

# Framing the Black Experience: A Discourse Analysis of President Barack Obama's Speeches

by

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## Abstract

The present study is an analysis of how President Barack Obama frames social problems as they confront African Americans in his speeches. The major research question in this study is: “Based on a discourse analysis of presidential speeches, how does Barack Obama frame the problems and challenges faced by the Black community relative to how he frames the problems and challenges of women and other communities of color?” This analysis looks for two distinct types of framing in the President’s speeches: structural\institutional framing and personal\individual framing. The results indicate that President Obama frames African American issues as evenly structural \ institutional and personal\individual. However, compared to his speeches to women, Latinos\Latinas, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and the LGBT community, the President moralizes on African Americans more than any other group in the comparison. The present study names this tendency: *racially relative moral castigation*.

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The impact of personal characteristics and social environmental factors on human behavior is and has been the subject of study for social scientists of various disciplines including demographers, sociologists, social workers, economists, and political scientists. The factors affecting human behavior are of great importance because they inform efforts to improve the delivery of critical services to society. Studying primarily unseen personal characteristics such as attitudes, beliefs, and values is an important endeavor for human society because it provides insight on how different people respond to social environmental conditions. Knowledge of attitudes, beliefs, and values also provides context for understanding how people go about shaping the society they live in.

Conversely, the study of the social institutions and neighborhoods in which people live helps social scientists understand how people are also shaped by their environment. Ultimately, through a process called *mutual constitution* people both shape and are shaped by their environments (Stephens, Markus, and Fryberg, 2012). How different people *frame* or make sense of human behavior varies as some may privilege environmental factors over personal factors or vice-versa.

*Framing* refers to how people view, identify, or make sense of the problems and challenges that different communities face. The way social problems related to crime, education, and economics are addressed is influenced by how people and their problems are framed. *Political framing*, more specifically, is about how politicians make arguments about the way issues such as poverty should be addressed (Wilson, 2009). The logic of political framing suggests that decisions about how to design policies and pass legislation (such as the extension of social services) is influenced by whether or not problems are framed as being the consequence of personal\individual characteristics or social\environmental factors. One of the most influential voices in the United States is the President's. President Barack Obama has had an influence on the political orientation, racial identity attitudes, and racial perceptions of people in the United States and African Americans in particular (Fuller-Rowell, Burrow, and Ong, 2011, Racial Politics, 2012, Staples, 2010). Through his many methods of addressing American citizens, the President also engages in the political framing of social problems and legislation. How the President frames social problems may influence how politicians and Americans in general view those problems. The President's framing of social problems may also influence how people view themselves and their environments. This study seeks to explore how President Barack Obama frames social problems confronted by African Americans relative to how he frames problems and challenges confronted by Women, Latino\Latinas, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and the LGBTQ. This study will also explore the plausible implications of the President's political framings of policy making and how African Americans perceive themselves and are perceived by Americans. This study is not intended to be an analysis of the President's policies as such an approach is beyond the scope of this investigation. However, present methods of framing African American life are informed by historic approaches. The African American experience has been studied through several Eurocentric lenses in the western social sciences: the inferiority paradigm, the cultural deficit paradigm, and the cultural difference paradigm.

## **Existing Literature**

### **Inferiority Paradigm**

According to Parham and Ajamu, (2011), the inferiority paradigm typifies a framework of analysis that characterizes Black people as inferior based on inadequate genetics and/or heredity. The inferiority paradigm asserts that the substandard social behavior and mental conditions of people of African descent can be explained by their inferior genetic inheritance. A long line of notable European scholars have and continue to adopt this line of reasoning (Galton, 1869; Hall, 1905; Jenson, 1969; Jung, 1950; Linnaeus, 1735; Terman, 1916). These scholars described people of African descent using language such as: emotional/impulsive, negligent, slow, intellectually inferior, lazy, hypersexual, and prone to crime. Scholars like these and many more like them in the past and present, represent a tradition, a paradigmatic train of thought that seeks to explain the thinking, behavior, and social conditions of people of African descent by proclaiming their inherent inferiority. These assertions of inferiority locate the nature of social problems within the individual. By doing so, attention is shifted away from the impact of inadequate environmental and social conditions.

