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In Blind Pursuit of Racial Equality?

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Abstract

Despite receiving little empirical assessment, the color-blind approach to managing diversity has become a leading institutional strategy for promoting racial equality, across domains and scales of practice. We gauged the utility of color blindness as a means to eliminating future racial inequity—its central objective—by assessing its impact on a sample of elementary-school students. Results demonstrated that students exposed to a color-blind mind-set, as opposed to a value-diversity mind-set, were actually less likely both to detect overt instances of racial discrimination and to describe such events in a manner that would prompt intervention by certified teachers. Institutional messages of color blindness may therefore artificially depress formal reporting of racial injustice. Color-blind messages may thus appear to function effectively on the surface even as they allow explicit forms of bias to persist.

Keywords

diversity approach, racial inequity, color blindness, social perception, intervention

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Color blindness—an approach to managing diversity in which intergroup distinctions and considerations are deemphasized—has emerged as a dominant strategy for advancing racial equality in educational, organizational, legal, and political domains (Carbado & Harris, 2008; Jones, 1998; Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009; Schofield, 2007). Growing institutional advocacy for a color-blind path to equality has been underscored by a basic conviction: “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 No. 1*, 2007, p. 2768). But does this prevailing ethos to not “see race” achieve its stated goal of decreasing racial injustice? Empirical evidence for such a link is scarce. We gauged the prospect of color blindness for promoting future racial progress by assessing its cumulative effect on a sample of elementary-school students.

The appeal of a color-blind approach to diversity is understandable: If perceiving racial difference is a necessary precondition to prejudice (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), then downplaying the relevance of such distinctions should limit the potential for bias. Anchored by such logic, color blindness has emerged broadly as a central ideology for promoting inclusiveness and tolerance. One domain in which such values have become particularly prominent is education (Jervis, 1996; Markus, Steele, & Steele, 2000; Sleeter, 1993; Stephan, 1999).

Color blindness manifests itself in many forms, cascading down various levels of the educational system. It is evident in national approaches to education reform (e.g., decreased focus on racial factors in addressing the White-minority achievement gap; No Child Left Behind Act, 2001), state regulations for managing districtwide diversity (e.g., overturned race-based integration initiatives in Washington and Kentucky; *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 2007), and standard school curricula (e.g., activities and readings that convey a generalized cultural identity, but leave group differences unaddressed; Tatum, 2003). Color blindness is also expressed through teachers’ strategies for promoting equality in classrooms (e.g., routinely emphasizing that “race does not matter” and “we are all the same”; Pollock, 2004), and even by behavioral changes among students themselves (e.g., a learned tendency to avoid mentioning race, even when clearly useful, beginning around 10 years of age; Apfelbaum, Pauker, Ambady, Sommers, & Norton, 2008).

But does color blindness actually reduce racial inequity? Indeed, one telling indicator of any strategy’s effectiveness at

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advancing equality would be its capacity to aid in rooting out inequity (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2009; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008). The degree to which an approach can sharpen detection of bias and facilitate appropriate intervention in such instances serves as an important barometer of its promise for fostering social progress. The notion that color blindness embodies a sense of fair-mindedness and cultivates cooperative tendencies (Hirsch, 1996; Schlesinger, 1992) would suggest that it is an approach well suited to achieve these egalitarian objectives. Yet recent research offers reason to question the utility of color blindness along these lines.

In race-relevant contexts, endorsement of color blindness has been found to diminish the accuracy of individuals' social judgments, increase decision-making errors, and magnify racial bias (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Sommers, 2006; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000). More generally, color blindness may also reduce sensitivity to potentially meaningful racial differences (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). For instance, the color-blind approach adopted by one school left students stunned to learn that Martin Luther King, Jr., was Black (Schofield, 2007). And teaching about Jackie Robinson—the first Black Major League Baseball player—without mention of his historical significance to American race relations has been found to diminish students' concern for intergroup equality (Hughes, Bigler, & Levy, 2007). When the acknowledgment of racial differences is not only relevant but also practically imperative, desensitization to these differences may act as an impediment. This tendency to foster intergroup ambiguity may therefore operate counter to the intended aims of color blindness, ironically undermining the very process by which instances of inequity are detected and resolved.

