Preprint: The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Philosophical Psychology* <21.01.2022> <http://www.tandfonline.com> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09515089.2022.2029386>

René Baston
rene.baston@hhu.de
ORCID iD: 0000-0001-9904-3729

**From Old-Fashioned to Offensive Racism: How Social Norms Determine the Measurement Object of Prejudice Questionnaires**

**Abstract**

Recently, an increasing number of scholars have been showing interest in old-fashioned racism again. While recent studies on old-fashioned racism apparently increase our knowledge of this psychological theory of racism, the studies actually shed light on a different type of racism, namely offensive racism. The aim of this text is to argue that psychological theories of racism, like old-fashioned racism and modern racism, depend on societies’ social norms. I will show that questionnaires are highly sensitive to social norms, and if there is change in social norms, the original measurement object alters. The theory of old-fashioned racism implicitly assumes agents that follow (or conform to) the social norm to behave prejudiced. Today, however, this social norm does not exist in Western societies. If agents express the same prejudices today, they indicate their willingness to breach the social norm to behave unprejudiced. Thereby, classic old-fashioned racism measures reflect a new kind of racism today.

**1. Introduction**

Recently, an increasing number of social psychologists have been showing renewed interest in ‘old-fashioned racism’ (OFR; Banks & Valentino, 2012; Huddy & Feldman, 2009; Knuckey & Kim, 2015; Lajevardi & Oskooii, 2018; Lashta et al., 2016; Milner et al., 2020; Valentino & Sears, 2005). To some extent, this new peak in racism research spurred on by how public speech is getting rougher, with racial sentiments playing a more prominent role. Nowadays, some individuals openly express and articulate prejudices to an astonishing extent. In the US, journalists call the relevant social group ‘the angry white men’ (Krugman, 2018); in Germany, they name them fury-citizen (“Wutbürger”, Petersen, 2016). Given these recent developments, some psychologists suggest that OFR is not investigated enough today. While psychologists were busy investigating facets of more modern psychological racism theories, like aversive racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004), they disregarded the influence and relevance of OFR.

In this text, I argue that the measurement object of direct prejudice questionnaires with face-validity[[1]](#footnote-1) alters through changes public social norms. I will explain that the classic measurement procedures for OFR target a different type of racism today than it did in the past. Against the background of changing public norms, agents express something different while the actual expressed and measured prejudice appears to be the same.

I will make the following argument:

1. Expressed prejudices reflect, in part, the subject’s inner stand towards a social norm.
2. The inner stand towards a social norm is essential for psychological types of racism.[[2]](#footnote-2)
3. If the social norm changes and the expressed prejudices are kept constant, then a subject’s *different* inner stand towards a social norm manifests.
4. Thus, although the expressed prejudices are the same at *t1* and *t2*, it can reflect a different psychological type of racism when the social norm changed between *t1* and *t2*.

In section 2, I argue for thesis (1). I shall argue that norms, a suppression factor, play an important role for prejudice utterances. Norms regulate how much prejudices are directly articulated.

In section 3, I argue for thesis (2) and will explain why psychological racism theories not only ground on a belief system and an emotional underpinning, but, in addition, on how a subject relates to norms. According to the theory of modern racism, for example, subjects suppress their prejudices to conform to norms. This suppression mechanism is not only essential for how modern racists’ prejudices are measured but also for behavior prediction. So, how the subject relates to an existing norm (conforming, following or breaching), i.e. the inner stand towards the norm, is essential for prejudice measurements: (a) it explains the measurement procedure (for example, how the Modern Racism Scale works), and (b) it explains the characteristic behavioral patterns, which are predicted based on the measurement.

Against this background, in section 4, I will argue for thesis (3) and (4): First, if the inner stand towards norms is essential for direct prejudice measurement, then what a prejudice utterance indicates about an agent’s mind is relative to the existing social norm. Second, if theses (1) and (2) are correct, a society’s norm change alters a measurement’s object. I will illustrate this claim by arguing that a direct prejudice measurement of old-fashioned racism is, in fact, measuring something different today than it did in the past. This is so because the social norm to behave unprejudiced did not start developing before the civil rights movement took place. I will argue that a recent study on old-fashioned racism, which indicate that anger is more important for old-fashioned racism than disgust (Banks & Valentino, 2012), only apparently contradict the theory of old-fashioned racism because, in fact, they are not measuring old-fashioned racism but ‘offensive racism’.

In section 5, I sketch an outline of offensive racism and its characteristics. Although this is ultimately an empirical question, I will present hypotheses regarding its nature. OFR is based on disgust, a racist belief-system and the inner stand of following (or conforming to) a racist social norm. Before the civil rights movement took place, it was normal and expected to express explicit prejudices. The opposite is true today: expressing prejudices while undergoing a direct measurement with face-validity is *breaching* a norm. Accordingly, if an agent expresses prejudices today like someone did in the past, she indicates something different about her mind. Offensive racists have a different emotional underpinning than old-fashioned racists, namely anger (Banks & Valentino, 2012). Furthermore, for offensive racists, being ‘politically incorrect’ is identity-forming and regarded as positive.

**2. Expressed prejudices partly reflect the subject’s inner stand towards a social norm**

In this section, I argue that if operationalism for psychological prejudice measurements is rejected, then direct prejudice measurements partly indicate how the subject relates to social norms.