### **Cultural Deficit Paradigm**

The cultural deficit paradigm is also known by similar phrases such as cultural disadvantaged, cultural deficit, cultural deprivation theory, which posit that African Americans experience social dilemmas based primarily on their own internal failures. According to Parham, Ajamu and White (2011) the cultural deficit paradigm is different from the inferiority paradigm in that its proponents cite environmental factors as the source of presumed Black deficiencies instead of heredity. For example, deficit modeling is demonstrated in the idea that African American children experience failure in school because the socialization they receive at home does not provide them with cultural interactions that foster intellectual development. It essentially asserted that African American culture was deficient because the values, beliefs and behaviors it transmitted were different from those of Whites (Durodoye and Hildreth, 1995). Parham, Ajamu and White (2011) explain that the basic assumptions of the cultural deficit paradigm are that: 1. White middle class values represent the normative standards, 2. Black people suffer from their underexposure to dominant values 3. Black people carry no sophisticated culture from Africa, and 4. they are in need of cultural enrichment. The purpose of this study is to determine how President Barack Obama frames the problems and challenges that confront African Americans relative to his framing of the problems and challenges that confront women, Latino\as, Native Americans, and Asian Americans.

## **Cultural Difference Paradigm**

The cultural deprivation paradigm was replaced by cultural difference paradigm which gained popularity in the 1980's. Those who advanced the cultural difference paradigm asserted that the culture of Black and other peoples should be considered in understanding their thinking behavior and social conditions. According to Parham, Ajamu and White (2011) this paradigm assumes that thinking and behavior can only be described as appropriate or inappropriate within its own cultural context. Based on this paradigm each culture has its strengths and limitations, and those who study or work with different populations require cultural awareness. Boykin (2000) uses the term "placed at risk" to describe students who are suffering socially and academically because it denotes children whose needs have not received the proper social attention as opposed to referring to children as "at risk" which connotes that the child has an affliction or less than optimal functioning that is the source of underachievement. Eggen and Kauchak (2003) refer to students placed at risk as "those in danger of failing to complete their education with the skills necessary to survive in modern society" (p.44). Eggen and Kauchak (2003) state that students placed at risk are in greater need of support, structure, and motivation. The "placed at risk" frame does not make the prior assumption that the deficiency originates in the person, their family, or culture. This historic and contemporary lens through which the African American experience has been framed informs how African American experiences are framed in the contemporary political arena. The cultural difference paradigm however is very general and not people specific. The Afrocentric paradigm offers creative and corrective perspective that challenges the aforementioned Eurocentric lenses.

## **Afrocentric Paradigm**

Asante (2003) defines Afrocentricity as a theoretical framework or perspective to be used to examine and self-consciously advance African people in every sector of society. Perspective refers to looking at the world in a way that seeks to identify ways to emancipate and empower people of African descent. Two of the basic assumptions of the Afrocentric paradigm are that:

- The best way to understand African people is first and foremost from their own perspective
- A people's worldview determines what constitutes a problem for them, and how they approach solving problems (Mazama, 2003)

These assumptions highlight two important things. Firstly, it is important to highlight how peoples of African descent define their own reality on their own terms. Second, it is important to critique definitions and perspectives of African descended people from non-culturally grounded, racist perspectives. Nevertheless, the historic and contemporary lenses through which the African American experience has been framed informs how African American experiences are framed in the contemporary political arena.

