept (Turner et al., 1994). Based on this perspective, an event of historic racial significance, such as the election of the first Black president in the United States, would be expected to lead to increases in reports of racial centrality. However, based on this theoretical perspective, these increases would not be expected to be enduring but rather would be a short-term consequence of exposure to racial messages immediately following the election.

A second theoretical perspective suggests that the effects of the election on racial identity relate to its significance as a shift in the social power structure. In particular, social identity theory suggests that how individuals conceive of their group's status in relation to other groups influences their group identity (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Along these lines, research has shown that increases in group power or status are associated with increases in group identification and more positive feelings toward group membership (see e.g., Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears, 1995; Doosje, Spears, & Ellemers, 2002). Because the election of the first Black president has been widely viewed as a monumental accomplishment for the Black civil rights movement and a profound step toward full representation and equality for African Americans, this theoretical perspective suggests that the election would lead to immediate increases in positive feelings toward group membership and increases in centrality. However, since the effects of group status changes have only been shown in short-term lab-based settings (see e.g., Doosje et al., 2002), the extent to

which increases in private regard and centrality would be enduring following the election is not clear.

A third perspective, however, suggests that increases in private regard may be enduring for those who explore their identity following the election. In particular, theories of racial identity development suggest that identity exploration serves as a mechanism for minority individuals to work through internalized racism and develop a more positive perspective on their group membership (Cross & Cross, 2008; Helms, 1995; Helms & Cook, 1999). Any event that stimulates substantial identity exploration may therefore increase the extent to which individuals feel positive about their race. Therefore, enduring increases in private regard are expected for those who engage in more exploration immediately following the election.

A fourth perspective on how the election might influence identity can be derived from existing research on ethnic identity. In particular, a range of work has suggested that members of marginalized minority groups are not able to take their racial/ethnic identity for granted and therefore tend to report higher levels of group identification than do majority group members (French, Seidman, Allen, & Aber, 2006; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Syed & Azmitia, 2009). Thus, when members of a devalued minority group experience a significant increase in sociopolitical power, toward greater equality, the identity of group members may shift toward looking more like the identity of majority group members (i.e., less emphasis on racial identity). Following this perspective, although centrality would still be expected to increase immediately following the election (due to activation of the racial self-concept), decreases in centrality would be expected on a longer time frame. However, enduring decreases in centrality following an event would also be expected to be contingent on the extent to which the event stimulates identity exploration. We therefore expected enduring decreases in centrality for individuals who explored more following the election and no changes in centrality for individuals who reported less exploration following the election.

Having considered changes in centrality and private regard, the last measure of identity that we considered is public regard. Relating to this construct, a large amount of anecdotal evidence in the popular media has suggested that, regardless of race, many individuals held some level of doubt that the broader society was capable of electing a Black president. This suggests that the election of Barack Obama may have challenged people's existing perspectives and influenced individuals' assessments of how African Americans are viewed (or valued) by the broader society. In particular, since the broader society (beyond African Americans) was partly responsible for electing a Black president, we believe that perceptions of public regard would show immediate and enduring increases following the election. Furthermore, because the election may generally have a more enduring influence for those who explored their racial identity more following the election, we expected that longer term increases in public regard would be more pronounced at higher levels of exploration.

In summary, because the election of the first Black president was an important race-related event, a historic accomplishment for African Americans, and an act of the broader society, we expected increases in centrality, private regard, and public regard in the days immediately following the election. However, we expected that longer term changes in identity would be more varied. In particular, based on theories of racial identity development (Cross &

Cross, 2008; Helms, 1995; Helms & Cook, 1999), we predicted that private regard would show enduring increases following the election but that these increases would be conditioned by the extent to which individuals explored their identity following the election. Furthermore, based on ethnic identity research (French et al., 2006; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Syed & Azmitia, 2009), we hypothesized that centrality would show enduring decreases following the election but that these decreases would also be conditioned on the extent to which someone increased in exploration following the election. Finally, since the election of the first Black president was an act of the broader society, we expected that perceptions of public regard—individuals' assessments of how African Americans are viewed by the broader society—would increase.

