



# The impact of multiculturalism versus color-blindness on racial bias<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

The present study examined the influence of different interethnic ideologies on automatic and explicit forms of racial prejudice. White American college students were exposed to a message advocating either a color-blind or a multicultural ideological approach to reducing interethnic tension and then completed explicit racial attitude measures, as well as a reaction time measure of automatic evaluations of racial groups. Results suggested that, relative to the multicultural perspective, the color-blind perspective generated greater racial attitude bias measured both explicitly and on the more unobtrusive reaction time measure. The findings of the present study add to previous research advocating a multicultural or dual-identity model of intergroup relations as the more promising route to interracial harmony.

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Two fundamentally different approaches to the reduction of interracial tension and stratification have been proposed by social scientists. One approach, often called *color-blindness*, proposes that racial categories do not matter and should not be considered when making decisions such as hiring and school admissions. The primary tenet of this approach is that social categories should be dismantled and disregarded, and everyone should be treated as an individual (Firebaugh & Davis, 1998; Lipset, 1996; Sniderman & Piazza, 1993). The second approach, typically called *multiculturalism*, proposes that group differences and memberships should not only be acknowledged and considered, but also, celebrated (Takaki, 1993; Yinger, 1994). A central tenet of this perspective is that ignoring ethnic group differences, for instance, undermines the cultural heritage of non-white individuals, and, as a result, is detrimental to the well being of ethnic minorities (Sleeter, 1991). In

short, color-blind perspectives advocate reducing, eliminating, and ignoring category memberships, whereas multiculturalism advocates considering, and sometimes emphasizing and celebrating, category memberships.

Both the color-blind and multicultural perspectives can also be found in the extant literature on intergroup relations in social psychology. The color-blind perspective, however, has been the dominant view in much of this work (see Gurin, Peng, Lopez, & Nagda, 1999 for more). Research stemming from Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Self-Categorization Theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) has documented the plethora of negative outcomes that stem from social categorization, including outgroup homogeneity, ingroup favoritism and ethnocentrism, as well as prejudice and stereotyping (see Brewer & Brown, 1998 for a review). Based on this work, mainstream social psychology has focused many of its intergroup conflict intervention efforts on methods that reduce category salience and encourage individuation (e.g., Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). In contrast to this perspective, some research by social psychologists is beginning to consider the potential positive consequences of taking a more multicultural approach to intergroup relations (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Gurin et al., 1999; Huo, Smith, Tyler, & Lind, 1996; Triandis, 1988). For instance, Hewstone and colleagues proposed in their model of Mutual Differentiation that introducing a

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cooperative relationship between groups without dismantling group boundaries or identities should reduce intergroup tension (Hewstone, 1996; Hewstone & Brown, 1986). Similarly, Gaertner, Dovidio and colleagues include what they call “dual identities”—the simultaneous embracing of both superordinate and subordinate group memberships—in their Common In-group Identity model (see e.g., Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2000; Gaertner, Mann, Murrell, & Dovidio, 1989). They argue that holding a dual identity should be sufficient to reduce prejudice, and, moreover, they write, “the benefits of dual identity may be particularly relevant to interracial and interethnic group contexts” (Dovidio et al., 2000, p. 153).

As recent social-psychological research uncovers the potential value of multiculturalism, considerable research in sociology, education, and anthropology has highlighted numerous disadvantages of the color-blind perspective (e.g., Stephan, 1999). Several field studies of integration efforts in schools have found that color-blind ideologies are widely endorsed and espoused by teachers and administrators (e.g., Jervis, 1996; Pollock, 2004; Rist, 1978; Schofield, 2001), informing both behavior with students and pedagogy (Schofield, 2001, 1982). For instance, many of the teachers at one integrated school in which color-blindness was the prevailing policy were hesitant to notice students’ self-segregation, actual racial differences in student suspension rates, or, even to incorporate teaching materials that represented the diversity among the student body (Schofield, 2001). Furthermore, Schofield reports that race had been so de-emphasized in one classroom in this school that “one white child was surprised to learn from a member of our research team that Martin Luther King, Jr. was African American, not White” (Schofield, 2001, p. 262). Ignorance of the accomplishments of racial minorities has been found to predict negative racial attitudes (Stephan & Stephan, 1984). Thus, this work suggests that color-blind ideologies may negatively impact racial attitudes (see also, Blum, 2002).

Similar to this work, in a compelling new book Bonilla-Silva (2003) argues that color-blind perspectives regarding race relations serve to maintain rather than dismantle the social stratification of the races. Moreover, he claims that individuals who endorse a color-blind ideology tend also to hold more prejudiced views. He writes,

I contend that whites have developed powerful explanations—which have ultimately become justifications—for contemporary racial inequality that exculpate them from any responsibility for the status of people of color. These explanations emanate from a new racial ideology that I label color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, p. 2).

