

‘Color Blind’ Policies Could Make Diversity Harder to Achieve

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Whether it be growing concerns about bias or recognition of the value of diversity, many organizations and institutions have elected to deemphasize race or remove it entirely from their decision-making processes. Yet new evidence from psychological science research suggests that this color-blind approach may not be as effective as people believe it is.

Color blindness offers a seemingly simple way to deal with race: If individuals and institutions do not even notice race, then they cannot act in a biased manner on that basis.

But according to a new article published by Evan Apfelbaum of the MIT Sloan School of Management and colleagues, efforts to ignore race can backfire.

“Shutting our eyes to the complexities of race does not make them disappear,” they write in the June issue of [Current Directions in Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

Apfelbaum and his co-authors, Michael Norton of Harvard Business School and Samuel Sommers of Tufts University, delve into the existing research on the unintended consequences of racial color blindness. For example, in one study, White individuals who avoided mentioning race in conversation were perceived as more biased by Black observers than White individuals who openly talked about race. And another study suggests that people who read arguments promoting color blindness are more likely to display racial bias than people who read arguments promoting multiculturalism.

Because color blindness is difficult to maintain even between two people, it’s not surprising that the approach has had mixed results for larger groups. Psychological scientists have found that whether color blindness succeeds at an organization largely depends on how diverse the organization is. Minority applicants perceive diverse organizations that endorse color blindness more favorably than they do predominantly White organizations. Policies that promote color blindness can even lead to racial tension when they are used to support claims of reverse racism by White individuals who believe they are victims of discrimination.

A proposed alternative to colorblindness, according to Apfelbaum and colleagues, is multiculturalism, in which racial differences are openly discussed rather than ignored. Research indicates that when people are encouraged to use a multicultural approach, they are better at understanding the perspectives of other people and better at spotting discrimination when it occurs. The authors acknowledge that multiculturalism isn’t perfect either (White individuals can feel alienated by multiculturalism), but they suggest that racial inequities are harder to hide — and more likely to be corrected — with a multicultural approach compared to a color-blind one.