Overview of the Study

We investigated the effects of promoting a color-blind approach to diversity among students 8 to 11 years old. Our experiment mirrored the chain of events through which plans for managing diversity are actually implemented in schools and tested by the real world. We examined whether institutional endorsement of color blindness can shape students' capacity to (a) detect incidents of racial inequity and (b) effectively relay such observations in a way that facilitates teacher intervention. Students reviewed an educational, multimedia storybook ostensibly under development for younger children. Two versions of the book both described a teacher's efforts to promote racial equality, but they diverged in the philosophical approach for doing so; one took a color-blind approach, and the other an approach emphasizing the value of diversity. After presentation of the storybook, students were introduced to a separate, presumably unrelated task, in which they were presented with three school-yard incidents that depicted varying degrees of evidence of racial bias. The students were videotaped recalling these events and asked to indicate which, if any, of the scenarios constituted racial discrimination.

Method

Participants

Sixty students (51 White, 9 Asian; 29 females, 31 males) from 8 to 11 years old ($M = 10.30$ years, $SD = 0.86$) were recruited from public elementary schools that serve middle- and upper-middle-class families outside Boston, Massachusetts.¹ Each student received a small gift for participating.

Materials and procedure

Parents of fourth and fifth graders were informed of the study via letters sent home by school administrators. After receipt of parental and student consent, students were invited to participate individually in an unoccupied room at their school. Upon arrival, they were told that before they participated in the main study, their help was needed for an ostensibly unrelated task: critically reviewing a storybook that would eventually be marketed to younger schoolmates. All students accepted this advisory role enthusiastically and then viewed an illustrated digital storybook on a laptop computer. A series of illustrations were synchronized to accompany one of two prerecorded audio narratives.

The content of the narrative—our experimental manipulation—was virtually identical in the two versions. The story described a third-grade teacher's efforts to promote racial equality by organizing a class performance. In both narratives, the teacher broadly championed racial justice (e.g., "We all have to work hard to support racial equality"). At three critical points, however, the narratives diverged in their approach to advancing this aim. The *color-blind* version called for minimizing race-based distinctions and considerations (e.g., "That means that we need to focus on how we are similar to our neighbors rather than how we are different," "We want to show everyone that race is not important and that we're all the same"). The *value-diversity* version endorsed recognition of these same differences (e.g., "That means we need to recognize how we are different from our neighbors and appreciate those differences," "We want to show everyone that race is important because our racial differences make each of us special").

The students were instructed to concentrate on the "main message" so that they subsequently would be prepared to answer questions regarding the story. After its presentation (~10 min.), the children completed a series of questions about the story before a new experimenter entered and introduced them to the "real" task for the study.

This second experimenter, blind to experimental condition, read aloud three scenarios depicting inequitable behavior alleged to have occurred at nearby schools. These scenarios included varying degrees of evidence of racial bias, and each was presented with a pair of photographs of the two male children described in the incident. The *control* (no bias) scenario portrayed a White child who marginalized his less experienced White partner's contribution to their school science project.²

The scenario with *ambiguous* evidence of bias described a White child's exclusion of a Black classmate from his birthday celebration:

Most of [Brady's] classmates got invitations, but Terry was one of the kids who did not. . . . [Brady] decided not to invite him because he knew that Terry would not be able to buy him any of the presents on his "wish list."

The scenario with *explicit* evidence of racial bias described a White child's unprovoked physical assault of a Black opponent during a soccer game:

Max tripped Derrick from behind and took the ball. . . . When one of Max's teammates asked him about the final play, Max said that he could tell that Derrick played rough because he is Black. . . .

Pilot work ($n = 20$ undergraduates) confirmed that the three behavioral scenarios offered reliably weak ($M = 1.10$, $SD = 0.31$), moderate ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.84$), and strong ($M = 6.00$, $SD = 0.97$) evidence of racial bias, respectively (7-point response scale: 1 = *weak*, 7 = *strong*), $F(2, 18) = 78.76$, $p < .001$, $r = .90$, but did not differ in perceived length or level of detail, $F_s < 1.5$. The control and ambiguous scenarios were presented in a counterbalanced order; the explicit scenario was

always presented last so that reactivity to overt discrimination would not affect responses to the other scenarios.

After hearing the scenarios, the students were asked to recall the events in question (e.g., "What happened in the soccer game?"). Their verbal responses were videotaped. Finally, the students were asked to indicate which, if any, of the three scenarios constituted racial discrimination.³

In a funneled suspicion check administered after completion of the experimental tasks, none of the students was able to correctly identify the relationship between the experimental tasks or the nature of the hypotheses. All students were thanked and debriefed.