*Operationalism* for psychological measurements entails that the meaning of theoretical concepts is synonymous with the operations by which they are measured (Borsboom, 2009). From this point of view, having racial prejudices means to score high on a racism scale: We cannot speak about racial prejudices without a psychological racism scale. However, even though an agent did not undergo a prejudice measurement, she can still be prejudiced. In such a case, being prejudiced is understood as a dispositional property: *if* an agent were measured with a racism scale, *then* she would score high. Importantly, an operationalist does not refer to an attribute as something that exists independently from a psychological measurement. That means, if an agent scores high on the Modern Racism Scale (McConahay et al., 1986), no realism for mental states is implied.

Classic studies reveal important details about OFR and the US general public’s opinion about races before the civil rights movement took place (for example, Bogardus, 1925, 1928; Hunter, 1927; Katz & Braly, 1933; Thurstone, 1928). To measure old-fashioned racism, subjects are directly asked about their prejudices. Direct measurements of explicit prejudices presuppose that the subject is *willing* (Jones & Sigall, 1971) and *able* (Banaji, 2001) to articulate her prejudices. However, with the civil rights movement, the public attitudes regarding race changed, which General Social Survey (GSS) data shows (Bobo et al., 2012). With a change in public racial attitudes, researchers expected more social pressure on subjects undergoing a direct racial attitude measure. Social psychologists assume that subjects modify their self-reported racial attitudes due to social-desirability effects (see, for example, Jones & Sigall, 1971). Subjects anticipate what they should reply according to current social norms and only articulate as much negative racial attitudes as possible. Measurements that rely on self-reports are ‘direct measurements’ in the following. Measures that do not rely on self-reports, like the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald et al., 1998), are ‘indirect’.

Distinct types of psychological racism classifications depend on *real* mental states and *real* behavioral patterns. This view is quite common in social psychology, as the famous study from Jones and Sigall (1971) illustrates. They showed by apparently using a lie-detector that subjects are trying to fake their prejudice measurements. Faking an attitude, however, presupposes that the *real* racial attitude, so to speak, was not expressed.[[3]](#footnote-3) In fact, social psychologists debate about what, say, implicit prejudices *really* are (see, for example Arkes & Tetlock, 2004; Houwer, 2014). These questions, however, only make sense if operationalism is rejected (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955, p. 282): If psychological attributes are defined by measurement operations, it is senseless to ask what the measurement instrument *really* measures. The widely shared non-operationalist view on prejudice measurements has surprising consequences for direct prejudice measurements.

Prejudices, as *real* psychological attributes, are evaluations of social objects in long-term memory. In social psychology, prejudices negative attitudes towards a social group object, like people of color or refugees. Attitudes are evaluative judgments that are built of three different components (multicomponent model; see Haddock & Maio, 2015): an affective component, a cognitive component, and a behavioral component. While the affective component includes affective reactions, the cognitive component includes stereotypical information about a social group. A prejudice is a negative attitude towards a social group. Commonly, psychologists assume that attitudes are stored in long-term memory (for example, see Fazio & Olson, 2014; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2011).

Two factors, namely suppression and justification, modulate an agent’s articulation of prejudices while undergoing a prejudice measurement.[[4]](#footnote-4) *Suppression* “is an externally or internally motivated attempt to reduce the expression or awareness of prejudice” (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003, p. 420). Suppression happens through intentional attempts to control prejudiced thoughts and expressions. Social norms are one of the most important factors for suppression (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). Because of widely shared social norms, society perceives prejudices as socially unacceptable, which explains why GSS data indicate decreasing prejudices in the US for decades (Bobo et al., 2012). So-called political correctness is a “social convention of restraint on public expression, operating within a given community” (Loury, 1994, p. 430) and functions as a social norm. We can expect that prejudiced subjects are aware of such norms and suppress their prejudices, like suggested by Jones and Sigall (1971). In contrast to suppression, a *justification* “serve as an opportunity to express genuine prejudice without suffering external or internal sanction” (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003, p. 456). For example, modern racists express prejudices if they can justify their prejudiced behavior in a non-prejudiced way (McConahay et al., 1981).

In conclusion, for uttering prejudices, an individual accesses prejudices from long-term memory and adjusts her verbal behavior through the psychological mechanisms of justification and suppression. Thereby, a prejudice articulation expresses more of an individual than ‘pure’ prejudices.

**3. The inner stand towards a social norm is essential for psychological types of racism**

I showed in the previous section that a prejudice articulation reflects more of an individual than prejudices in long-term memory. The process of prejudice articulation cannot be separated from how an individual adjusts articulated prejudices by to psychological mechanisms of suppression and justification. In this section, I will argue that the inner stand towards a norm is partly constitutive of different psychological types of racism. I argue that well-known psychological types of racism are based on an (a) emotional underpinning, (b) a belief-system and (c) the inner stand towards a norm, which is following, breaching or conforming to a social norm. Without the inner stand towards a social norm, the theories are incomplete, which is why I call it 'essential'.

From a psychological perspective, to say that somebody has prejudices is an elliptic description. Agents can be prejudiced in different ways, depending on a psychological racism theory. Being prejudiced as an aversive racist (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004) is something different than being prejudiced as a modern racist (McConahay et al., 1986). It is not the case that prejudices can be measured *despite* influences from psychological mechanisms of suppression and justification. In contrast, psychologists measure prejudices precisely *because* of them; they are *essential* for different psychological theories of racism.

