

COMMENTARY

## What helps you hurts Me: Researchers should consider how symbolic racism might affect attitudes toward basic income

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In discussing universal basic income (UBI) in their focal article, Huffmeier and Zacher (2021) note the importance of investigating predictors of support or opposition to such programs. The authors note that as the discussion of UBI continues, “it will be important to use rigorous research methods to examine individual and higher level reactions to the proposal and actual introduction of a BI, as well as individual and contextual factors that moderate these effects” (p. 42). Although the authors discuss several theories in organizational research related to fairness, such as procedural justice and equity theory, we believe there may be additional factors to consider as well. In particular, we believe that attitudes toward disadvantaged groups and minority groups may lead individuals to oppose the program even if they might benefit from the program individually.

Universal basic income, depending on how it is designed, has the potential to benefit every citizen. In that way, the program would be similar to other government programs that have historically been implemented. Accordingly, to understand whether this program will be successful, it may be beneficial to examine whether other similar programs have also been successful. We were reminded of Heather McGhee's recent book *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (2021). In the book, McGhee examines the community swimming pools that were created in the early part of the 20th century and then later destroyed or abandoned when they were required to racially integrate. This historical example demonstrates that people may act against their own interests if they feel that government programs benefit individuals they find undesirable.

As researchers in the field of industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology, these findings surprised us. However, researchers in other fields have already explored how racism may affect attitudes on government spending. One concept that may be particularly useful is *symbolic racism*. Symbolic racism refers to a belief system that maintains four specific ideas: that Black individuals no longer face discrimination, that Black individuals face disadvantages that are due to a lack of work ethic, that Black individuals are overly demanding in their desire for equality, and—most relevantly—that Black individuals do not deserve government assistance (Sears & Henry, 2003). Researchers have found that symbolic racism predicts more positive attitudes toward more punitive policing policies that may disadvantage minority groups (Green et al., 2006). Jaccoby (1994) found that symbolic racism in particular was a strong predictor of negative attitudes toward government spending, particularly on social programs. Sears and Henry (2003) also found that symbolic racism was a strong predictor of opposition to government spending on minority groups specifically, beyond what was predicted by other prejudices or what was predicted by general individualism. Other researchers have also found that beliefs about the work ethic of Black individuals

are the strongest predictor of reducing government spending on minority groups (Gilens, Sniderman, & Kuklinski, 1998). Thus, we think symbolic racism may also be the force that drove communities in the middle of the 20th century to abandon and close the public swimming pools that were integrated.

Although symbolic racism is an important predictor of attitudes toward government programs, we do not believe that symbolic racism has informed much organizational research. However, researchers have started to explore the potential for programs that are generally viewed as popular to be viewed negatively by employees who do not benefit from those programs. Indeed, the potential for organizational programs to create *backlash* has begun to be explored in organizational research. Perrigino et al. (2018) reviewed the literature around backlash toward work–life balance policies and found strong evidence that employees without families or with limited family responsibilities may resent policies that are meant to promote balance between work and home life. Spitzmueller et al. (2016) has also found employees who are not currently nursing children may have negative attitudes toward providing breastfeeding accommodations to nursing employees. Li et al (2015) also found that employees caring for senior relatives may resent organizational policies supporting childcare when the organizational does not support eldercare. All of this research demonstrates that employees may have negative emotions and backlash toward programs that they do not currently benefit from directly (even though they may potentially benefit from these programs in the future). Although this research is similar to research surrounding symbolic racism, organizational researchers have not, to our knowledge, explored the possibility that individuals may be opposed to policies they would benefit from due to symbolic racism.

Given the fact that UBI would potentially benefit large segments of the population, organizational researchers might assume that most individuals would favor these propositions out of rational self-interest. However, researchers need to consider that attitudes toward groups that are viewed as less deserving generally and racial animosity specifically may lead individuals to oppose programs even if they may benefit from those programs. This does not seem to be an area of psychology that has been well developed in the I-O psychology literature and may require additional research. In particular, we think this discussion should motivate researchers to explore whether negative attitudes toward minority groups leads to backlash toward programs that benefit minority communities even when everyone would benefit from those programs. We currently lack the theory and the vocabulary to identify the variables that might predict acceptance of these programs.

Understanding resistance to UBI, therefore, will require developing additional theory to comprehend how individuals may act against their own interests to ensure that the groups that they feel are underserving do not receive a benefit. Although we believe this endeavor may require some effort, we feel that it may lead organizational researchers to contribute to the broader discussion of other organizational and government policies as well (both currently and historically). Psychological theories that explore perceptions of organizational fairness currently assume that individuals favor policies and actions that benefit them, but theories such as symbolic racism may explain why individuals may oppose policies they may benefit from just to ensure that undeserving minorities do not benefit. Organizational researchers would greatly benefit from developing a greater understanding of this resentment, much as political science, social psychology, and other fields have benefitted. More importantly, both government programs and organizational policies that benefit minority groups may be resented by the majority, and understanding the boundary conditions and moderators of this resentment may help overcome this resistance. We hope the current discussion on UBI leads to a greater understanding of this underexplored area.

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