Results

Detection of discrimination

We first examined whether the diversity approaches modeled in the storybooks affected students' subsequent capacity to detect incidents of racial discrimination (Fig. 1). When placed in a value-diversity mind-set, 3% of students perceived discrimination in the control scenario, 43% perceived discrimination when there was ambiguous evidence of bias, and 77% perceived discrimination when there was explicit evidence of bias. These frequencies were consistent with pretesting ratings obtained from a sample not exposed to the storybook.

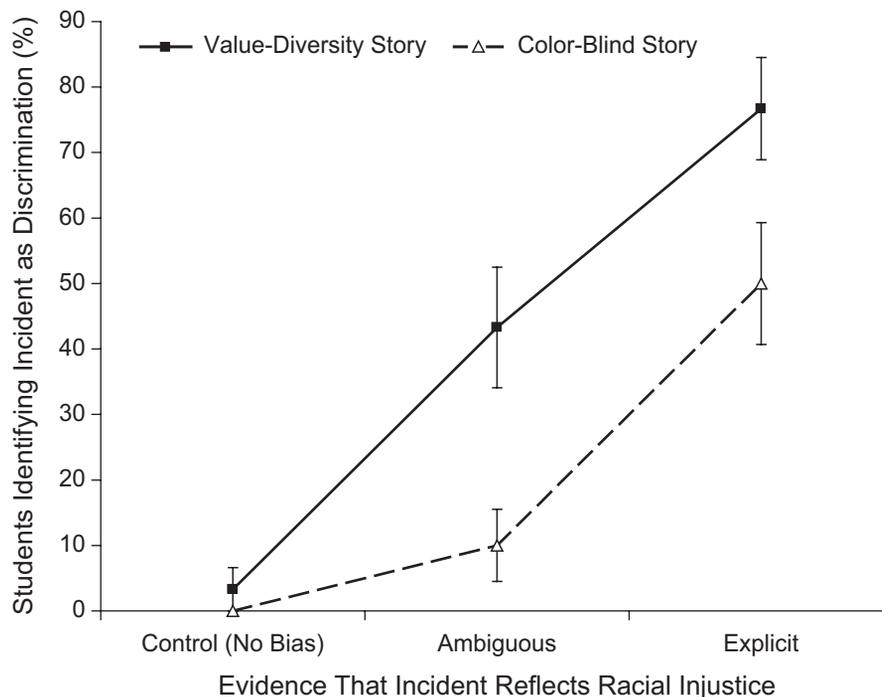


Fig. 1. Frequency with which students identified incidents as discrimination as a function of primed approach to diversity (color-blind vs. value-diversity story) and strength of the evidence for racial bias. Error bars represent standard errors.

When students were placed in a color-blind mind-set, however, a different pattern of results emerged. Although a similarly nominal percentage of students (0%) perceived racial injustice in the control scenario, $p = .31$, only 10% of students perceived discrimination when the evidence of bias was ambiguous, a percentage significantly lower than that in the value-diversity condition $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 8.52, p < .005, \phi = .38$. Remarkably, the frequency with which students detected discrimination dropped significantly relative to the value-diversity condition even when there was explicit, unambiguous evidence of racial aggression: Just 50% of students in the color-blind condition perceived discrimination in this scenario, $\chi^2(1, N = 60) = 4.59, p = .03, \phi = .28$.⁴

Likelihood of intervention

This notable decline in students' sensitivity to discrimination when placed in a color-blind mind-set raises the possibility of an additional consequence: When subsequently queried by teachers, students with such a mind-set may describe bias-related events in a manner that minimizes the likelihood of adult intervention. To examine this possibility, we asked two naive certified elementary-school teachers who were experienced with this age group to rate the students' videotaped descriptions of the scenarios. The teachers were led to believe that they were assisting in a memory study in which students had been presented with one of several variations on three basic scenarios that they had later been asked to recall. This pretext encouraged the teachers to evaluate the descriptions of each scenario independently from one student to the next. The teachers rated the scenarios (intraclass correlation coefficient = .61) for perceived seriousness and need for intervention ($\alpha = .64$) on a 7-point response scale (1 = *not at all*, 4 = *somewhat*, 7 = *very much*). Responses to these items were then averaged to create a likelihood-of-intervention index. A significant two-way interaction emerged, $F(2, 56) = 4.50, p < .02, r = .27$ (see Table 1).⁵ Students primed with a color-blind mind-set

described events with ambiguous evidence of bias in a manner significantly less likely to prompt adult intervention than did students primed with a value-diversity mind-set. Again, this pattern held even for descriptions of events with clear evidence of bias. No difference between conditions emerged for descriptions of the control scenario.