When agents express their explicit prejudices, agents partly indicate their inner stand towards norms. If the socially shared norm ‘behave unprejudiced’ exists, suppression leads to lower articulated prejudices (see section 2). Here, it indicates that the subject is *conforming* to the norm. That means to act “in accordance with the norm, not because of the norm, but because of other considerations associated with the norm” (Brennan et al., 2016, p. 218). In these cases, the norm is externalized for the individual and used as an instrumental reason to act. On holidays, for instance, we can get into situations where we have to externalize rather than internalize an existing norm. We can recognize different social norms and adapt to them. For example, tourists visiting Germany recognize that German pedestrians tend to stop at red lights even though there is obviously no car on the street. A tourist can feel the need to just conform to this social practice without acknowledging the social norm itself. People often adhere to externalized norms to avoid blame. At the same time, the conforming individuals do not really acknowledge the norm as they have not internalized it relevantly.

Social norms, as a suppression factor, play a prominent role in psychological theories of racism, like the theory of modern racism (McConahay et al., 1986) and aversive racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). Both theories suggest that it has become a widely shared social norm to behave unprejudiced.

How modern racists relate to the social norm to ‘be unprejudiced’ *explains* how psychologists measure modern racists’ prejudices. On an individual level, there are different motivations to suppress prejudices, which reflect how subjects relate to social norms. For example, Plant and Devine (1998) developed the External Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice Scale (EMS), which addresses the subject’s will to avoid race-related conflicts.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is characteristic for modern racism (McConahay et al., 1986) and is reflected by the Modern Racism Scale.

The Modern Racism Scale is still used today (for instance, see Blatz & Ross, 2009; for an overview, see Morrison & Kiss, 2017) to measure explicit prejudices. It uses ambiguous questions to measure people's attitudes. A participant can answer these questions using either racist or non-racist justifications. When measuring prejudice with the MRS, participants have to express their agreement with the scale’s items. For example, an ambiguous item could be the question whether positive discrimination, that is, recruitment quotas, can be justified for people of color. On the one hand, participants can answer this question negatively if they highly value personal responsibility: the best candidate should get a job. On the other hand, participants can answer the question negatively because of racist beliefs. Since the subject can justify their answer in a non-racist way, they express their negative emotions towards people of color by filling in the questionnaire. Accordingly, the participant’s expectations for social sanctions explain how psychologists measure prejudices with the MRS.

Additionally, how subjects conform to the social norm to behave unprejudiced *explains* the predicted discriminatory behaviors. The modern racism theory predicts behavior accordingly: modern racists engage in discriminatory behavior against Blacks when they feel safe from social sanctions (McConahay, 1983).

For example, in one study (Brief et al., 2000), participants who scored high on the Modern Racism Scale discriminated against people of color if they had an external justification (authority figures) as a reason to discriminate. Participants went through an applicant screening process and rated applicants. One group of participants was randomly assigned to the no-justification condition, the other group to the justification condition. Those in the justification condition received a memorandum from the President of the firm, which told the participant to refrain from selecting applicants from minorities. The participants who scored high on the Modern Racism Scale discriminated against people of color if they had a business justification to do so. Accordingly, psychologist predict particular behavioral pattern of modern racists, and how participants relate to social norms explains these patterns.

In sum, the theory of modern racism relies on social norms, which partly explain the measured behavior *and* the predicted behavior. Only because subjects *conform* to the social norm to behave unprejudiced, they can be considered as modern racists. Against this background, it is important to know which cognitive processes were influential and resulted in the final self-reported attitude because it makes a difference for the prediction and explanation of behavior. When a subject reports an explicit attitude and has the external or internal motivation to behave unprejudiced, the *measurement result* would be equal regardless what motivation led to the self-report. However, for the explicit attitude’s *functional expectations*, the source of suppression makes an important difference (Devine et al., 2002).

To conclude, *the inner stand towards a social norm is referred to within psychological racism theories to predict and explain the behavioral patterns associated with different types of racism.* Thereby, being prejudiced in terms of a racism theory means to have prejudices and to suppress (or justify) these prejudices according to applying norms.

**4. Old-fashioned racism and why we have problems measuring it today**

I showed in the previous section that psychological racism theories ground on an emotional underpinning, a belief-system, and, in addition, the subject’s inner stand towards a norm. The latter was illustrated against the background of the theory of modern racism. For psychological theories of racism, norms and how a subject relates to them are essential for behavior prediction and explanation. Notice that I do not claim that existing psychological racism theories need revision, but that they already rely on norms, even though it is more implicitly conceptualized within the theories.

Which role does suppression play for old-fashioned racism? In the following, I will argue that direct measures of old-fashioned racism measure something different today than in the past. This change happened because of the widely shared social norm to behave unprejudiced, which did not exist in the past. I will show that old-fashioned racists *followed or confirmed to* the social norm to behave prejudiced. Nowadays, when a subject expresses prejudices in the same way, she indicates a different inner stand towards a social norm: *breaching* the norm to behave unprejudiced. As this reflects something different about a subject’s mind, I argue that today the classic direct prejudice measurements tap into a different type of psychological racism, namely offensive racism.