## **Framing and Politics**

According to Wilson (2009) the culture that people are nurtured in has an influence on their behavior and socio-economic outcomes but in a symbiotic way structure conversely influences culture. Wilson (2009) asserts that structural institutional forces in society have a shaping effect on culture and individual characteristics, patterns of thinking and behavior. Understanding how policy makers view the nature of social problems aids the process of contextualizing and understanding the solutions they propose for solving those problems. For example, a personal and cultural (focusing on individual characteristics) framing of Black and Latino\Latina youth violence explains them as rational and immoral actors who engage in violence because they lack proper social and family values. If the nature of the problem of youth violence is framed this way, then the logic of framing follows that the solution to youth violence will place significant emphasis on encouraging families to teach youth proper values. Structural framing explains Black and Latino\Latina youth and their violence as an unacceptable yet logical and rational outcome or consequence of being exposed to poor quality social institutions and environments. If the nature of the problem of youth violence is framed this way, then the logic of framing follows that the solution to youth violence may be multidimensional but will place significant emphasis on improving the quality of the social institutions youth are exposed to and the quality of the environments in which they live. Guetzkow (2010) conducted a discourse analysis of congressional anti-poverty discussions during two periods: the great society period from 1964 to 1968 and the neoliberal era from 1981 to 1996. Guetzkow's (2010) purpose was to explain the policy tools aimed at the poor by studying how policy elites frame the causes of poverty and the nature of the poor. According to Guetzkow (2010) there has always been a relationship between social policy and policy makers' perceptions about whether or not recipients are "deserving" or "undeserving". Guetzkow (2010) explains that policies are generous when the target population is perceived as deserving and stingy when they are perceived as undeserving. The results of Guetzkow's analysis indicated that during the 1960's the language policy makers used primarily framed the poor as having dignity, self-respect, and motivation. They were perceived as economically disadvantaged because they lacked skills, but they were willing to work. Congress-people during this period saw them as being involved in crime and violence as a consequence of being born into underserved communities and abnormal conditions. During this time period, programs such as Job Corps and Community Action Programs were initiated. However, during the 1980's and 1990's the source of poverty was redefined. Congressional language used to describe the poor and poverty shifted. During this period poverty was more likely to be described as a consequence of government intervention, which was thought to slow the economy and foster welfare dependency. Teen pregnancy and out-of-wedlock-births were no longer seen as the consequence, but the cause of poverty and other social ills. Guetzkow's (2010) analysis of congressional testimonies reveals that the poor during this period were often described as "lazy", and lacking in conventional values, such as "family values", and "personal responsibility". During this period cuts were made to welfare and welfare was reformed on the premise that the poor needed to be coerced to work.

According to Wilson (2009), liberals have traditionally placed emphasis on the role that structure plays in shaping behavior while conservatives have placed the most emphasis on cultural factors such as individual initiative and personal responsibility. Wilson (2009) takes a more fairly balanced position on the matter of framing, however, he privileges the role of structural inequality:

The challenge facing those of us who seek change outcomes for the poor and the marginalized is to frame issues so that the American public comes to recognize that structural inequities are the most powerful forces shaping individual and family responses, and that cultural programs, although desirable, should be combined with strong efforts to attack structural inequities. (Wilson, 2009)

Wilson (2009) argues that cultural and individual factors are inextricably linked to structural factors. Moreover, to explain the social and economic outcomes of different racial groups both structure and cultural individual characteristics must be taken into consideration by policy makers. Others argue that the differential attribution of structural versus personal causes for social economic outcomes amounts to a kind of racism.

### **Laissez Faire Racism**

Laissez-faire racism is a theory that explains the evolution of racial attitudes toward African Americans and the persistence of racial inequality. In the post-World War II period, Bobo (1999) explains that White American racial attitudes shifted from Jim Crow racism to laissez-faire racism. In the post-Civil War period, Jim Crow racism was at its height. African Americans were mostly in rural southern areas doing agricultural work. During this time period, racial discrimination was formally accepted. Most White Americans comfortably accepted the notion of Black inferiority and scientific explanations of Black people's inherent bio-genetic inferiority were common. But in the post-World War II era, due to political agency and changes in the position and power of Black people, Jim Crow social structures diminished. The Black population became more socio-economically heterogeneous and urbanized. Moreover, overt racism became more socially unacceptable and the country adopted more officially race neutral policies. Bobo (1999) asserts that this change did not result in an anti-racist society that embraces a popular ideology of egalitarianism and equal worth and treatment of Black people. Instead racial inequality is now popularly accepted under the ideology of laissez-faire racism which is based on the following assumptions: 1.) The persistent negative stereotyping of African Americans, 2.) The tendency to blame African American people for their position in the current condition of socio-economic racial inequality, 3.) Resistance to meaningful policy efforts aimed at ameliorating racist social conditions because such efforts pose a threat to collective White privilege.