Method

Design and Participants

Participants were African American undergraduate students from two large research universities in the northeastern United States ($N = 324$; 26.3% male; $M_{\text{age}} = 19.3$ years, $SD = 1.8$). Both universities had predominantly White student bodies, contained approximately 11% underrepresented minorities, and were 5% and 7% Black, respectively. As expected within the college sample, the socioeconomic backgrounds of participants were above the national average, with 51% of mothers having completed at least a 4-year degree. Annual household income before taxes was reported on an 8-point scale ranging from 1 (*less than \$7,500*) to 8 (*over \$150,000*). The average response was 5 ($SD = 1.85$), which corresponds to an average income of approximately \$50,000 (both parents combined). The average family income level of the universities was not available.

The design of the study consisted of two components: one longitudinal and the other daily. To recruit participants into the longitudinal component, an e-mail was sent out to all freshman, sophomore, and junior African American students inviting them to take part in a study focusing on the experiences and perspectives of Black college students where they would be asked to complete self-report measures once each semester for four consecutive semesters starting in the fall of 2007 (Wave 1: October 2007; Wave 2: March/April 2008; Wave 3: October 2008; Wave 4: March/April 2009). The third and fourth waves of data were collected approximately 2 weeks before and 5 months after the 2008 presidential election. Of the 324 individuals who agreed to participate in the study, 209 completed Waves 3 and 4. These individuals ($n = 209$) were included in analyses for the current study relating to the longitudinal component. Those who did not complete Waves 3 and 4 were compared with those who did on demographic variables and on the substantive variables of interest. No significant differences were found between the two groups.

In order to also consider the immediate effects of the election, we invited participants in the longitudinal study to take part in a daily diary study. Recruitment e-mails were sent to all individuals in the longitudinal sample until 150 individuals had agreed to participate in the diary study. In this component of the study, participants completed measures at the end of each day on the days immediately before and after the election. Analyses relating to this component included those who had pre and post data in the daily

component of the study, collected on the 2 days before and the 2 days after the election ($n = 108$). Those who participated in the longitudinal study but not the daily study were slightly younger than those who participated in both components (M_{age} difference = 0.58 years; $p < .05$). No other differences were found on any of the demographic or substantive variables of interest between the longitudinal and daily diary samples.

Longitudinal Measures

Racial identity. The 20-item Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI) was used to measure racial identity (Sellers et al., 1997). Three dimensions of racial identity are included in the scale. Eight items were used to measure centrality, six items were used to measure private regard, and six items were used to measure public regard. Items for centrality include "Being Black is an important part of my self-image" and "Being Black is an important reflection of who I am." Items for private regard include "I feel good about being Black" and "I am happy that I am Black." Items for public regard include "Blacks are not respected by the broader society" (reverse-coded) and "In general, others respect Black people." Response options on a 7-point scale range from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), with 4 (*neither agree nor disagree*) as the neutral point. Internal reliabilities were above .80 for all three scales at both waves.

Daily Measures

Racial identity. Daily measures of racial identity were modified for daily use from the MIBI (Sellers et al., 1997). Specifically, participants were asked to report how strongly they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements relating to that particular day. Six items were used to measure daily racial identity centrality. Sample items for this scale are "Today, being Black was an important part of my self-image" and "Today, I had a strong sense of belonging to Black people." For daily centrality, Cronbach's alpha on any particular day ranged from .79 to .88, and the reliability of within-subject changes across days was .55 (see Cranford et al., 2006, for details on reliability of daily measures across time). Four items were used to measure daily private regard. Sample items are "Today, I felt good about being Black" and "Today, I often regretted that I am Black" (reverse-scored). Cronbach's alpha for private regard on any particular day ranged from .80 to .93, and the reliability of within-subject changes across days was .61. Four items were used to measure daily public regard. Sample items are "Today, I felt that others respect Black people" and "Today, I felt that society views Black people as an asset." For daily public regard, Cronbach's alpha on any particular day ranged from .79 to .87, and the reliability of within-subject changes across days was .64. Pilot testing of the daily racial identity measures revealed that a 5-point scale adequately captured the variance for each identity measure and served to minimize the burden on respondents. Response options for all daily racial identity scales were therefore measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Scale modifications are commonplace across diary and longitudinal modes of data collection. Furthermore, since change in the diary component of this study was measured separately from change in the longitudinal component, there are no compelling statistical or methodological

implications to using different response scales across these two modes of data collection. A complete list of the items used for each identity scale is available from the first author upon request.

