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Do Color Blindness and Multiculturalism Remedy or Foster Discrimination and Racism?

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Abstract
This article offers insight from psychological science into whether models of diversity (e.g., color blindness and multiculturalism) remedy or foster discrimination and racism. First, we focus on implications of a color-blind model. Here, the literature suggests that while color blindness appeals to some individuals, it can decrease individuals' sensitivity to racism and discrimination. Furthermore, the literature suggests that, with some exceptions, color blindness has negative implications for interracial interactions, minorities' perceptions and outcomes, and the pursuit of diversity and inclusion in organizational contexts. Second, we examine circumstances under which a multicultural approach yields positive or negative implications for interracial interactions, organizational diversity efforts, and discrimination. The research reviewed coalesces to suggest that while multiculturalism generally has more positive implications for people of color, both models have the potential to further inequality.

Keywords
multiculturalism, color blindness, diversity, racism, discrimination

Debates about racial diversity happen in every corner of society. For example, should race be a permissible factor in college admissions? Should the tech sector and other workforces diversify and how? How should underrepresented students be mentored and taught? Wielded in these debates are beliefs about whether race should be avoided or attended to. Against a historic backdrop of racial and ethnic hierarchy, people use these beliefs to make sense of, engage in, and structure their worlds. Here, we ask the following question: What implications do these different approaches to diversity have for discrimination and racism?

A robust psychological literature has emerged documenting sources, correlates, and effects of models of diversity, or diversity ideologies—the ways in which people think about and approach diversity. Most of the literature pits identity blindness (e.g., color blindness) against identity consciousness (e.g., multiculturalism), with varying definitions and operationalization of these constructs (see Plaut, Cheryan, & Stevens, 2015). Generally, color blindness minimizes the use and significance of racial group membership and suggests that race should not and does not matter. According to multiculturalism, group membership matters and should be acknowledged, respected, and even valued. Here, we examine each model's appeal, along with implications for stereotyping and prejudice, sensitivity to discrimination, intergroup interaction, and people's experiences of discrimination in institutions (e.g., schools and workplaces).

Implications of Color-Blind Models

The appeal of color blindness

Whites tend to endorse color blindness more than do people of color (Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000; Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007). What is its appeal? Color blindness has ego-protective features. Adopting color blindness lets members of

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groups associated with perpetrating racism (e.g., Whites) maintain an egalitarian self-image, because it allows them to believe they are nonprejudiced and are self-presenting as such. Indeed, Whites' use of color blindness in interracial interaction correlates with external motivation to control prejudice (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008). It can also represent a vision for an equitable society, where race does not impact life outcomes (Knowles, Lowery, Hogan, & Chow, 2009), and when framed as commonality regardless of backgrounds, it can relate to warmth (Hahn, Banchefsky, Park, & Judd, 2015; Wolsko et al., 2000). However, color blindness can also justify current inequality. When threatened, White Americans high in social dominance orientation (i.e., preference for group-based hierarchy) use color blindness to defend the status quo (Knowles et al., 2009). Color-blind racial attitudes also resonate with low-status group members high in social dominance orientation (Neville, Coleman, Falconer, & Holmes, 2005).

Color blindness reduces sensitivity to racism

Although color blindness can be framed as egalitarian, it can also be used to negate the occurrence of racism. Schofield (1986) conducted a case study of a newly integrated middle school that embraced color blindness as an institutional value intended to reduce bias and create a welcoming environment for Black students. Many teachers reported not knowing how many White and Black students they taught, providing evidence of their color blindness. Yet ample evidence suggested that teachers discriminated, including giving Black students harsher punishments and secretly changing class election results to favor the White male loser over the Black female winner (explaining that the White boy was simply a more desirable candidate). Color blindness removes the plausibility of racism and, therefore, the opportunity for addressing it.

Another study exposed children to lessons about equality through stories containing either a color blind or valuing-diversity message followed by descriptions of incidents with blatant, ambiguous, or no bias. Children in the color-blind condition perceived racism less and recalled events in ways less likely to alert teachers to racism occurring (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, & Ambady, 2010). Similarly, Offermann and colleagues (2014) found that color-blindness-espousing Whites lacked sensitivity to microaggressions—chronic put-downs and slights that devalue racial minorities and over time threaten well-being (Sue et al., 2007). People who try to convey their experience with microaggressions may further experience microinvalidation when White color-blind supervisors and peers, lacking sensitivity, dismiss their concerns.