According to Bobo, laissez racism has emerged as the popular racial belief system during a time period when cultural trends reject notions of biological racism, and state policy is formally race neutral and committed to anti-discrimination. In spite of the ideology, race based inequity persists and have worsened in some respects (Bobo, 1999). As the socio-cultural climate has changed, and overt Jim Crow racism is no longer essential to maintaining White privilege, laissez-faire racism defends racial inequality in a socially acceptable manner thus protecting White privilege. A question that remains is, “how does race intersect with political framing in the language of the nation’s political leader?”

## **Method**

Congressional testimony has been investigated to discover how policy makers frame the poor. (Guetzkow, 2010). However, the dialog of the President should also be the subject of similar analysis. The present study is a discourse analysis of how President Barack Obama frames the social problems that confront the African American community and how he frames solutions for those social problems relative to how he frames problems and solutions to women and other communities of color in the United States. Particular attention here is given to how problems are framed as personal\individual, structural\institutional, both, or neither. For the purpose of this study two distinct types of framing will be used to analyze President Obama’s speeches: 1.) personal\individual framing and 2.) structural\institutional framing. Structural \institutional framing is defined as explaining or contextualizing problems and challenges as being the consequence of conditions created by the inadequate quality, accessibility, availability, or affordability of society’s institutions. Structural\ institutional framing also refers to framing problems as being the consequence of people being underserved as a consequence of race, class, sexuality, or gender bias. Personal\individual framing refers to explaining or contextualizing problems and challenges as being primarily the consequence of inadequate or dysfunctional cultural and personal characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors.

An example of discourse that would qualify a structural\environmental framing is exemplified by the following statement: “Youth violence among African American and Latino\Latina students is a consequence of their living in underserved, under resourced communities, the poor quality of the educational institutions they attend and their parent’s relatively lower levels of education”. An example of a personal individual framing would be as follows: “Youth violence among African American and Latino \ Latina students is a consequence of the poor parenting they have received at home, their lack of value for life, and lack of respect for law and order”. Neither is mutually exclusive however, each frame places emphasis on either structural\ institutional influences or personal\ individual influences on problems and solutions.

The question this study addresses is, “Based on a discourse analysis of presidential speeches, how does Barack Obama frame the problems and challenges faced by the Black community relative to how he frames the problems and challenges of women and other communities of color?” The following sub-questions this study seeks to answer are:

- Does the President frame the problems and challenges that African Americans are faced with as primarily structural\institutional, personal\individual or both?
- Does the President frame the problems and challenges that Women, Latinos\Latinas, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and the LGBTQ community face as structural\institutional, personal\individual compared to how he frames the problems and challenges that African Americans face?

The technique used to answer these questions is *discourse analysis*. Discourse analysis is a research technique that allows you to systematically analyze the hidden and visible content of communication messages in sources such as texts, writings, manuscripts, speeches, and other communication messages produced by members of a culture. In this case, the communication messages in President Barack Obama’s speeches will be analyzed.

Speeches were selected based their likelihood to contain communication messages about social problems and challenges as they relate to African Americans, Women, Latinos\Latinas, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community (LGBTQ, also known as LGBTQIA meaning lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, and asexual). It must be noted that there is overlap between the categories of groups analyzed in this study, such as Women and African Americans. However, this study is focused on how the president frames issues when in his speeches he makes direct reference “African Americans” in general and/or “women” in general. A total of 33 speeches (White House, 2012) were selected from a time period ranging from Barack Obama’s announcement of candidacy in 2007 to May 2012. The President’s speeches were accessed using the White House website where all of the Presidents speeches and remarks are archived in a single location. For African Americans, 10 speeches were selected from the President’s addresses to the Congressional Black Caucus, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the National Urban League, and some predominantly Black churches. For Latino\Latinas, 8 speeches were selected from the President’s addresses to the National Hispanic Prayer Breakfasts, the Annual Cinco de Mayo Celebration and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. For Women, 6 speeches were selected from the President’s addresses to the Fortune Most Powerful Women Summit, the International Women’s Day Celebration, and several town hall discussions on women. For Native Americans, 3 speeches were selected from the President’s addresses to the National Tribal Nations Conference, and town hall discussions on the Tribal Law and Order Act.