Racial identity exploration. Items relating to exploration were modified for daily use and expanded from Phinney's (1992) measure of ethnic identity. A larger pool of 13 items was initially developed and piloted. Based on pilot data and qualitative feedback from pilot participants, the number of items was reduced to five. Cronbach's alpha on any particular day ranged from .85 to .92, and the reliability of within-subject changes across days was .83. Items for this scale are included in the Appendix. Descriptive statistics for study variables are presented in Table 1.

Analysis Overview

Our initial focus was to consider the immediate effects of the presidential election on racial identity exploration and the extent to which initial levels of identity centrality (measured in the Wave 3 longitudinal survey approximately 2 weeks prior to the election) predicted the strength of these changes. Short-term changes in exploration were considered by averaging the measures of exploration from the 2 days before the election (pre), and the 2 days after the election (post). Paired-samples *t* tests were then employed to test for the significance of changes from pre to post, and longitudinal OLS regression models were used to test for racial identity centrality as a predictor of change.

After considering changes in exploration immediately following the election, our second focus was to consider short-term and longer term effects of the presidential election on racial identity. Short-term changes in the three racial identity constructs were considered in the same manner as for exploration: by averaging the measures from the 2 days before and the two days after the election and comparing the pre and post measures using paired-samples *t* tests. Longer term changes in racial identity between Waves 3 and 4 of the longitudinal study, measured approximately 2 weeks before and 5 months after the election, were also tested using paired-samples *t* tests. (Analyses looking at changes in identity between Waves 3 and 4 utilize a sample size of 209. All of the other models described utilize the daily data and therefore involve a sample size of 108.)

Our final focus was to look at changes in exploration following the election as a predictor of longer term change in each of the three identity constructs. In order to test these models, a variable representing the short-term changes in exploration was created by regressing the postexploration score (averaged from the 2 days after the election) on the preexploration score (averaged from the 2 days prior to the election) and saving the residuals. This variable was then used as a predictor of longer term changes in identity in longitudinal ordinary least squares regression models. A conceptual model depicting the hypothesized association between changes in identity exploration immediately following the election and longer term changes in racial identity is depicted in Figure 1. Since racial identity centrality is hypothesized to be a predictor of changes in exploration following the election, the link between racial identity at Wave 3 and change in exploration following the election is also shown in Figure 1.

Results

Identity Exploration Following the Election

Means and standard deviations for pre- and postelection measures are shown in Table 1. Our first hypothesis was that levels of racial identity exploration would increase immediately following the election. In support of this prediction, a paired-samples *t* test showed that levels of exploration in the daily diary were significantly higher in the 2 days after the election than in the 2 days before the election ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.776$, $SE = 0.089$), $t(107) = 8.72$, $p < .001$. This increase in exploration corresponds to 0.93 standard deviations.

Centrality as a Predictor of Increases in Exploration Following the Election

Our second hypothesis was that individuals with higher levels of centrality would be more likely to experience the election as an encounter and therefore more likely to increase their levels of exploration immediately following the election. In support of this prediction, results of a longitudinal regression model adjusting for initial levels of exploration showed that higher levels of centrality,

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable	Preelection		Postelection		Paired-samples <i>t</i> (<i>df</i>)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Daily					
Exploration	2.720	0.830	3.496	0.839	8.72 (107) ^{***}
Centrality	3.186	0.734	3.691	0.777	9.38 (107) ^{***}
Private regard	4.119	0.688	4.436	0.564	6.62 (107) ^{***}
Public regard	3.113	0.704	3.661	0.746	8.27 (107) ^{***}
Longitudinal					
Centrality	4.507	1.191	4.399	1.148	-0.703 (208)
Private regard	5.964	1.022	5.912	0.838	-0.353 (208)
Public regard	3.367	1.057	3.725	1.214	4.66 (208) ^{***}

Note. For daily variables $N = 108$, and for longitudinal variables $N = 209$.

^{***} $p < .001$.

