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Racial Color Blindness: Emergence, Practice, and Implications

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the pervasive endorsement of racial color blindness—the belief that racial group membership should not be taken into account, or even noticed—as a strategy for managing diversity and intergroup relations. Despite research demonstrating the automatic perception of race (and thus the seeming improbability of actual color blindness), the color-blind approach to race has become increasingly prevalent in a variety of important domains, from education and business to law and societal discourse. An emerging research literature has revealed the many ways in which color blindness shapes individual, group, and institutional efforts to handle issues related to diversity. We offer an integrative assessment of this work, highlighting recent psychological investigations that have explored the emergence, practice, and implications of color blindness. We conclude by discussing alternative strategies for managing diversity and underscoring the importance of an approach that simultaneously accommodates the concerns of Whites and minorities.

Keywords

color blindness, diversity, race, discrimination, bias, affirmative action

Laypeople, educators, professionals, and institutions are regularly faced with difficult questions about how to handle issues of race in contemporary society. Concerns about being labeled racist leave many people unsure as to whether it is appropriate to notice skin color or mention race in everyday interactions (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008). Questions also emerge as to what role, if any, race should have in the development of school curricula, college-admissions criteria, promotion guidelines, public policy, and legal adjudication (Plaut, 2010). In this article, we examine recent evidence from a range of domains that highlights one increasingly prevalent approach to the issue of race: *color blindness*.

Color blindness is rooted in the belief that racial group membership and race-based differences should not be taken into account when decisions are made, impressions are formed, and behaviors are enacted. The logic underlying the belief that color blindness can prevent prejudice and discrimination is straightforward: If people or institutions do not even notice race, then they cannot act in a racially biased manner. This notion that color blindness has the capacity to “short-circuit” the typical processes by which bias emerges was epitomized by U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts’ opinion in a 2007 case involving a local school district’s efforts to achieve diversity: “The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race” (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District*, 2007).

Despite the pervasiveness of this color-blind approach to race relations, new evidence from psychological research has called its supposed benefits into question. We document the practice and implications of color blindness in a wide range of contexts: interpersonal, educational, organizational, legal, and societal. In each domain, despite the ubiquity of the color-blind approach, there is mixed evidence as to its effectiveness in accomplishing intended goals. We conclude with a discussion of multiculturalism, a perspective that is often proposed as an alternative to color blindness but is not without its own limitations.

Interpersonal Color Blindness

Perhaps the most compelling critique of the color-blind approach is the fact that people *do* notice race when perceiving others. Perceptual differentiation of race occurs rapidly—in less than one-seventh of a second—and emerges as early as 6 months of age (Bar-Haim, Ziv, Lamy, & Hodes, 2006; Ito & Urland, 2003). Yet recent work has highlighted the prevalent tendency for people to avoid acknowledging that they “see”

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racial differences during social interactions. For example, we and our colleagues (Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006) presented White participants with an array of photos of people—half of whom were Black and half of whom were White—and challenged respondents to guess which of the photos a partner was holding by asking as few questions as possible. Although asking about race was an obvious way to home in on the target photo, many participants avoided mentioning race despite knowing that their performance on the task would suffer—a tendency most evident when their partner was Black.

Although this tendency to sidestep mention of race may stem from a well-intentioned desire to avoid bias (or at least a desire to appear unbiased), such color-blind behavior has been found to result in various negative social consequences. Ironically, for example, White individuals who avoid mentioning race appear more biased in the eyes of Black observers than do White individuals who openly talk about race (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008). Recent work has also suggested that, beyond efforts to avoid mention of race, deemphasizing race more broadly as an approach to racial diversity can shape individuals' attitudes toward racial out-groups. But in this context, too, color blindness has not been an elixir to racial bias. To the contrary, people exposed to arguments promoting color blindness have been shown to subsequently display a greater degree of both explicit and implicit racial bias (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Son & Shelton, 2012; Vorauer, Gagnon, & Sasaki, 2009; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000), a pattern of results suggesting that a color-blind ideology not only has the potential to impair smooth interracial interactions but can also facilitate—and be used to justify—racial resentment (see Norton & Sommers, 2011).

Educational Color Blindness

The color-blind approach can also be observed outside of face-to-face dyadic interactions. In recent years, for instance, it has become clear that manifestations of color blindness cascade down various levels of the U.S. educational system. Color blindness is reflected by the ways in which districts are permitted to regulate the diversity of their schools (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District*, 2007), reinforced by standard school curricula that portray a generalized cultural identity but leave group differences unaddressed (Schofield, 2007), and routinely exhibited by teachers seeking to model equality in their classrooms by emphasizing that “race does not matter” (Pollock, 2004). Consistent with these developments, evidence suggests that by the age of 10, color blindness becomes children's modal approach for dealing with race-relevant situations (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Ambady, Sommers, & Norton, 2008).