For Asian Americans, 3 speeches were selected from the President's addresses to the Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month celebration and town hall discussions on the Asian American and Pacific Islander Initiative. For the LGBTQ community, 3 speeches were selected from Presidential Speeches at the annual LGBTQ pride celebration. This analysis explores how the President framed the most commonly discussed issues in his speeches. The most commonly discussed issues in the President's speeches were found to be education and achievement, healthcare, crime, jobs and economic opportunity, housing, immigration, and family. This analysis will also involve calculating how many times the President has framed any of these issues in a structural\institutional way, a personal\ individual way, or both in each of his speeches. To get a quantitative sense of the kind of structural versus individual framing the President gave African American issues, ratios were calculated. These ratios represent the ratios of structural\institutional framings to personal\institutional framings.

## Results

The slight majority of President Obama's problem framings in all 33 speeches taken together are structural\institutional (White House, 2012). The nature of the President's speeches most frequently concern the structural\institutional aspects of social problems and what the federal government can do to address them. The results show that for the speeches in which he addressed issues as they relate to African Americans, the President has a 1.43 to 1 ratio of structural\institutional to personal\individual framings (See Table 1). This means that for every one personal\individual framing, the President provides 1.43 structural\institutional framings. Thus, for every time the President gives a personal\individual framing of a social problem such as:

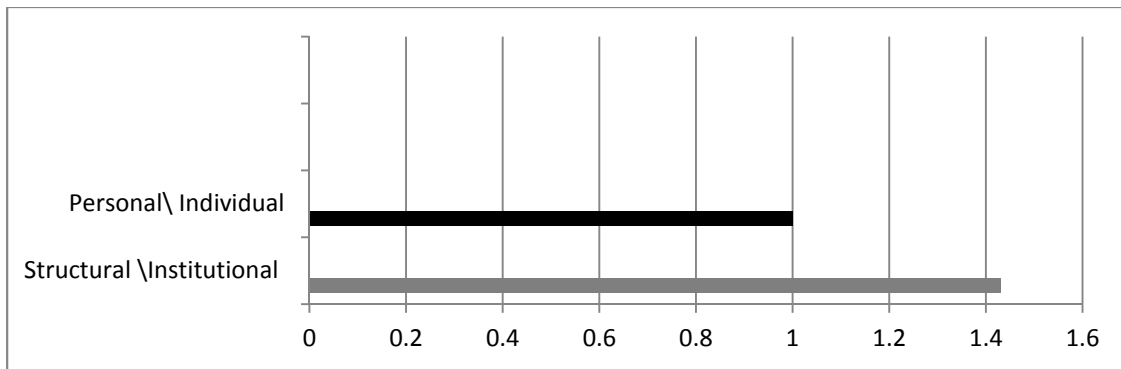
“Government can't put away the play station. Government can't put our kids to bed at a reasonable hour. Government can't attend those parent teacher conferences. Government can't read a book to your child at night. Government can't help them with their homework. Government can't make sure they leave for school on time. These are things only a mother can do and a father can do.”  
(White House, 2012)

The President also provides a structural \ institutional framing such as:

“The most difficult barriers include structural inequalities that our nation's legacy of discrimination has left behind: inequalities plaguing too many communities and too often the object of national neglect. These are barriers we are beginning to tear down one by one—by rewarding hard work with an expanded tax credit; by making housing more affordable; by giving ex-offenders a second chance. ”  
(White House, 2012)

This means that the President is fairly balanced in his analysis of African American issues, attributing social problems to both structural\institutional causes and personal\individual causes with a slight edge to instructional causes. The President is slightly more likely to point to structural \ institutional causes. This is different from the conservative tradition in that he gives more attention to structural \ institutional causes than conservative politicians, and different from the liberal tradition in that he gives almost equal attention to personal\individual causes to social problems. The President’s framing of social problems of the Black community are fairly numerically even.