References to intergroup difference

We further investigated the basis for such intervention discrepancies by analyzing students' references to intergroup differences in describing the scenarios. For each description, we coded the degree to which racial differences were acknowledged using a continuous measure: A description was given a score of 2 if such differences were referenced directly (e.g., "because of his skin color"), a score of 1 if they were referenced indirectly (e.g., "because he is different"), and a score of 0 if they were not referenced. A two-way interaction emerged, $F(2, 56) = 3.35, p < .04, r = .24$ (see Table 1). Students primed with a color-blind mind-set referenced intergroup differences significantly less often than those primed with a value-diversity mind-set, in describing both events with ambiguous evidence of racial bias and events with explicit evidence of racial bias.

Mediational analyses demonstrated that when diversity approach (value-diversity = 0, color-blind = 1) and reference to difference simultaneously predicted intervention ratings, diversity approach was no longer a significant predictor of intervention ratings for either ambiguous scenarios, $\beta = -0.21, p = .08$, or explicit scenarios, $\beta = -0.11, p = .32$. However, reference to difference remained a significant predictor of intervention ratings for both ambiguous scenarios, $\beta = 0.48, p < .001$ (Sobel $Z = 1.76, p = .07$), and explicit scenarios, $\beta = 0.54, p < .001$ (Sobel $Z = 1.92, p = .05$). In other words, teachers were less likely to appreciate the need for intervention from students' descriptions in the color-blind condition because such descriptions minimized the importance of racial

Table 1. Effects of Diversity Mind-Set on Students' Descriptions of the Three Scenarios

Measure and condition	Scenario (evidence of racial bias)		
	Control	Ambiguous	Explicit
Likelihood of intervention			
Value-diversity condition	2.99 _a (0.55)	3.88 _a (0.82)	4.88 _a (0.85)
Color-blind condition	3.12 _a (0.70)	3.35 _b (0.71)	4.40 _b (0.77)
Intergroup differences referenced			
Value-diversity condition	0.00 _a (0.00)	0.17 _a (0.46)	0.80 _a (0.92)
Color-blind condition	0.00 _a (0.00)	0.00 _b (0.00)	0.33 _b (0.76)

Note: The table presents mean scores, with standard deviations in parentheses. The likelihood-of-intervention index reflects teachers' ratings of students' descriptions for perceived seriousness of the incident and the need for intervention. The descriptions were also coded for whether they referenced intergroup differences. Each condition included 30 students. For each dependent measure, means that are in the same column and do not share subscripts are significantly different, $p < .05$.

difference to the events in question. Diversity approach did not predict intervention ratings for the control scenario; thus, we did not explore this mediational relationship further.

Discussion

Our results emulate a chain of events all too likely to occur in a variety of educational contexts: Racial bullying on the playground is likely to be perceived as nothing more than ordinary misconduct in the eyes of well-intentioned schoolmates taught not to consider race. Moreover, teachers presented with a muted account of the same incident by indifferent classmates are likely to deem it similarly unremarkable and unworthy of intervention.

The elimination of racial inequity has emerged as a focal, but rather nebulous, goal to which individuals, groups, and institutions aspire. Our research underscores the importance of considering not only whether, but also how, this aim is pursued. Additional work is required to determine whether promoting value-diversity efforts is more effective than minimizing color-blind practices in addressing inequity. Nonetheless, our findings raise distressing practical implications, including the possibility that well-intentioned efforts to promote egalitarianism via color blindness sometimes promote precisely the opposite outcome, permitting even explicit forms of racial discrimination to go undetected and unaddressed. In doing so, color blindness may create the false impression of an encouraging decline in racial bias, a conclusion likely to reinforce its further practice and support. Despite this perception of tangible progress toward equality, however, color blindness may not reduce inequity as much as it adjusts the lens through which inequity is perceived and publicly evaluated.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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Notes

1. Results did not differ significantly when analyses were restricted to White children only.
2. An alternative control condition could have included a White-Black pairing with equitable behavior. For the present study, we instead opted to explore whether the effects of our manipulation were limited to race-relevant, as opposed to inequity-relevant, contexts.
3. All children correctly described the concept of racial discrimination after making these judgments.

4. In a pretest, students made identical discrimination judgments but were not exposed to a diversity message ($N = 20$). The rates at which discrimination was identified were significantly higher than those observed in the color-blind condition, $ps < .01$ (binomial test), but were not distinguishable from those observed in the value-diversity condition, $ps > .16$.
5. One student's recording was lost because of equipment malfunction.

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