Allport (1954) published the most comprehensive study of OFR in his book *The Nature of Prejudice*. However, it is important to emphasize that at the time Allport published his famous study, the civil rights movement was already ongoing, and it was this very movement that made the development of subtle prejudice measurements necessary. Nevertheless, Allport relied on many classic studies in his book that were undertaken before the civil rights movement took place. *The Nature of Prejudice* made influential theoretical suggestions for our understanding of OFR as it unified a large amount of classic data in one comprehensive theory.

One of the theory’s most important aspects is the relation of a racist’s belief system and a negative emotion towards races. Allport claimed that *disgust* is a very important negative emotion for racism. The racist belief system depends on disgust and serves as a justification for antipathy towards Black persons. While the beliefs have truth-values and are debatable, the negative emotion is undebatable and generates new beliefs if needed. If an old-fashioned racist’s belief is debunked, another belief pops up to protect the original prejudice.

Classic attitude studies, conducted before the civil rights movement took place, are clear-cut cases of OFR. Based on the relevant studies, I suggest that OFR entails norm-following or, at least, norm-conforming behavior. An old-fashioned racist has a set of negative normative attitudes towards Black persons and the knowledge that these attitudes are widely shared. Furthermore, old-fashioned racists acknowledge the normative principle ‘*behave prejudiced*’.

There are two factors that speak in favor of the existence of the racist social norm ‘behave prejudiced’: the classic studies of racial attitudes in the US show strong and widely shared negative racial attitudes (A), and the way subjects justify their judgements (B). Against the background of classic studies, I will show that old-fashioned racists followed or confirmed to the racist social norm. Regarding (A), the studies from Bogardus (1925, 1928) as well as other studies (Katz et al., 1931; Katz & Braly, 1933) are evidence of a uniform cultural pattern of racial stereotypes and prejudices. Social norms ground on what people are used to do, and it was a social practice to articulate stereotypes and prejudices.

Concerning (B), if social norms exist and apply in a certain situation, then one’s not acting in accordance with these norms makes one socially accountable (Brennan et al., 2016, pp. 87–89). Besides breaching norms, agents can act in accordance with norms if they follow or conform to the norms. To follow a norm is to act in accordance with a norm *because of the norm:*

One can be said to follow a norm when (or to the extent that) one’s non-instrumental desire to act in accordance with the norm explains one’s acting in accordance with the norm. More formally, then, one can be said to follow a norm N that requires one to X just in case (i) one has a non-instrumental desire to act in accordance with N, (ii) one Xs, and (iii) one’s non-instrumental desire to act in accordance with N explains why one Xs. (Brennan et al., 2016, p. 202).

In contrast, to *conform* to a norm is to externalize the norm by treating the norm as an instrumental reason to act in accordance with the norm. For example, consider the desire to act in accordance with the norm to return borrowed objects. If one has this desire only because one wants to be able to borrow further objects in the future, then one is conforming to the norm. Here, one does not act in accordance with the norm *because of the norm* but because of other considerations associated with the norm. If an individual acts in accordance with a norm only to avoid harassment or disapproval, then the individual conforms to the social norm.

Now, consider the following data:

* A study from Bogardus (1925) shows that subjects’ prejudices ground on *accepted* tradition and opinion. In the study, subjects were tasked to name the source of their prejudices, and Bogardus concluded that tradition is one important factor: “The first and largest grouping of materials was composed of traditions and accepted opinion.It is clear after evaluating the data that hearsay evidence coining from both one’s personal friends and relative strangers in one’s own ‘universe of discourse’ who possess prestige.” (Bogardus, 1925, p. 219). These subjects reported “cultural influences in the form of accepted traditional opinions” (Katz et al., 1931, p. 380).
* Furthermore, Katz, Jenness and Allport (1931) asked students why they would exclude some racial groups from their fraternity and boarding houses. More than half of the students acknowledged the following answer as justification: “… as things are at present in society it would lower the reputation of my fraternity to admit those I have not checked” (p. 149-154). Accordingly, participants knew that to behave prejudiced was accepted (and expected) by the White majority.
* A study from Minard (1952) investigated the behavior of Black and White miners in a southern US town. One extreme negative racial self-reported attitude is explained by the author as follows: “because he is talking to a white man, perhaps, and couches his language in terms of what he has learned to conceive as group expectation. His real attitude may or may not be the one to which he gives expression” (Minard, 1952, p. 33). Accordingly, from a psychological point of view, a face-to-face interview between a White experimenter and a White person led to *higher* self-reported explicit prejudices due to social norms. In contrast, today non-anonymous face-to-face interviews usually lead to lower self-reported prejudices because of current social norms.

The quoted empirical studies speak in favor of the existence of a racist social norm. Individuals expected that *not* acting in accordance with the racist social norm will lead to social sanctions. Analogously, suppose at a funeral in Germany all guests wear black clothes because they know that there exists the social norm to wear black at funerals. If a person breaches the social norm by participating at the funeral with a Hawaiian shirt, others consider her blameworthy.

The empirical studies show a racist social norm, but they do not fully reveal the individuals’ inner stand towards it. Some studies suggest that individuals confirmed to the racist social norm, as the individuals externalized it because they wanted to avoid social sanctions. Figuring out whether individuals are following or conforming to a norm is tricky. The problem is like Wittgenstein’s problem of rule-following[[6]](#footnote-6): it is hard to see how a fact in the world can decide whether an individual is following a rule or just acts accordingly. I think, for the case of racism in the US before or in temporal proximity with the civil rights movement, it is implausible to assume that individuals from the White majority were just *conforming* to the norm to behave prejudiced. This would imply that they did not have a racist belief system, which is, for historical reasons, unlikely. However, the way some participants justify their judgments or discriminatory intentions speaks in favor of conforming to the norm. Regardless of individuals followed or conformed to the social norm, the important point is that there was a different social norm, which individuals considered when undergoing a prejudice assessment.