The literature suggests that people high in color blindness not only are less sensitive to racism but also may be less attuned to minorities' unique realities (Neville et al., 2000). A study of early-career teachers demonstrated that those with more color-blind orientations were less willing to adapt their teaching to ethnic-minority students' needs (Hachfeld, Hahn, Schroeder, Anders, & Kunter, 2015). Other research suggests a connection between color-blind racial attitudes and lower adoption of inclusive teaching practices by educators (Aragón, Dovidio, & Graham, 2017), lower empathy in therapists (Burkard & Knox, 2004), greater apathy to racism (Tynes & Markoe, 2010), and less willingness to support diversity efforts such as affirmative action as a strategy to reduce discrimination (Awad, Cokley, & Ravitch, 2006).

Interracial interaction

Even when well-intentioned, a color-blind approach can undermine interracial interactions. Apfelbaum et al. (2008) used a "Guess Who?" game to assess Whites' use of a color-blind strategy. (In this game, the goal is to guess who appears on the opponent's card by asking about various appearance-related characteristics, making attending to race not only appropriate but also advantageous.) Whites tended to avoid mentioning race when playing with a Black partner, but ironically, the strategy prompted a perception of them as more biased. Ironic effects of color blindness in interracial interaction stem from the prevention orientation it elicits; in other words, focusing on preventing the interaction from going poorly leads Whites to express more negativity (Vorauer, Gagnon, & Sasaki, 2009). In the Apfelbaum study, color-blindness-abiding Whites showed more cognitive impairment and less ability to inhibit negative nonverbal behaviors. In another study, simply instructing non-Black interviewers to not think about race caused more social distance between them and a Black interviewee (Madera & Hebl, 2013). In other research, Whites exposed to a color-blind (vs. multicultural) passage exhibited more prejudice, such that their Black and Asian American interaction partners experienced more cognitive depletion (Holoien & Shelton, 2012).

Experiences and expectations of discrimination in institutions

Color-blind messages can result in perceptions of and expectations for people of color that subvert institutional diversity efforts. One study found that Black professionals exposed to a color-blind message and low racial diversity in an organization's brochure expressed more distrust of the organization (Purdie-Vaughns,

Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008). Another study exposed college students to a color-blind or multicultural message from a university, finding that students perceived lower levels of institutional diversity and higher risk of discrimination in the color-blind condition (Wilton, Good, Moss-Racusin, & Sanchez, 2015). Additionally, women of color expected lower performance and performed worse in the color-blind condition, whereas White women had more positive outcomes. Color blindness may have conveyed different signals to women on the basis of their race—perhaps a sense of organizational safety for White women but threat for women of color. If there is evidence of the institution's commitment to diversity, however, a message that stresses equal opportunity may be more motivating to people of color than one that focuses only on tolerance and diversity efforts, especially when their representation is low (Apfelbaum, Stephens, & Reagans, 2016). The different operationalization of diversity approaches, stimuli, and outcome measures make it difficult to evaluate discrepancies, but all of these studies highlight the attunement of people of color to how an institution may treat them.

Diversity ideologies' impact on racial minorities' expectations and self-perceptions also has implications for mentoring and the classroom. In one qualitative study in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) disciplines, White faculty often engaged with undergraduates of color from a color-blind ideology, as evidenced by their use of race-neutral and color-blind language (McCoy, Winkle-Wagner, & Luedke, 2015). As in Schofield's (1986) study, faculty may have been attempting to create a racially safe space for these students. Yet according to the researchers, their language branded these students as academically inferior, unprepared, and disinterested in research and graduate studies, which may have ultimately influenced students' own perceptions and aspirations to remain in STEM disciplines. Therefore, color blindness may work against goals of recruiting and retaining more diverse students, scholars, and professionals.

Implications of Multicultural Models

Attitudes toward multiculturalism

Multiculturalism enjoys somewhat strong support across groups, but ethnic and racial minorities tend to endorse multiculturalism more than do majority groups (Ryan, et al., 2007; Wolsko, Park, & Judd, 2006). Why is it difficult for some people to embrace multiculturalism? One key factor is threat. White Dutch students who perceived more symbolic threat (e.g., Muslims posing a threat to Dutch culture and identity) showed less support for multiculturalism (Velasco González, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008). Highly identified Whites are especially threatened by multiculturalism (vs. color blindness; Morrison, Plaut, & Ybarra, 2010). Framing multiculturalism in concrete (vs. abstract) terms increased symbolic threat to national identity in White American participants, which in turn provoked anti-Latino prejudice (Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014). Another possible reason relates to belonging. Diversity tends to be associated with non-White groups (Unzueta & Binning, 2010), and Whites can feel excluded by multiculturalism (Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, 2011).