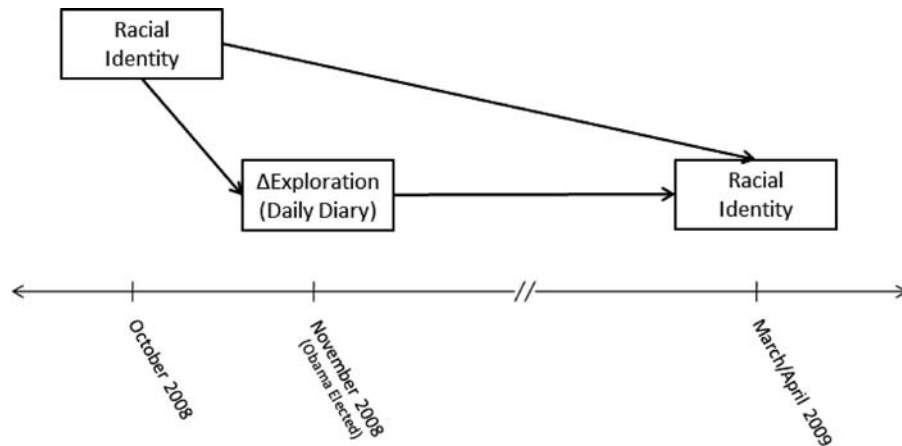


Figure 1. Conceptual model depicting racial identity at Wave 3 as a predictor of changes in racial identity exploration immediately following the election and changes in racial identity exploration as a predictor of longer term changes in racial identity.

measured prior to the election in the longitudinal survey, were associated with greater increases in exploration in the daily diary immediately following the election ($b = 0.350$, $SE = 0.073$, $p < .001$). The influence of centrality on levels of exploration following the election is depicted in Figure 2. As evidenced by the figure, individuals with higher levels of centrality (+1 SD) showed an estimated increase of 1.126 units on exploration ($SD = 1.349$). However, individuals with lower levels of centrality (-1 SD) showed smaller increases in exploration following the election (0.426 units; $SD = 0.510$). The effects of private regard and public regard on changes in exploration were also explored but were found not to be significant ($ps > .05$). The effects of centrality also remained significant ($p < .001$) and were reduced by only 6% when private regard and public regard were included in the model as controls.

Changes in Racial Identity Following the Election

Short-term and longer term changes in racial identity following the election were also considered. Short-term changes were con-

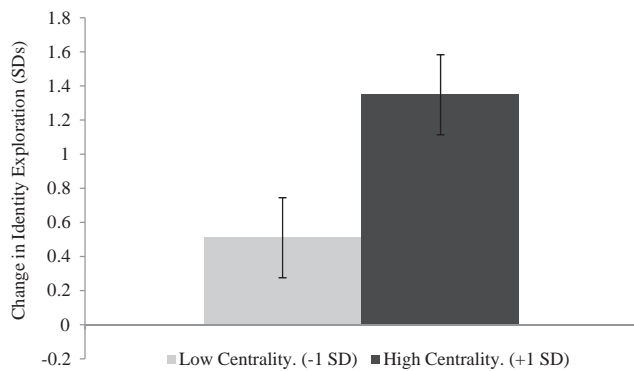


Figure 2. Fitted interaction plot depicting immediate changes in identity exploration following the election at lower (-1 SD) and higher (+1 SD) levels of centrality. Error bars represent ± 1.96 standard errors of each point estimate.

sidered using the subsample of participants who completed the daily study ($n = 108$), and longer term changes were considered using the larger longitudinal sample ($n = 209$). With respect to short-term changes, we hypothesized that levels of centrality, private regard, and public regard reported in the daily diary would all increase in the days immediately following the election. Paired-samples t tests supported this prediction. In particular, public regard showed the largest increases ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.549$ [$SD = 0.757$], $SE = 0.066$), $t(107) = 8.27$, $p < .001$, followed by centrality ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.505$ [$SD = 0.668$], $SE = 0.054$), $t(107) = 9.38$, $p < .001$, and private regard ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.316$ [$SD = 0.505$], $SE = 0.048$), $t(107) = 6.62$, $p < .001$. The magnitudes of the immediate increases in each racial identity construct are depicted in Figure 3.