One might object that the outlined data does not include clear-cut cases of old-fashioned racism, because not all subjects self-report negative attitudes towards Black subjects. However, *the point of subsection (B) is to show that the norm to behave with prejudice existed at this time*. Before or in temporal proximity with the civil rights movement, OFR was commonly measured directly with no precautions regarding social-desirability. This is understandable since the current social norm of not expressing negative racial stereotypes and prejudices did not exist. The revealed data (A & B) justify the claim that it was an accepted social practice (B) to articulate negative racial attitudes (A). Before or in temporal proximity with the civil rights movement, directly expressing prejudices reflected an inner stand of following or conforming to a social norm. However, if subjects score high on old-fashioned racism today, subjects indicate something different their minds.

For OFR, when uttering prejudices, there was no external suppression due to social norms. In contrast, people acknowledged the habit to behave prejudiced. Before or in temporal proximity with the civil rights movement, there were a different shared social norm at play which subjects followed. Today, if a subject undergoes the same measurement procedure and articulates the same prejudices, she reveals something different about her mind. Social psychologists often assume that subjects articulate fewer prejudices because of social-desirability effects (external suppression). However, when a subject expresses prejudices through a direct prejudice measurement, she shows a different inner stand towards the social norm to behave unprejudiced, namely she is *breaching* a norm.

For an operationalist, an agent has prejudices in terms of old-fashion racism if the agent expresses prejudices with, say, the Attitudes Towards Blacks Scale (Brigham, 1993). Operationalism ignores what is actually going on in an agent’s mind when she undergoes the measurement procedure. However, the fact that social psychologists are very careful to avoid social-desirability effects, justifies the assumption that many psychologists are not operationalist. But if they are not operationalists, the agent’s inner stand towards a social norm partly determines what, say, the Attitudes Towards Blacks Scale actually measures.

A direct prejudice measurement can lose its construct validity if social norms change while a subject apparently articulates the same prejudices. Imagine a psychologist would go back in time, visiting the USA in 1920, and measures explicit prejudices with the Modern Racism Scale. If the White majority scores high on the MRS, what would be indicated? Sure, they are prejudiced, but in which sense? Are they *modern racists*? Are they prejudiced in terms of the theory of modern racism? No, because they are not externally motivated to control their prejudiced reactions (see section 2; Plant & Devine, 1998), and this explains why they do not show the characteristic behavioral patterns of modern racists. These people do not try to mask their prejudices with arguments about fairness, for example, and they do not show discriminatory behavior only when it is subtle and indirect. As mentioned in section 2, psychologists do not measure prejudices *despite* the agent’s suppression-mechanisms, but *because* of them.

For instance, a classic study (McConahay, 1983) reveals the behavioral patterns that are characteristic for modern racists. Participants had the task to evaluate job applications from White and Black applicants. In the experiment’s negative context, participants received an application from a Black applicant first. In this condition, the Black candidate’s application gave few anchor points for comparison. A lack of applications from other individuals, especially White individuals, made race less salient. The psychologists assumed that this condition would lead modern racists to discriminate because the lack of White competitors made the relevance of social norms less obvious (McConahay, 1983, p. 553). In contrast, in the experiment’s positive context, participants saw two White competitor’s applications before evaluating the application from the Black candidate.

In the negative context, the participants who scored high on the MRS showed less willingness to hire a Black than a White candidate with identical credentials. In the positive context, they expressed a greater preference for the Black over the White applicant if the Black candidate appeared well suited for the job. So, in this context, when anti-racist social norms were salient, participants did not discriminate the Black candidate. Psychologists expect such ambivalent behavioral patterns, which look inconsistent across different situations, from modern racists. It is one of the modern racists’ behavioral characteristics that modern racists discriminate in situations that deliver reasons that excuse discriminatory behavior.

Similarly, the theory of old-fashioned racism makes *implicit* references to social norms and how subjects relate to them. The theory presupposes that there is a racist society and that people are acting in accordance with racist norms. Against this background, prejudice measurements did not take social-desirability effects into account. Many societies have changed their values and norms regarding racism since then.

In sum, if operationalism is rejected, expressing high prejudices today does not indicate what is characteristic for old-fashioned racists. In contrast, it reflects something different about an agent’s mind than it did in the past.

**5 An outline of offensive racism**

In the last section, I argued that a direct measurement of explicit prejudices does not measure old-fashioned racism today. In contrast, I think, what is actually measured today is *offensive racism*. Offensive racism is, as all kinds of racism, partly constituted by the subject’s inner stand towards current social norms. In this case, agents are *breaching* the norm to behave unprejudiced. In this section, I will briefly outline some hypotheses regarding the nature of offensive racism.