Recent psychological research has cast doubt on the utility of color blindness in educational contexts. Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, and Ambady (2011) presented elementary school children with a story about a teacher who either endorsed color blindness or did not. Children then read about a series of

schoolyard conflicts, some of which involved instances of racial discrimination. Children who were initially exposed to the color-blind story, compared with children who were not, were later *less* likely to identify bias when it had clearly occurred and tended to describe instances of discrimination in a manner that seemed less serious to certified teachers. Such findings are troubling: The fact that color blindness makes children *less* likely to identify overt instances of bias could lead people to mistakenly conclude that color blindness is an effective tool for reducing bias—perhaps one factor contributing to its continued support and proliferation in the educational system.

Organizational Color Blindness

Faced with the challenge of recruiting and managing an increasingly diverse workforce, many contemporary organizations have come to endorse an internal culture of color blindness (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Thomas & Ely, 1996). The perceived utility of color blindness lies in its capacity to normalize employees by shifting attention from their racial and cultural differences to a unifying organizational identity or goal (i.e., an organization may stress that employees are all the same, working toward the same goal; Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Recent research has suggested that the credibility and effectiveness of color-blind employee-recruitment efforts depend in large part on whether the organizations implementing them are actually racially diverse. For example, Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlemann, and Randall-Crosby (2008) demonstrated that minority applicants respond favorably to racially diverse organizations that endorse a culture of color blindness but are skeptical of such messages when they are endorsed by organizations predominantly composed of Whites. Minority applicants may have good reason to be suspicious: Organizations that claim to show no racial preference may still discriminate on the basis of race and justify race-based hiring decisions under the guise of more acceptable criteria (e.g., Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Norton, Vandello, & Darley, 2004; Pager & Qullian, 2005).

The implications of organizational color blindness for minorities who are already employed also remain unclear. Consider, for example, Plaut, Thomas, and Goren's (2009) analysis of 3,758 employees' responses to a survey about the diversity climate (i.e., how people viewed, felt, and approached issues of diversity) at a large healthcare organization. The researchers found that White employees' endorsement of color blindness predicted decreases in psychological engagement among minority employees and *increases* in minority employees' belief that the organizational climate was racially biased. Interestingly, they also found that White employees' endorsement of multiculturalism—an alternative approach to diversity in which racial differences are acknowledged and even celebrated—led to the opposite pattern of results, predicting increases in engagement and decreases in perceptions of organizational bias among minority employees.

Legal Color Blindness

Color blindness was ushered to the forefront of legal discussions about race by way of decisive legislation passed during the civil rights movement. More recently, however, color blindness has come to represent the legal standard against which acts of bias are judged—exemplified by the view that no form of race-based consideration is acceptable in a lawfully egalitarian society (e.g., *Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2003; *Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003). Whereas legal arguments for color blindness were once emblematic of the fight for equal opportunity among racial minorities marginalized by openly discriminatory practices, they have become increasingly geared toward combating race-conscious policies. If racial minority status confers an advantage in hiring, in school admissions, in the drawing of voting districts, and in the selection of government subcontractors—the argument goes—then Whites' right for equal protection may be violated (*Adarand v. Peña*, 1995; *Bakke v. Board of Regents*, 1978; *Shaw v. Reno*, 1993; *Wygant v. Jackson Board of Education*, 1986).

More broadly, legal notions of color blindness have become increasingly relevant for efforts to adjudicate racial bias, including employment discrimination lawsuits (Kang & Lane, 2010; Peery, 2011; Sommers & Norton, 2008). For instance, one recent case, *Ricci v. DeStefano* (2009), involved a claim of racial bias made by 20 New Haven, Connecticut, firefighters; the unique aspect of the discrimination claim was that all but one of the plaintiffs alleging bias were White (the remaining plaintiff was Hispanic). At issue was the fact that an exam used to determine promotions had yielded disproportionate results by race—namely, no Black firefighters had achieved passing scores—prompting city officials to abandon the exam and forgo the promotions altogether. The U.S. Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, determining that invalidating the exam (and thereby invalidating the plaintiffs' potential for promotion) was as a race-based decision at odds with the Equal Protection Clause and the spirit of a color-blind ideal.

Societal Color Blindness

The emergence of color blindness as an ideology of diversity has also altered the broader cultural discourse on race and equality by transforming the conversation on how best to improve intergroup relations (Markus, Steele, & Steele, 2000; Pearson, Dovidio, & Gaertner, 2009; Plaut, 2002). To many individuals, an ethos of color blindness epitomizes the dawn of a "post-racial" society, but recent research has demonstrated that color blindness may actually perpetuate existing racial inequities (Knowles, Lowery, Hogan, & Chow, 2009): When race is made salient, many Whites shift from viewing color blindness as a distributive principle (i.e., everyone should have equal outcomes) to viewing it as a procedural principle (i.e., everyone should receive equal treatment, regardless of existing race-based inequalities).