Multiculturalism can create more positive outcomes

Does multiculturalism, which highlights group categories, facilitate or reduce stereotyping and prejudice? Some research suggests that support for multicultural ideology relates to less stereotyping (Hachfeld et al., 2015; Velasco González et al., 2008), whereas other research points to greater stereotyping (Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000). However, in the latter case, stereotyping does not necessarily link to lower regard for ethnic minorities among Whites or ability to use individuating information. With regard to prejudice, Whites and people of color who endorse multiculturalism show lower prejudice (Ryan et al., 2007; Wolsko et al., 2006). Exposure to a multicultural passage temporarily reduces implicit prejudice (Lai et al., 2014) and results in less implicit and explicit prejudice than color blindness (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004).

Multiculturalism can also have positive implications for interracial interaction, engagement, performance, and detection of discrimination. Exposing White Canadians to multiculturalism resulted in more positive, other-directed comments toward an Aboriginal Canadian conversation partner (Vorauer et al., 2009). Similarly, multiculturalism promotes perspective taking (Todd & Galinsky, 2012) and relates to educators' willingness to adapt their teaching to ethnic-minority students (Hachfeld et al., 2015) and adopt inclusive teaching practices (Aragón et al., 2017). Benefits also extend to relationships and experiences in work environments. According to a large field study, employees of color who work in departments in which White peers hold more multicultural attitudes (e.g., supporting organizational diversity) feel more psychologically engaged (Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009). Furthermore, they perceive less risk of bias, contributing to their greater engagement. Similarly, racial or ethnic minorities who work with multiculturalism-endorsing leaders report greater feelings of acceptance (Meeussen, Otten, & Phalet, 2014). Among college

students, exposure to a multicultural university statement (stressing strength in and embracing diversity) yielded better performance for women of color than a color-blind statement (stressing similarity and that social identities are immaterial; Wilton et al., 2015). Additionally, organizational diversity policies that stress differences (rather than similarities) foster leadership self-perceptions and goals among minorities (Gündemir, Dovidio, Homan, & De Dreu, 2017). With regard to discrimination detection, research conducted with children suggests that a value-diversity model facilitates identification and reporting of discrimination, because it provides language to label difference (Apfelbaum et al., 2010).

Multiculturalism gone wrong

But multiculturalism is by no means a panacea. Multiculturalism backfires when Whites feel under threat. Whites exposed to multiculturalism displayed more hostility in an interracial interaction after being threatened (e.g., learning they were rejected by or disagreed with their partner; Vorauer & Sasaki, 2011). Multiculturalism

Table 1. Summary of Findings

Multiculturalism may foster discrimination and racism when . . .	Multiculturalism may remedy discrimination and racism when . . .	Color blindness may foster discrimination and racism when . . .	Color blindness may remedy discrimination and racism when . . .
. . . it sparks threat and intergroup bias in Whites (especially in concrete form and with highly identified Whites)	. . . it encourages more positive, other-directed interracial interaction in Whites	. . . it decreases detection of explicit and ambiguous discrimination	. . . it communicates (and advances) equal opportunity and a culture of fairness and rooting out prejudice and discrimination
. . . it sparks more hostility in Whites in interracial interaction (especially when Whites feel threatened)	. . . it leads to less behavioral prejudice in Whites and less cognitive depletion in their interaction partners of color	. . . it leads Whites to express more negative affect or appear less friendly in interracial interactions	. . . it represents a vision for an equitable society that decreases harm to marginalized groups
. . . it encourages liking of stereotypical people of color to the detriment of counterstereotypical people of color	. . . it leads to greater detection of explicit and ambiguous incidents of discrimination	. . . it leads to greater behavioral prejudice in Whites and more cognitive depletion in their interaction partners of color	. . . it focuses on commonality without diminishing the experiences of marginalized groups
. . . representation of people of color is low (vs. high) and a unique focus on diversity lowers persistence and performance	. . . Whites supportive of diversity create an environment in which coworkers of color are more engaged and experience less bias	. . . it is associated with lower expectations of students of color	
. . . it creates an illusion of fairness and nondiscrimination	. . . it is associated with endorsement of and willingness to adopt inclusive teaching practices	. . . it is used by Whites with high social dominance orientations to enhance hierarchy after threat	
	. . . leaders support it and engender more feelings of acceptance among cultural-minority group members	. . . it is associated with lower endorsement of and willingness to adopt inclusive teaching practices	
	. . . it fosters a sense of a more open diversity climate, greater leadership self-efficacy and goals, and positive-outcome expectancies among people of color	. . . it lowers organizational trust among people of color, especially if there is no evidence of commitment to color-blind ideals	
	. . . it sparks better performance among women of color	. . . women of color perform worse after exposure to it in a university diversity statement	

