

In Blind Pursuit of Racial Equality?

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New Kellogg School Research Suggests a Colorblind Approach to Diversity May Frustrate Efforts to Identify and Confront Discrimination

“Colorblindness” has emerged as central strategy for managing racial diversity in schools, business, politics, and the law, with the hope that deemphasizing racial differences will lead to equality, tolerance and inclusion. However, new research from the Kellogg School of Management shows that promoting colorblindness can lead people to turn a blind eye to even overt examples of racial discrimination and hamper the prospect for intervention.

In a new study entitled “In Blind Pursuit of Racial Equality?,” researchers sought to determine the impact of colorblindness on elementary school students’ capacity to recognize racially motivated incidents and subsequently report them to facilitate adult intervention.

The research was conducted by Evan P. Apfelbaum of the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University; Kristin Pauker of Stanford University; and Samuel R. Sommers and Nalini Ambady of Tufts University. The article will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

“In many ways, the logic behind colorblindness is understandable, that downplaying racial distinctions should limit the potential for bias. We see this ideology prominently displayed in many social settings, from the strategies people use to avoid discussion of race in interracial interactions to broader efforts at education reform in which administrators are challenged with managing diversity among school districts and within classrooms,” said Apfelbaum, visiting assistant professor of management and organizations at the Kellogg School.

“However, our research suggests that exposure to colorblindness can actually reduce individuals’ sensitivity to meaningful racial differences. And as a result, when discrimination does occur, individuals with a colorblind mindset often fail to see it as such,” he added.

In their experiment, the researchers explored the effects of promoting a colorblind approach to diversity among 8- to 11-year-old students. First, students reviewed different versions of a multimedia storybook, half received a colorblind version and the other half received and a value-diversity version. In both stories, the narrator championed racial justice, but the colorblind version encouraged minimizing race-based distinctions, whereas the value-diversity version encouraged embracing these differences. (“We need to focus on how we are similar to our neighbors rather than how we are different” vs. “We want to show everyone that race is important because our racial differences make us special.”)

After the storybooks were read, the students listened to three stories featuring varying degrees of racial bias: a control story in which a White child was marginalized by his White schoolmate’s contribution to

a school science project; an ambiguous story regarding a White student's exclusion of a Black student from his birthday party; and an explicitly biased story describing a White student's unprovoked assault of a Black student in a soccer game. After the stories, students were asked to describe the three events and their responses were video recorded.

The results found that students who had read the value-diversity version of the storybook were more likely to detect evidence of racial discrimination: 43 percent of students perceived discrimination in the ambiguous story and 77 percent perceived discrimination in the explicitly biased story.

In the colorblind condition, on the other hand, the frequency with which students detected discrimination dropped significantly, to 10 percent of children for the ambiguous story, and to only 50 percent in the explicit story—a scenario that portrayed overt evidence of racially biased behavior.

This decline in sensitivity has potentially severe consequences, according to the researchers. The students were later asked to recall the three stories presented to them via the storybook, and their video recorded descriptions were then presented to real schoolteachers. The students initially primed with a colorblind mindset described the stories in a manner significantly less likely to trigger adult intervention than students exposed to the value-diversity mindset.

“These diversity mindsets did not only impact how children perceived racial bias, but also how they conveyed these acts to others,” said Apfelbaum. “Teachers were less likely to see the need for intervention because the students’ descriptions in the colorblind condition played down the race-related nature of the transgressions,” said Apfelbaum. “In a real world situation, bullying on the basis of race could go unnoticed by onlookers or be mistaken for ordinary misconduct by teachers who receive insufficient information to recognize it as discrimination.”

The researchers conclude that the study underscores the need to explore the effectiveness of value-diversity efforts in addressing inequity. “Despite good intentions to promote egalitarianism through colorblindness, our findings show that doing so sometimes elicits the exact opposite outcome, permitting even explicit forms of racial discrimination to go undetected and unaddressed,” said Apfelbaum. “Perhaps most alarming, on the surface, colorblindness appears to work quite well—reported incidents of bias do decrease. In spite of such encouraging signs, however, our study suggests that colorblindness may not reduce bias as much as it adjusts the lens through which bias is perceived.”

http://www.kellogg.northwestern.edu/News_Articles/2010/evan-apfelbaum-blind-pursuit.aspx