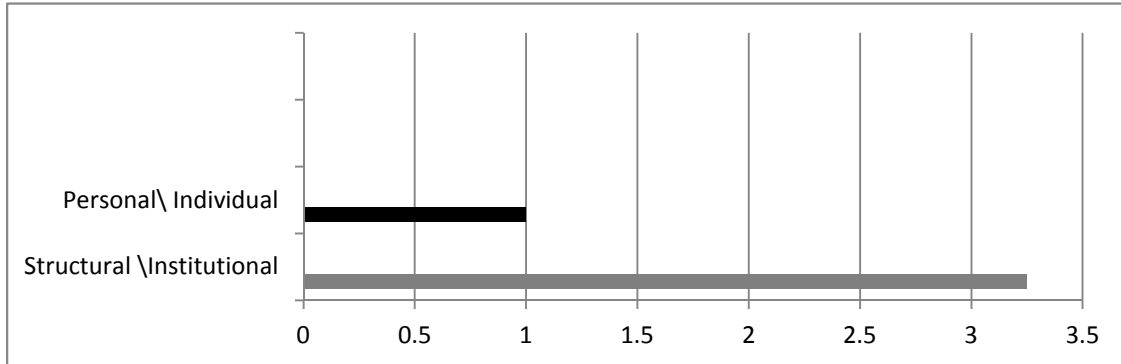
**Table 1**  
Ratio of Personal\Individual Framing to Structural\Institutional Framings for African Americans



When the scope of analysis is extended to the President’s speeches to and about Women, Latinos\Latinas, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and the LGBTQ community something different is revealed. The results show that for Latino\Latina social issues, the President has a 3.25 to 1 ratio of structural\institutional to personal\individual framings (Table 2). This means that for every one individual framing, he gives approximately 3 institutional framings.

**Table 2**

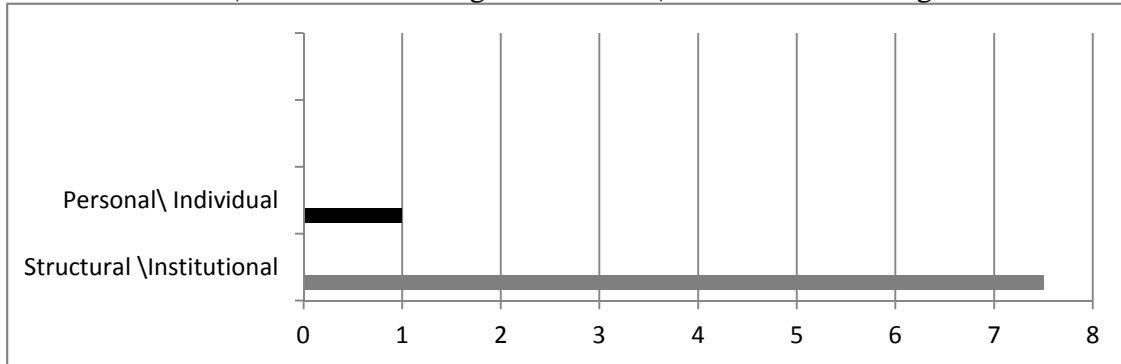
Ratio of Personal\Individual Framing to Structural\Institutional Framings for Latinos\Latinas



The results indicate that for women's social issues, the President has a 7.5 to 1 ratio of institutional to individual framings (Table 3). Meaning that for every one individual framing, he gives approximately 7 institutional framings.

**Table 3**

Ratio of Personal\Individual Framing to Structural\Institutional Framings for Women



No ratios were calculated for Native Americans, Asian Americans or the LGBTQ community because the President has not given any framings that fit this study's definition of personal\individual framings of social problems for those groups in the speeches analyzed. One thing that is consistent regardless of what racial ethnic group that is being addressed is that the President primarily frames issues structurally and institutionally. The President's framing of issues as personal\individual, however, is what varies by race. What is revealed by comparison is that the President is choosing with whom he frames issues as personal\ individual. Moreover, the group about whom the President frames issues as having personal\individual causes more than any other in this study's comparison is African Americans.