Although Bonilla-Silva, a sociologist, supports his claims about color-blind ideologies quite convincingly with both survey and interview data, across diverse

samples of participants, the lack of a clear control or comparison group makes it hard to ascertain the relation between color-blind ideologies and racial attitudes. Support for Bonilla-Silva’s claims regarding color-blindness from experimental research would be particularly compelling, especially in light of the body of social-psychological research in support of the benefits of color-blindness (or decategorization).

Some evidence can be gleaned from recent experimental work conducted by Wolsko, Park, Judd, and Wittenbrink (2000). They examined the impact of exposure to multicultural and color-blind ideologies on intergroup judgments. Specifically, they presented individuals with brief statements advocating either a color-blind or a multicultural approach to achieve interethnic harmony then measured those individuals’ warmth and ethnocentrism (Wolsko et al., 2000, Exp. 1). Although participants in both ideological statement conditions revealed less pro-white bias in their warmth judgments compared to control participants, there was a non-significant trend for participants in the color-blind condition to reveal greater pro-white bias on this measure than participants in the multiculturalism condition ( $p < .17$ ). Although this finding is suggestive, it is hard to ascertain whether the failure to find a reliable difference on this measure was because the null hypothesis is indeed true, or rather, an artifact of measurement error. For instance, the self-report measure of warmth employed may have been corrupted by self-presentation bias that masked individuals’ actual racial attitudes. Consequently, in the present study, we sought to compare the influences of color-blindness and multiculturalism on racial attitudes, making use of both an explicit measure as well as a relatively unobtrusive reaction time measure; namely, the IAT. Consistent with the hypothesis forwarded by the aforementioned educational and sociological research, we predicted that color-blindness would be associated with greater racial attitude bias compared to multiculturalism.

### Automatic attitudes

Considerable research demonstrates that attitudes can be activated automatically and implicitly (see Fazio & Olson, 2003; Greenwald et al., 2002, for reviews). In the present study, we employed the Implicit Association Test (IAT) to assess automatic racial attitudes (see Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998 for more details). Recent work employing the IAT finds differences in the ease with which individuals can associate differing racial groups with positive and negative words and concepts (Dasgupta, McGhee, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2000; Livingston, 2002; Lowery, Hardin, & Sinclair, 2001; Richeson & Ambady, 2003). For instance, white individuals are faster to associate white American with

positivity and black American with negativity, compared to the time required to associate white with negativity and black with positivity, indicative of an automatic pro-white racial attitude bias (Lowery et al., 2001; Richeson & Ambady, 2003). Moreover, this research, as well as several other recent studies, finds that the generation of automatic bias can be modulated by recent experience (e.g., Rudman, Ashmore, & Gary, 2001). In the present study, we examined the relative influence of differing perspectives on interethnic relations—namely, color-blindness and multiculturalism—on whites' automatic racial attitudes.

## Predictions

*Hypothesis 1.* Consistent with previous research, we expected individuals to generate attitudes regarding blacks that were relatively more negative than attitudes regarding whites.

*Hypothesis 2.* Furthermore, we predicted that this pro-white bias would be greater for participants exposed to the color-blind ideology, relative to participants exposed to the multicultural ideology.

## Method

### Participants

Fifty-two white undergraduate students attending Dartmouth College (30 female) participated in this experiment for partial course credit.

### Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to either the multicultural or the color-blind ideological prompt condition prior to arriving at the laboratory. Upon arrival, each participant was greeted by a white male experimenter, escorted into a room in which there was a desk and a computer, and seated in a chair away from the computer. Participants were informed that they would be helping the researchers to examine the "current state of inter-ethnic relations and inter-ethnic understanding and awareness in the US." They were told that they would read a passage about inter-ethnic relations then complete several tasks and questions regarding different groups. Participants were then provided with a brief written description of the study that included a consent statement for them to read and sign.

### *Ideology perspective induction*

The methods used to expose participants to the ideologies were nearly identical to those reported in

Wolsko et al. (2000, Exp. 2). Specifically, participants were provided with a one-page statement that either endorsed a multicultural or a color-blind approach to inter-ethnic relations. These ideological statements were identical to those employed by Wolsko et al. (2000). After reading the appropriate ideological prompt, participants were asked to make a list of 5 reasons why "multiculturalism (or color-blindness) is a positive approach to interethnic relations." When they finished their statements, participants were provided with a list of 21 responses that presumably had been provided by previous study participants, and asked to circle the responses that were similar to their own (again, these statements were identical to those used in Wolsko et al., 2000). Both the generation of their own responses and the reading of additional responses were used to encourage participants' agreement with the ideological perspective provided in the prompt. After a few minutes, the experimenter returned and asked participants if they were ready to continue.