To avoid confusion, in the following, I will call society’s widely shared social norms *cultural norms* now. The psychological racism theory of OFR presupposes that subjects follow or conform to a cultural norm to behave prejudiced. Given the cultural norm before or in temporal proximity with the civil rights movement, it is understandable why there were no concerns about social-desirability effects when psychologists measured prejudices directly. However, if a subject expresses high explicit prejudices today, the measurement instrument reflects something different of the subject’s mental setup. In Western societies, the fact that subjects intentionally breach the cultural norm to behave unprejudiced leads to new possibilities of explaining and predicting different behavioral patterns. I think that we currently lack a spelled-out psychological theory for this type of racism, which I call offensive racism. However, I will make some hypotheses about its nature in this section.

I want to shed some light on offensive racism by asking the following questions: (a) Why do offensive racists self-report their prejudices and breach a social norm? (b) What emotional underpinning is characteristic for offensive racism? (c) What behavioral patterns can be expected?

**5.1 Breaching norms and why**

In modern studies on old-fashioned racism, subjects self-report that they strongly dislike people of color. While this behavior was common in 1933, it is unacceptable in 2021. The consternation triggered by this behavior comes from well-known cultural norms that forbid such verbal behavior. What is going on in an individual’s mind that expresses prejudices today? At first sight, violating the norm does not lead to advantages as with stealing or fraud. The latter norm-breaking behaviors are easily understandable because the individuals can gain monetary value, which serves as an explanation. Regularly, the expression of negative racial attitudes cannot be explained based on this. The individual seems to prefer non-compliance as such. Why do offensive racists act like this?

Forscher and colleagues (2015) found that there is a motivation to express prejudices that is independent from low internal or low external motivations to control prejudiced reaction. Some subjects simply have the motivation to express their prejudices, which is captured with the Motivation to Express Prejudice Scale (Forscher et al., 2015). While the study shows that this motivation dimension exists, it leaves the question open what drives subjects who score high on it. Thus, the question remains: if high explicit prejudices, measured with the feeling thermometer, reflect something different of an individual’s mind than in the 30s, then what exactly is it?

I suggest that the norm-breaching behavior can partly be explained by *symbolic actions* (Brennan et al., 2016, p. 238): norm-breaching indicates the individual’s social group and attacks the norm as such. Symbolic actions carry meaning that depends on the prevailing norms, and we understand the actions’ meaning if we understand them as acts of disapproval. In such cases, subjects violate the social norm to undermine or alter it. In order to target a social norm, the social practice itself has to be targeted. As a consequence, the norm-breaching behavior has to be *public*, not private. For instance, in “the early days of the ‘gay rights’ movement, for example, certain gays ‘came out’ with the express purpose of asserting their opposition to prevailing sexual norms.” (Brennan et al., 2016, p. 238) The norm breaching behavior is also a statement to the public. For symbolic actions, the action is partly explained by the existing norm and how agents relate to it.

A modern racist tends to breach norms in the absence of social pressure, which is norm breaching in private. However, if the social norm is to be altered, then the divergent behavior has to be public. Offensive racists breach the social norm of political correctness because they disapprove of it. Although such actions lack an immediate benefit for the agents, if the agents succeed, there is potential benefit for them in the action in the long-run. From this perspective, there is value and meaning in breaching the norm and the behavior becomes intelligible.[[7]](#footnote-7)

One might reply that breaching a norm is a question of perspective: someone can breach a norm and, thereby, follow another norm. This can happen because different social groups can have different norms. However, a society has a well-known shared set of norms, whereas all subgroups are part of this society. A cultural norm, a norm which is shared across society, applies to subgroups which can breach them. In fact, subgroups breach various cultural norms all the time. For many subgroups, breaching these cultural norms is identity-establishing. Think about the gothic, metal or punk culture: breaching certain cultural norms of clothing standards is usual. Accordingly, if an offensive racist is breaching the norm to behave unprejudiced, she can follow a norm of her social peer group simultaneously. For the current purpose, a prejudice measurement is socially embedded if the measurement’s construct validity depends on cultural norms and how subjects relate to them. I suggest that the average US citizen , for example, is aware of cultural norms, like the norm to behave unprejudiced, which GSS data (Bobo et al., 2012) indicates.

**5.2 The emotional underpinning of offensive racism**

A modern study on OFR (Banks & Valentino, 2012) investigates emotional substrates for different types of racism. It investigates which emotions trigger the agreement to belief systems, which are typical for kinds of racism, like modern racism and old-fashioned racism. The participants had to look at a picture showing a facial expression of an emotion, like anger, fear or disgust. The participants’ task was to remember or imagine a situation that put them into this specific feeling. With an emotion triggered, the subjects’ self-reported their prejudices through different questionnaires. The underlying idea is that if OFR entails disgust, then disgust should make the OFR-belief-system more accessible. Accordingly, the expectation was to measure higher OFR scores in a disgust-scenario than for fear or anger. The study shows, in contrast to the authors’ hypothesis, that subjects score higher on old-fashioned racism when subjects are angry; there was no demonstrable effect for disgust and old-fashioned racism.

The authors (Banks & Valentino, 2012) discuss different explanations for this result. One explanation is that anger found its way into the OFR belief system only recently. Given the data from classic studies that took place before the civil rights movement, there are good reasons to stick to Allport’s suggestion that classic forms of racism grounds on disgust. However, today explicit prejudice scales do *not* measure OFR, but a different form of racism. This distinct kind stems from the subject’s inner stand towards the social norm to behave unprejudiced. The subjects breach the social norm when articulating explicit prejudices, which distinguishes this psychological type of racism from old-fashioned racism. From this perspective, it is unsurprising that there are different emotional substrates to explicit prejudices today.