Note: This summary is meant to be representative but not exhaustive of findings.

is also detrimental if it leads to pigeonholing. Research in organizational behavior describes negative effects of valuing employees mostly for their social identity (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Another study examined effects of priming multiculturalism (vs. color blindness) on likability ratings of a man of color with stereotype-consistent or stereotype-inconsistent extracurricular interests (e.g., a Latino who likes salsa vs. hip-hop; Gutiérrez & Unzueta, 2010). When exposed to multiculturalism, participants liked the stereotypical target more than the counterstereotypical target, which raises concerns about whether multiculturalism constrains identity expression for racial and ethnic minorities. In another study, for Black women and men, a corporate statement emphasizing diversity efforts resulted in lower persistence and performance on a cognitive task when representation of their racial group was depicted as low (5%) versus moderate (40%; Apfelbaum et al., 2016). This could be due in part to pigeonholing concerns or to receiving mixed messages about diversity.

Highlighting an organization's diversity initiatives can also undermine detection of discrimination. Their presence can create a deceptive impression of organizational fairness, such that high-status group members are less likely to identify discriminatory behavior against low-status group members (Kaiser et al., 2013).

Conclusion

Does avoiding or attending to race foster or reduce discrimination and racism? Findings are nuanced, yet major themes emerge (see Table 1). Color blindness, while often heralded as a remedy for racism, can foster negative outcomes for people of color (e.g., interpersonal discrimination). Moreover, color blindness serves to reify the social order, as it allows Whites to see themselves as nonprejudiced, can be used to defend current racial hierarchies, and diminishes sensitivity to racism. Multiculturalism can provoke threat and prejudice in Whites, but multicultural practices can positively affect outcomes and participation of people of color in different institutional arenas. Yet it also has the potential to caricature and demotivate them and mask discrimination. In other words, while multiculturalism generally has more positive implications for minorities, both models can further inequality. Additionally, their impact can depend on group status and numerical representation, perceived threat to Whites, and whether they are employed to change or maintain the status quo.

Although the literature typically pits one model against the other, they are not mutually exclusive, and it is possible to recognize people as group members and as individuals. An instructor can be conscious of marginalized identities in designing curricula to enhance learning and belonging while employing a blind grading system to decrease bias. Organizations may engage an identity-conscious strategy in attracting a diverse applicant pool through targeted outreach, whereas during the evaluative stage of recruitment, organizations may implement color-blind procedures while also attempting to decrease the opportunity for systemic biases to derail selection fairness. Moreover, if an organization is actually equitable and inclusive in practice, potential negative implications of a given approach may not emerge.

Future research should increase the focus on the success and support of marginalized groups, possible long-term effects of these approaches (e.g., derailed career trajectories), and how historical and institutional circumstances matter. Further, if avoiding race increases inequality but attending to it incites resistance, how do we balance those concerns?

Recommended Reading

Rattan, A., & Ambady, N. (2013). Diversity ideologies and intergroup relations: An examination of colorblindness and multiculturalism. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, *43*, 12–21. A comprehensive and accessible overview of color blindness and multiculturalism.

Sasaki, S. J., & Vorauer, J. D. (2013). Ignoring versus exploring differences between groups: Effects of salient colorblindness and multiculturalism on intergroup attitudes and behavior. *Social and Personality Compass*, *7*, 246–259. A highly accessible review of the literature on color blindness and multiculturalism with an emphasis on prevention and learning orientations.

Thomas, K. M., Plaut, V. C., & Tran, N. M. (Eds.). (2014). *Diversity ideologies in organizations*. New York, NY: Routledge. An examination of how diversity ideologies improve or impair organizational functioning across different types of organizations and identities.

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