We also considered longer term changes in racial identity from 2 weeks before to 5 months after the election reported in Waves 3 and 4 of the longitudinal survey. Specifically, paired-samples t tests showed that levels of centrality did not change ($M_{\text{difference}} =$

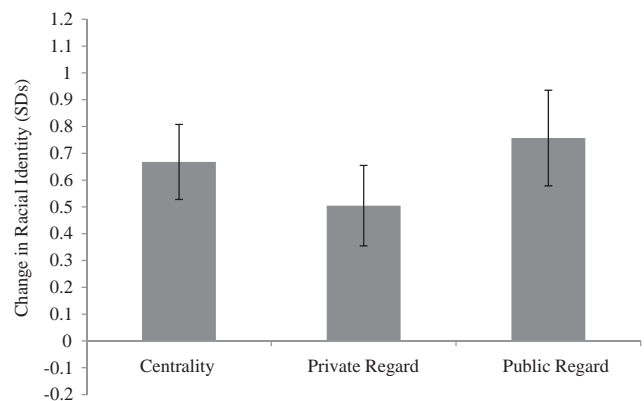


Figure 3. Average magnitude of increase in centrality, private regard, and public regard from the 2 days immediately before to the 2 days immediately after the election. Error bars represent ± 1.96 standard errors of each point estimate.

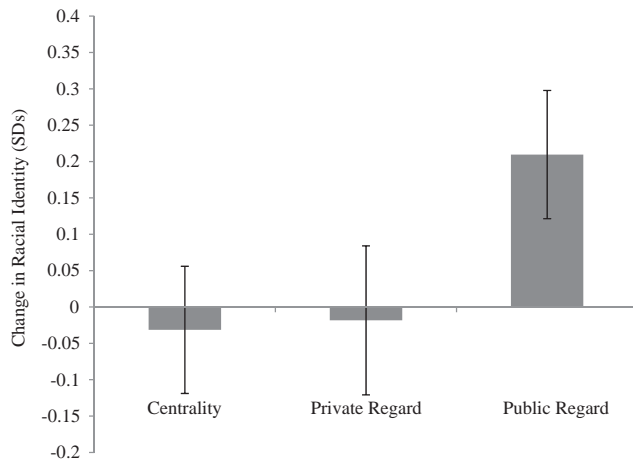


Figure 4. Average magnitude of longer term changes in centrality, private regard, and public regard from 2 weeks before to 5 months after the election. Error bars represent ± 1.96 standard errors of each point estimate.

-0.037 [$SD = -0.031$], $SE = 0.052$), $t(208) = -0.703$, $p = ns$, nor did levels of private regard ($M_{\text{difference}} = -0.016$ [$SD = -0.018$], $SE = 0.056$), $t(208) = -0.353$, $p = ns$. However, as predicted, public regard did show enduring increases 5 months after the election ($M_{\text{difference}} = 0.253$ [$SD = 0.210$], $SE = 0.054$), $t(208) = 4.66$, $p < .001$. The magnitude of longer term change in each racial identity construct is depicted in Figure 4.

Exploration Following the Election as a Predictor of Longer Term Identity Change

Our final set of hypotheses predicted that longer term changes in racial identity would depend on how much an individual increased in racial identity exploration immediately following the election. Results from longitudinal regression models are shown in Table 2. These models consider the change in exploration immediately following the election as a predictor of Wave 4 identity, controlling for baseline (Wave 3) levels of the outcome being predicted (see Figure 1). With respect to centrality, we had hypothesized that individuals who explored their racial identity more following the election would decrease more in the extent to which they normatively defined themselves with respect to race. In support of this hypothesis, model results suggest that greater increases in exploration following the election were negatively associated with centrality ($b = -0.136$, $SE = 0.067$, $p < .05$). Post hoc analyses relating to this finding suggest that individuals with higher levels of exploration following the election ($+1 SD$) significantly decreased in levels of centrality by an average of 0.229 units ($SD = 0.196$, $p < .05$), whereas those with lower levels of exploration ($-1 SD$) showed a small nonsignificant increase of 0.043 units ($SD = 0.037$). Levels of exploration did not predict longer term changes in public regard ($b = -0.036$, $SE = 0.076$, $p = ns$).