Why the ‘angry White men’ are angry is difficult to answer. Paul Krugman, a columnist from the New York Times, assumes that their anger is driven by the threat of change in society “in which the privilege of being a White man isn’t what it used to be” (Krugman, 2018). The psychologist Diana Mutz (2018) makes a similar claim in respect to Trump supporters. She suggests that the support for Donald J. Trump is not explained by the supporters’ low economic status, but with issues that threaten White Americans’ sense of dominant group status. In fact, a study (Forscher & Kteily, 2020) on alt-right supporting subjects showed that they have a higher motivation to express prejudices and are in favor of Social Dominance Orientation (Malle et al., 1994), which is one’s degree of preference for inequality among social groups. Thus, the data supports the idea that the angry White men are angry because of threats to their social status.

But in which sense is this perceived threat causally responsible for feeling angry? Why does it not lead to, say, fear instead? According to Scherer’s (1997) component model of emotions, cognitive appraisals of a situation instantiate emotions. Against this background, an agent feels *anger* because she (a) perceives a morally bad situation, (b) notices goal hindrance by (c) an external cause and (d) has a coping ability. The following factors explain why offensive racism entails anger, in contrast to, say, disgust. Their anger reflects their perception of a morally bad situation and somebody, as the external cause, is responsible for that. As suggested in the last paragraph, they feel unfairly treated by losing norms that guaranteed higher social status. Moral blameworthy are people that establish and defend political correctness, basically the cultural norm that is breached, as well as those that profit from it. They do so because they think they can change the cultural norm of behaving unprejudiced by breaching it. Accordingly, the coping strategy is to express prejudices to change the norms, and, therefore, the norm-breaching behavior has to be *public*, not private: Norms are grounded on social practices, which is why the norm-breaching behavior is public.

In accordance with why norm-breaching behavior happens, the fact that anger reduces the perception of risk (Lerner & Keltner, 2001)is helpful. When agents expect less risk for being blamed and socially excluded, it is easier to express prejudices in public and via social media (when trolling, for example; see Baston & Kenyah-Damptey, 2020; Nagle, 2017).

**5.3 Offensive racism and behavioral patterns**

If offensive racism is expected to be different than OFR, then direct racism scales with face-validity, which originally measured OFR, may have different predictive powers today. While a clearly articulated explicit prejudice had certain predictive powers in 1933, it should predict different behavioral patterns today. Especially, a socially embedded measurement’s predictive powers change together with the relevant cultural norms, and, as I have shown, explicit prejudice measurement with face-validity are socially embedded in this way.

According to Lazarus (1991), disgust comes with behavior that keeps the object of disgust away from oneself. It serves as “a barrier to social relationships, to sexual arousal and enjoyment, and can force avoidance of a host of situations and experiences that do not have to be inherently offensive” (Lazarus, 1991, p. 262). Psychological theories of anger are more intertwined with aggression and, thereby, with *harmful intentions* (Lazarus, 1991, pp. 217–232). Therefore, I hypothesize that today high OFR scores correlate stronger with discriminatory behavior than in the past. Two things speak in favor of that: (1) Anger is the underlying emotion for offensive racism; (1) the offensive racist’s symbolic actions must contradict the current standards of ‘political correctness’. Furthermore, when offensive racists express prejudices in public to change the cultural norm, the behavioral patterns should be apparent.

According to the General Aggression Model (Anderson & Bushman, 2002), anger does not simply cause aggression but nevertheless three factors amplify the risk of its appearance. First, anger can interrupt moral reasoning. Second, anger maintains an aggressive intention over time by increasing attention to provoking events. Third, anger primes aggressive scripts, thoughts and relevant action-plans.

One study (Parrott & Peterson, 2008) on homophobia illustrates the interrelations between prejudices, anger and aggression towards minorities. The study “demonstrated that anger in response to gay men fully mediated the relationship between sexual prejudice and one’s likelihood of engaging in antigay aggression. Thus, it appears that it is the anger that sexually prejudiced men experience in response to gay men that significantly increased their risk of being an antigay assailant.” (Parrott & Peterson, 2008, p. 312) The data indicates that those anti-gay prejudiced participants who got angry when watching a male-male intimate relationship behavior are more likely to commit an act of antigay aggression.

Additional support for the hypothesis that offensive racists are more prone to discrimination is only indirect. First, a recent study (Forscher & Kteily, 2020) shows that alt-right and Trump supporters self-report more aggressive behavior than non-Trump supporters. Second, the angry White men tend to authoritarianism (Forscher & Kteily, 2020), which is associated with the aggressive enforcement of established norms and customs (Kleppestø et al., 2019). Third, reported cases of angry White men’s hate crimes against African-Americans (Blake, 2021) speak in favor of more willingness to discriminate. Fourth, the rise of hate crimes against Chinese-Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic is partly explained by the Trump-supporters’ Xenophobia (Tavernise & Oppel Jr., 2020).[[8]](#footnote-8)

As mentioned in section 5.1, the Motivation to Express Prejudices Scale (Forscher et al., 2015) measures the willingness to express prejudices, which is the most important dimension of offensive racism. The psychologists developed the scale to explain intentional forms of discrimination, namely hate crimes. Thereby, the scale’s predictive powers could shed light on the characteristic behavioral patterns of offensive racists. Unfortunately, however, the scale’s predictive powers have not been investigated enough yet.