Indeed, it has become increasingly clear that many contemporary Whites feel that they are victims of discrimination themselves. Norton and Sommers (2011) administered a national survey in which Americans reported their beliefs about the extent to which Blacks and Whites are the targets of discrimination. The results revealed that, although both Whites and Blacks agree that anti-Black bias was pervasive in previous eras, the average White American now believes that Whites are *more* victimized by racial bias than Blacks are. As a result, many Whites believe that policies that continue to favor Blacks are no longer reducing inequities in outcomes between Blacks and Whites, but are actually increasing what Whites perceive to be an unfair advantage. With the rise in sentiments like these, it stands to reason that the appeal of racial color blindness—and the between-race disparities in its endorsement—will only continue to grow.

Alternative Approaches and Conclusions

The allure of color blindness is that it seems to offer a relatively simple framework for managing issues of race in contemporary society: If people do not notice race, then race will no longer matter. Yet as the research reviewed in this article shows, color blindness is far from a panacea, sometimes representing more of an obstacle than an asset to facilitating constructive race relations and equitable race-related policies.

As an alternative to color blindness, researchers have examined multiculturalism: an approach to diversity in which group differences are openly discussed, considered, and even highlighted. For example, faced with the prospect of training a racially diverse team, a leader utilizing a color-blind approach might shift attention away from demographic differences and toward issues that unite or homogenize the team, whereas a leader opting for a multicultural approach might explicitly discuss the nature and implications of team members' ethnic and cultural differences. Research has demonstrated that multiculturalism offers a variety of benefits, from fostering appreciation for other people's perspectives to sharpening assessments of discrimination (Apfelbaum et al., 2011; Todd & Galinsky, 2011). For instance, Todd and Galinsky (2011) found that individuals exposed to a multicultural message, as opposed to a color-blind message, subsequently demonstrated heightened perspective-taking tendencies, underscored by efforts to understand other people better by actively imagining their point of view.

However, a multicultural approach has its limitations, too. Perhaps most notably, it has the potential to alienate Whites. Whites tend to be less favorable toward multiculturalism than color blindness (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007), as traditional conceptualizations of multiculturalism may leave Whites feeling as though minorities have received attention at their expense (Norton & Sommers, 2011). Illustrative of this zero-sum mind-set, recent research has indicated that simply making Whites aware of projected changes in ethnic demography (i.e.,

declines in the proportion of White residents in an area) is sufficient to elicit feelings of threat and anger toward minorities (Outten, Schmitt, Miller, & Garcia, 2012). Frustration with the seemingly one-sided nature of multiculturalism may also ultimately undercut minorities' experience on college campuses and in the workplace by fueling Whites' belief that it was race—not qualifications—that earned minority candidates a spot. Moreover, Purdie-Vaughns and Walton (2011) note a variety of limitations of multiculturalism from the perspective of Blacks, including the fact that multicultural approaches often fail to explicitly challenge extant racial inequality.

So where, then, do we go from here? Is there an approach to diversity that accommodates the often divergent concerns of minority and majority group members? Stevens and her colleagues (2008) examined one possibility for dismantling the zero-sum mind-set that many White individuals bring to the issue of race. They proposed a hybrid form of multiculturalism that aims to espouse a culture in which a wide range of racial differences is acknowledged while affirming the need for Whites to be included in this process. In such an approach, Whites might be encouraged to individuate themselves by drawing on unique aspects of their own identity (e.g., their family heritage) in a way that mirrors the personal individuation multiculturalism typically elicits from minorities. Alternatively, organizational mission statements and promotional materials could convey a vision of diversity that explicitly includes nonminorities as well as minorities. Allowing *everyone* to contribute to diversity and take pride in their own uniqueness preserves one of the most attractive principles of color blindness—that race should not dictate outcomes—without denying that race represents a distinctive social identity that is real and often does matter.

Future research is needed to more fully assess the viability of this and other approaches for managing diversity—and to do so in a racial context outside the White–Black binary in order to reflect the broader demographic shifts occurring in contemporary organizations, institutions, and interpersonal contexts. However, our review suggests that one conclusion is already clear: Shutting our eyes to the complexities of race does not make them disappear, but does make it harder to see that color blindness often creates more problems than it solves.

Recommended Readings

- Apfelbaum, E. P., Sommers, S. R., & Norton, M. I. (2008). (See References). A representative series of studies that illustrates original research about color blindness in social interaction.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2003). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. An in-depth discussion of the position that color blindness is a central means to justifying existing racial inequity in the United States.
- Plaut, V. C. (2002). (See References). A clearly written and relatively comprehensive review for readers who wish to expand their knowledge about color blindness and other approaches to diversity.
- Pollock, M. (2004). (See References). A user-friendly book that offers a more detailed examination of color blindness in education.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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