In support of our hypothesis that identity exploration leads to more positive feelings toward group membership, the second model in Table 2 shows that greater increases in exploration following the election were positively associated with changes in private regard ($b = 0.130$, $SE = 0.053$, $p < .05$). Post hoc analyses relating to this finding revealed that individuals with higher levels

of exploration following the election ($+1 SD$) showed small but nonsignificant increases in private regard in the 5-month follow-up (0.078 units [$SD = 0.089$], $p = ns$), whereas those with lower levels of exploration ($-1 SD$) showed significant decreases (0.182 units [$SD = 0.208$], $p < .05$). These findings suggest that rather than contributing to increases in private regard, higher levels of exploration were necessary to maintain existing levels of private regard.

Discussion

The current study established several important findings relating to changes in identity following the election of Barack Obama. First, the election was found to have stimulated increases in racial identity exploration, as well as immediate increases in all three of the racial identity constructs considered. Furthermore, increases in exploration were conditioned by the extent to which individuals normatively defined themselves with respect to race. In these analyses, greater levels of racial centrality were linked to systematic increases in identity exploration immediately following the election. Relating to longer term changes in identity, results suggest enduring overall increases in public regard following the election. However, longer term changes in private regard and centrality depended on identity exploration such that those who explored their racial identity more following the election were more likely to increase their levels of private regard and more likely to decrease their levels of centrality.

While previous work has shown that reports of discrimination are positively associated with ethnic identity exploration (Pahl & Way, 2006), to our knowledge, the current study is the first to document increases in identity exploration following a prominent national event. This finding is therefore in line with Cross's Nigrescence theory, which suggests that important race-related events can serve as encounter experiences that stimulate identity

Table 2

Change in Exploration as a Predictor of Changes in Centrality, Private Regard, and Public Regard From 2 Weeks Before to 5 Months After the Election

Variable	Estimate	SE	β
Wave 4 centrality			
Intercept	-0.093	0.061	
Wave 3 centrality	1.004***	0.067	.879
Change in exploration	-0.136*	0.067	-.119
Wave 4 private regard			
Intercept	-0.052	0.052	
Wave 3 private regard	0.613***	0.053	.732
Change in exploration	0.130*	0.053	.155
Wave 4 public regard			
Intercept	0.358***	0.074	
Wave 3 public regard	0.940***	0.076	.774
Change in exploration	-0.036	0.076	-.030

Note. Results are based on regression models. The Wave 3 autoregressive control variable and the change in exploration variable are z-scored in all models. Wave 4 outcome variables are centered on Wave 3 scale means so that the intercept represents mean change in the sample across the two waves. $n = 108$ for all models.

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

exploration or immersion into issues of race (Cross, 1971, 1991; Cross & Cross, 2008).

We were also able to show that, related to this finding, participants with higher levels of centrality showed greater increases in exploration following the election. This finding extends previous work (Aries et al., 1998; Shelton & Sellers, 2000; Yip, 2005) by showing that, in addition to being more likely to interpret experiences through a racial lens, race-central individuals are also more likely to explore their racial identity following important events. This finding also, however, runs counter to Cross's Nigrescence model (Cross, 1971, 1991; Cross & Cross, 2008). In particular, the finding refutes the idea that individuals with low-salience identities will be more likely to experience an important race-related event as an identity encounter. While Cross's more recent perspectives allow for the fact that individuals who have developed a high-salience identity may experience additional encounters and recycle through their identities (see e.g., Cross & Cross, 2008), the current findings go further than this to suggest that individuals with high-salience identities may actually be more likely to experience encounters. One possible implication of this is that, over time, race-central individuals may be more likely to refine their understanding of race and develop a more nuanced or differentiated racial identity.

Another important focus of the current study was to consider changes in levels of racial identity following the election. Relating to racial centrality, our findings are congruent with work suggesting that the racial domain of the self-concept is activated, or made salient, when individuals are faced with a race-related event (Turner et al., 1994). Specifically, we found that levels of centrality were substantially elevated immediately following the election. This finding was expected and suggests that the election may have been viewed and experienced through a racial lens by many Black college students at predominantly White colleges.