**6. Conclusion and final remarks**

Operationalism is the theory that (psychological) attributes are defined through a set of measurement operations. From this perspective, an agent has the psychological attribute *X* if a psychological measurement indicates that the agent has the attribute *X*. If social psychologists are non-operationalists with regard to prejudice measurements, I argued, prejudice measurements can lose their construct validity due to shifts in social norms. When a prejudice measurement and theory presupposes a racist society and that agents act in accordance with society’s norms, then the originally measurement objects alters when the society’s social norms change, while participants express the same prejudices.

I argued that psychological racism theories comprise an emotional underpinning, a belief system and, in addition, of the subject’s inner stand towards a social norm (section 3). The theory of OFR implicitly assumes agents that follow (or conform to) the norm to behave prejudiced. Today, however, this norm does not exist any longer in Western societies. If agents utter the same prejudices today, they reflect something different of their minds because they are breaching the norm to behave unprejudiced (section 4). Therefore, classic OFR-measurement procedures are *socially embedded: The measurement object alters with changing social norms*.

Today, an individual who scores high on a direct prejudice measurement with face-validity indicates her intention to breach the social norm to behave unprejudiced, which is not true for old-fashioned racists. I suggested to call those individuals *offensive racists* to highlight that they are not old-fashioned racists, although they score high on the same prejudice measurements. For offensive racists, the norm-breaching behavior has the purpose to change the social norm and, therefore, has to be public (section 5.1). The relevant emotional underpinning is not disgust, like for old-fashioned racism, but anger (section 5.2). Additionally, recent studies on old-fashioned racism (for example, see Banks & Valentino, 2012; Huddy & Feldman, 2009; Knuckey & Kim, 2015; Lajevardi & Oskooii, 2018; Lashta et al., 2016; Milner et al., 2020; Valentino & Sears, 2005) should be recast as studies on offensive racism (section 5.2). Finally, although offensive racists articulate the same prejudices as old-fashioned racists did, the functional expectations for explicit prejudices differ depending on the motivation for articulating prejudices (section 4). Accordingly, classic prejudice measurements should show different predictive powers today than they did in the 1920s or 1930s (section 5.3).

I suspect, recent social movements fit the psychological type of offensive racism. For example, in the US, journalists occasionally refer to a certain social movement as the ‘angry White men’ (Krugman, 2018). These are partly euphoric Trump supporters that are to some extent motivated by racism (Lopez, 2017). In Germany, there is a similar social development. The so-called refugee crisis correlates with strong support for a right-wing party, and the verbal reactions in social networks are getting increasingly offensive and angry. Here, the people in question are sometimes denoted as fury-citizen by journalists (“Wutbürger”, Petersen, 2016).

I am not suggesting that these social groupings are the only representatives of offensive racism, but they can serve as an illustration. Furthermore, I do not think that offensive racism appeared solely with the formation of these social groups. On the contrary, I think that offensive racism slowly emerged over decades with evolving social norms that regulate the expression of prejudices and stereotypes.

As a final remark: I did not show that it is impossible to measure OFR *in general* today. If a subject does not recognize that there are different social norms today, then the subject’s inner stand can be the same as in the past: following or conforming to the social norm of expressing prejudices towards certain social groups. Nevertheless, I suggest that the average US citizen, for example, is aware of the widely shared norm to behave unprejudiced, as GSS data suggests.

**Acknowledgements**

I am grateful for help and critical comments from Josh Cangelosi, Jonathan Koch, Anna Welpinghus, and Amrei Bahr. Finally, I want to acknowledge the detailed and helpful comments received from two anonymous referees.

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1. A measurement has face-validity if the subject undergoing the measurement thinks that the procedure measures what it should measure. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I call it essential, because only with this element, psychological racism theories can be used to explain the prejudice measurement procedure and why the theory predicts certain behavioral patterns. Without the inner stand towards a social norm, psychological racism theories, like modern racism or old-fashioned racism, would be incomplete (see section 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Operationalism assumes that every measurement comes with measurement error. Accordingly, if a person lies while undergoing a prejudice measurement, this could be classified as a huge measurement error. However, as Borsboom (2009) showed, it is unclear what could count as a measurement error if the theoretical assumptions of operationalism are accepted. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I partly rely on fundamental ideas of the Justification-Suppression Model (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003), which is an empirical framework for explaining prejudice utterances. However, I do not presuppose it with all its assumptions and theoretical entities, like ‘genuine prejudices’. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The *Internal* Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice Scale (Plant & Devine, 1998) characterizes *internal* *suppression* mechanisms, which are essential to understand *aversive racism*. Because aversive racists *follow* egalitarian moral norms, these norms explain aversive racists’ behavioral patterns and internal mental states, like the feeling of guilt if they unintentionally discriminate. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Wittgenstein*’s Philosophical Investigations,* §201a. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I am not aware of empirical data that supports the idea that racists express prejudices to change social norms. However, the concept of symbolic actions explains behavioral patterns that seem odd otherwise. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Notice that only those individuals who openly express prejudices are offensive racists. Therefore, not every Trump supporter, for instance, would count as an offensive racist. However, I suspect that many subjects who are considered ‘angry white men’ are in fact willing to express prejudices. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)