So what appears to be balance on the face of it, as revealed by the President attributing issues to both structure and individual factors for African Americans, is indeed *imbalanced* when the scope is broadened to other populations. Plainly, the President is less likely to frame issues as having a personal individual causes when he is speaking to and about non-African Americans and the social issues they are challenged by. Because what varies by race in the President's framing of issues is personal\individual framing, let's look closer into the nuances of the personal/individual framings that the president is more likely to use with African Americans than the non-African American groups in this study.

### **Nuanced Personal\Individual Framings**

Firstly, the President is most likely to frame social problems as personal\individual when addressing African Americans' educational challenges in the form of the academic "achievement gap" and when he addresses crime and violence among African Americans.

### **Responsibility**

One thing the President discusses consistently no matter who he is talking to is parenting. However, there are certain things he is more likely to say to African Americans about parenting than other groups. One is his focus on lack of responsibility and the need for more responsibility. This is something that the President appears to focus on when addressing African Americans more than Women and other people of color. He doesn't suggest lack of responsibility and the need for more responsibility as much with any of other group in this study. For example, the following statements represent this focus in the President's speeches:

- "It doesn't matter how much money we invest in our communities, or how many 10-point plans we propose, or how many government programs we launch- none of it will make any difference if we don't seize more *responsibility* in our own lives". (White House, 2012)
- "To Parents—to parent, we can't tell our kids to do well in school and then fail to support them when they get home. You can't just contract our parenting". (White House, 2012)
- "We have to accept our *responsibility* to help them learn. That means putting away the Xbox—putting our kids to bed at a reasonable hour." (White House, 2012)

The President focusses on lack of responsibility and need for more responsibility as the nature of the problem and solution primarily with African Americans and not with other people of color and women, which can imply that lack of responsibility is a more salient feature of the Black American experience relative to other people of color and women.

## **Poor Values or Lack of Values**

Another thing the President places emphasis on is values. He typically focuses on American values and restoring and preserving American values such as self-determination, responsibility, individual initiative, and respect for others. But when he talks about lack of values and poor values such as laziness and lack of self-determination, he speaks of corporate America and the government. But he emphasizes lack of values, poor values and the need for better values more when discussing African Americans and talking to African Americans than with other people of color and women.

- “Take off your bedroom slippers. Put on your marching shoes. Go do some politics.” (White House, 2012)
- “Folks are complaining about the quality of our government, I understand there’s something to be complaining about.... I also know that if cousin pookie would vote, get off the couch and register some folks and go to the polls, we might have a different kind of politics”. (White House, 2012)
- “The Joshua Generation in its success forgets where it came from. Thinks the height of ambition is to make as much money as you can, to drive the biggest car and have the biggest house and wear a Rolex watch and get your own private jet, get some of that Oprah money.” (White House, 2012)
- “Something we need to do as fathers is pass along the value of empathy to our children. Not sympathy, but empathy- the ability to stand in somebody else’s shoes; to look at the world through their eyes.” (White House, 2012)

The results indicate that in the selected speeches in this study the President focusses on lack of values and poor values and the need for better values as the nature of the problem primarily with African Americans and not with other people of color or women, which implies that lack values and poor values is a more salient feature of the African American experience relative to other people of color and women.