Furthermore, beyond activation of the racial self-concept, it is likely that perceived changes in group status following the election also contributed to immediate increases in identity centrality. In particular, research relating to social identity theory has suggested that an event that is perceived as a positive shift in group status will lead to increases in group identification, as well as increases in positive feelings toward group membership (see e.g., Doosje et al., 2002). The observed increases in centrality and private regard immediately following the election therefore provide support for this theoretical perspective. Furthermore, findings relating to immediate increases in private regard suggest that affective judgments of group membership may tend to fluctuate in response to status-related events. This is notable given that, to our knowledge, only identity centrality has been discussed as an event-contingent construct (see e.g., Shelton & Sellers, 2000). We believe that, based on these findings, it will be important for future research to consider the significance of fluctuations in private regard across time and context.

With respect to longer term changes in centrality, individuals who explored their identity more following the election decreased in their levels of centrality, while individuals who explored less showed little change. These findings are consistent with the idea that enduring changes in identity are the result of the deliberation and internal grappling that defines identity exploration (Cross, 1991; Erikson, 1968; Phinney, 1990). Furthermore, these findings are in line with research on ethnic identity, which has shown that

higher status groups report lower levels of group identification (French et al., 2006; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Syed & Azmitia, 2009). In particular, our findings extend this work by demonstrating that levels of group identification decreased following an event that was widely perceived as an increase in group status. Our longer term findings are not, therefore, consistent with research from a social identity theory perspective, which suggests that increases in group status lead to increase in group identification (Doosje et al., 1995, 2002). This is not, however, entirely surprising given that research in this area has focused on the short-term influence of status changes among artificially created groups and is therefore not necessarily equivalent to the concept of longer term identity change.

As was the case with centrality, longer term changes in private regard were also conditioned by exploration such that greater increases in exploration following the election were positively associated with changes in private regard. To our knowledge, this study was the first to provide longitudinal support for the notion that identity exploration serves as a means for minority individuals to develop or maintain a positive perspective on their group membership. This is a foundational assumption behind leading theories of racial identity development (see e.g., Cross & Cross, 2008; Helms, 1995; Helms & Cook, 1999) and thus demonstrates that this relationship is an important contribution of the current study. Related to this finding, it is important to note that at lower levels of exploration, individuals actually decreased in their levels of private regard in the 5 months follow-up. This suggests that, when levels of private regard are already high, substantial continued identity exploration or identity "recycling" (Cross & Cross, 2008; Parham, 1989) may be important for the maintenance of a positive racial self-concept. It should also be explicitly noted here that while greater increases in exploration following the election exploration were positively associated with changes in private regard, they were negatively associated with changes in centrality. This provides support for the unique nature of these two identity constructs and suggests that their development may be occasioned by different factors.

With respect to public regard, clear increases were observed immediately following the election and remained highly significant in the 5 months follow-up. This finding supports our prediction that the election of the first Black president had an important influence on individuals' assessments of how African Americans are viewed (or valued) by the broader society. The magnitude of this effect is notable, especially given that normative racial identity development would suggest decreases in public regard alongside a growing awareness of racism and societal oppression across the late adolescent college years (Sellers et al., 1998; Yip, Seaton, & Sellers, 2006). The increases in public regard shown in the 5 months follow-up are therefore likely to be a conservative estimate of the influence of the election on levels of this construct. That is, since decreases would generally be expected across this period, the actual influence of the election may actually have been larger.

Some potential implications of these findings are also important to discuss. First, our overall findings relating to longer term changes in identity provide support for perspectives suggesting that meaningful changes in identity can take place over time (see e.g., Cross, 1991; Ong, Fuller-Rowell, & Phinney, 2010; Phinney & Ong, 2007). It is also worth noting, however, that our findings do not necessarily contradict the idea that identity is somewhat

stable (see e.g., Sellers et al., 1998). This is evident in the strong autoregressive association in identity constructs over the 5 months period (see Table 2). Additionally, relating specifically to public regard findings, since research has suggested that lower levels of public regard are protective against the adverse effects of discrimination on mental health (see e.g., Sellers & Shelton, 2003), it is possible that increases in public regard may lead African Americans to be more vulnerable to experiences of discrimination. Furthermore, since it is unlikely that the election had any parallel influence on the prevalence of discrimination in society (Kaiser, Drury, Spalding, Cheryan, & O'Brian, 2009; Knowles, Lowery, & Schaumberg, 2009), it is possible that the net effect of the election on the health of African Americans could be a deleterious one. While these ideas are speculative, we believe that it will be important for future research to test the possibility that the harmful effects of discrimination on mental health have increased since the presidential election and that levels of public regard may account for these changes.

Another important area of future research will be to explore the relationship between activation of the racial self-concept (something that we relate to the social-cognitive perspective) and an identity encounter (something that we relate to Cross's, 1991 [1995; Cross & Cross, 2008] theory of racial identity development). Overall, we have conceptualized activation as relating to fluctuations in identity centrality, and encounters as relating to fluctuations in identity exploration. In terms of the relationship between these two concepts, we believe that activation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for identity exploration to occur. While the current article does not focus on testing this particular point, our finding that centrality, measured prior to the presidential election, was positively associated with the extent to which individuals increased their levels of exploration immediately following the election is consistent with this perspective. In future research, experience sampling designs will be useful to further test the relationship between these two constructs and the dynamic mechanisms behind processes of identity change.

Some additional future directions and limitations are also important to note. First, since the study focused on Black college students attending predominantly White colleges, the extent to which the findings can be generalized to other Black college students or other age groups is not known. Another important point relating to the context of this research is that the focus of the study was on one particular type of event: a larger scale political event that was widely perceived as positive among African Americans. An important direction for future research will therefore be to consider different types of events and how the characteristics of an event may modify the event's impact on immediate or longer term changes in identity. Various questions are of relevance to this topic. For example, do positive and negative events differentially impact identity exploration, and how does the valence of the event influence short-term and longer term changes in identity? One possibility is that important events may in some cases have the same effects regardless of whether they are positive or negative. For example, if exploration is a driving force behind changes in some components of identity (e.g., private regard), then, to the extent that both positive and negative events stimulate exploration, they may have a similar influence on longer term changes in identity. However, with respect to short-term effects, negative race-related events (e.g., discrimination) may have a different

impact on some components of identity (e.g., private regard) than would positive events. All of these topics will be important for future research to address in order to further understand fluctuations in identity and the extent to which they are yoked to life events. While daily fluctuations in identity centrality have been linked with daily well-being (see e.g., Yip & Fuligni, 2002), the association between daily fluctuations in different components of identity and adjustment will also be an important topic for research.

Although in this study Obama's election was considered as a single event, it is important to acknowledge that the presidency is also an ongoing series of events, which may be continuing to influence the racial identity of African Americans. Attending to the dynamic aspects of such events over time may yield a more nuanced understanding of how encounter experiences shape identity processes. It will therefore be helpful for future research to consider how portrayals of Obama in the media and events during the presidency may be impacting racial identity. Furthermore, Obama's reelection bid—the 2012 presidential election—will likely bring racial issues to the fore once again and may again have an important impact on the racial identity of African Americans.

Conclusion

The current investigation has shown that the study of identity changes following a specific national event can provide important insight into the dynamics of identity change. However, with multiple dimensions of identity and a diverse set of theoretical perspectives to consider, researchers have much more work to do in this area. In particular, in addition to understanding the role of negative race-related experiences such as discrimination, future research should further consider the role of positive race-related events and how they come to influence changes in identity over time. Where possible, more studies of macro-level sociopolitical events would be useful. However, the study of unique race-related events that occur in people's daily lives (see e.g., Ong, Fuller-Rowell, & Burrow, 2009; Yip, 2005) will also be important to understanding fluctuations in identity as well as the antecedents of longer term identity change.

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Appendix

Items for Daily Measure of Racial Identity Exploration

Use the scale below to indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

Today . . .

1. I reflected on issues of race or ethnicity and how they relate to my life.
2. I considered how closely I want to relate to my own or other racial/ethnic groups.
3. I thought about specific experiences and how they relate to my understanding of race.

4. I did not think about my race very much at all. (Reverse Scored)
5. I thought about how my racial/ethnic background has influenced my values and beliefs.

Response options: strongly disagree (1); disagree (2); neutral (3); agree (4); strongly agree (5).

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