## **Culture of Excuses and Blaming**

The President talks about making excuses and blaming, however, in the speeches analyzed in this study he talks about Americans making excuses and blaming with African Americans more than any other Americans with the exception of corporate America and the government itself. Outside of government and corporate America the President seems to reserve the language of making excuses and blaming for African Americans. For example:

- “That’s what we have to teach all of our children. No excuses. No excuses.” (White House, 2012)
- “You’ve got to want it. You’ve got to reach out and claim that future for yourself. And you can’t make excuses.” (White House, 2012)
- “We need to be good role models and encourage excellence in all our children, every last one of them. We need to let them know there are no excuses for not doing your best, everyday, all the time, in order to achieve your dreams.” (White House, 2012)
- “No excuses for mediocrity. If they come home with a B, don't tell them "that's great." I know some of you all do that. (Laughter.) Tell them to work harder and get an A. Set their sights high. (Applause)”. (White House, 2012)

The President seems to focus on the making of excuses as the nature of problems primarily with African Americans and not with other people of color and women. This carries the implication that excuse making is a unique feature of the African American experience relative to other people of color and women.

## **Discussion:**

### **President Barack Obama’s Racially Relative Moral Castigation**

Could it be that the social issues African Americans face are more a consequence of their personal internal deficiencies than other groups? Could it be that the solutions to African American social challenges require their moral improvement more so than other groups? Indeed it was once believed that African Americans were genetically inferior and later once that train of thought had been largely abandoned it was believed that African American were culturally deficient and pathological. These ways of thinking have historically been the justification for the notion that African American social conditions are a consequence of their personal and internal inadequacies. Nevertheless, many continue to ascribe to those modes of thought however to do so requires ignoring the *absence of scientific evidence* of African American’s moral deficiency relative to other racial groups.

I refer to the tendency to moralize on African Americans citing their internal moral deficiencies more relative to other groups of Americans as, *racially relative moral castigation*. Linnaeus (1735) asserted that Black people were morally deficient, untrustworthy and, less intelligent relative to Whites and other races in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Hall (1905) proclaimed that Black people were lazy, immoral, and criminal relative to Whites and other races. Conservative politicians have often argued that many of the poor were poor because they were relatively lazy, lacked values and personal responsibility and were unworthy of some social supports.

And now President Barack Obama's speeches reflect his tendency to speak to issues confronting African Americans in similar ways, asserting that their social issues are the consequence of laziness, lack of responsibility, poor values, and excuse making relative to the other groups involved in this study's comparison. The Afrocentric paradigm suggests that such claims have to be placed in historical context and that Black people's self-definition should be privileged over perspectives grounded in traditionally Eurocentric ways of framing the Black experience.

What are the consequences of this racially relative moral castigation that the President engages in? Historically, this kind of rhetoric has served the purpose of creating an ideological or conceptual pretext for the passing of public policy or the elimination of policy initiatives. It could shape how policy makers, non-Black people, and Black people themselves view the values of Black Americans, Black Americans' deservingness of social services, and the racially relative blameworthiness of Black Americans. It could shape how people view African Americans relative to other Americans who are no less likely to be lazy, immoral, or violent. It could set the ideological pretext for the support or lack of support for a host of social services that African Americans and other Americans could potentially benefit from. The president's participation in perpetuating these racial stereotypes can precipitate individuals and institutions who are willing to discriminate against African Americans based on racial prejudice. Moreover, when people question a segment of the American population's relative motivation to succeed, their deservingness, their work ethic, and their possession of positive values they are less likely to support extending social resources to them. There are also the plausible psychological consequences of internalizing stereotypical beliefs about Black Americans, the consequences of which are well documented. Asserting African American's relative internal moral deprivation is nothing new in the Eurocentric American rhetorical tradition. It is an extension of the inferiority paradigm, the cultural deprivation paradigm, and the more recent at-risk paradigm. Moreover, it is in many ways consistent with the precepts of Bobo's (1999) theory of laissez faire racism. How the President articulates problems and solutions for African Americans is balanced, but that symmetry is undermined by his failure to extend the balance of structural/environmental framing and personal/individual framing to other Americans. His failure to moralize on other Americans to the extent that he does African Americans illustrates a rhetorical inequity. Challenging racism at the conceptual level is the necessary precondition for challenging it as it manifest at the level of public policy. Stereotypes about African American's relative biophysical, moral, cultural, and spiritual deficiency must be challenged whether they are manifested in the form of racially biased educational curriculum and public policies or whether they come from the lips of a radio disc jockey or the President of the United States himself.

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