*Implicit association test.* The IAT provided the primary dependent variable of the study—the assessment of automatic racial attitudes. When participants indicated that they were ready, they moved to the desk, in front of a Compaq Presario microcomputer with a 14" monitor. The experimenter then began the IAT program and left the room. Instructions and stimuli were presented, and response latencies were saved, on the computer.

The IAT employed in the present study included 2 blocks of trials of primary import, each consisting of 40 trials (see Greenwald et al., 1998 for more information regarding IAT protocols). During each block, participants were required to identify to which of four categories (i.e., White names, Black names, Pleasant concepts, or Unpleasant concepts) a series of stimuli belonged as quickly and accurately as possible. For instance, the name "Josh" would appear and then need to be categorized as belonging to the category "White" by pressing a previously indicated key (either the left or right) and, similarly the name "Lamar" would appear and then need to be categorized as belonging to the category "Black." The names used were identical to those employed in Dasgupta and Greenwald (2001). During one of the two blocks, participants pressed the same response key to indicate that a stimulus word belongs to either the category "White" or the category "Good," and a different key to indicate that a stimulus word belongs to either the category "Black" or the category "Bad." We subsequently refer to this block as the *White–Good* category pairing. In the second block, the appropriate response keys for one set of categories was reversed, such that the same key was used to indicate that a stimulus word belongs to either the category "Black" or the category "Good," whereas the other key was used to indicate that a word belongs to either the category "White" or the category "Bad." We refer to

Table 1  
Mean IAT effect and explicit bias toward blacks scores

Ideological condition	IAT bias			Explicit bias			$r(\text{IAT/Explicit})$
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>r</i>
Multicultural	25	196*	161	24	-0.014	11.0	.29
Color-blind	24	289*	172	24	5.0*	8.1	.34

\* Mean is significantly different from zero.

this second block as the *Black–Good* category pairing. The order of these two blocks was counter-balanced across participants. The difference between response latencies during the *White–Good* category pairing and response latencies during the *Black–Good* category pairing indicates the degree to which an individual favors one category over the other (i.e., “White” versus “Black”) (Greenwald et al., 1998).

After the IAT, participants completed several thermometer-like warmth ratings for both blacks and whites, as well as for two other racial minority groups (i.e., Asians, Latinos), in order to examine the impact of the two ideological prompts on racial attitudes toward a variety of ethnic minority groups, in addition to blacks. These thermometer ratings were embedded in a series of other non-racial groups (e.g., men, women, college students, corporate CEO’s). Participants were then informed that the study was over and debriefed. In the debriefing sheet, they indicated their agreement with the ideology to which they had been exposed, their race and gender, as well as several variables that could be related to the questions of interest, including political party affiliation and whether they had lived in the US for at least 6 years. Three participants reported that they had not lived in the US for at least 6 years, and were excluded from analysis leaving a sample of 49 (25 in the multicultural condition, 24 in the color-blind condition). After completing the debriefing questionnaire, participants were thanked for their participation.

## Results

### *Automatic racial attitudes*

The response latencies from the critical blocks (i.e., *White–Good*, *Black–Good*) were used to assess automatic racial attitudes. The data were trimmed according to the guidelines of Greenwald et al. (1998), after which all response latencies were log-transformed. The log-response times for trials in the “*White–Good*” block were averaged for each participant, as were the log-response times<sup>1</sup> for trials in the “*Black–Good*” block. The

<sup>1</sup> For ease of presentation, response latencies in the text and table are presented in the raw milliseconds values.

mean log-latencies associated with the *White–Good* pairing block were then subtracted from the mean log-latencies associated with the *Black–Good* pairing block in order to create difference scores indicative of the extent of bias in favor of whites (often termed IAT effect scores). Greater values indicate greater pro-white bias. The raw mean latencies in milliseconds are presented in Table 1.

In replication of previous research and consistent with Hypothesis 1, there was a robust pro-white bias in participants’ patterns of response latencies [ $t(48) = 11.02, p < .0001, r = .85$ ]. In other words, participants completed the trials faster during the *White–Good* category pairing block, compared to the *Black–Good* category pairing block, suggesting a pro-white automatic racial attitude bias ( $M = 242, SD = 171$ ). Interestingly, this pattern was revealed for participants in both the multicultural [ $t(24) = 6.33, p < .0001, r = .79$ ] and the color-blind [ $t(23) = 9.75, p < .0001, r = .90$ ] prompt conditions. Next, we examined the IAT bias scores for differences as a function of the 2 ideological prompt conditions (color-blind, multicultural).<sup>2</sup> Results revealed a significant effect of the ideological prompt condition [ $t(47) = 2.28, p < .05, r = .31$ ]. As shown in Table 1, participants exposed to the color-blind prompt revealed a larger pro-white bias compared to participants in the multicultural prompt condition.<sup>3</sup> Consistent with Hypothesis 2, therefore, these findings suggest that a color-blind approach to inter-ethnic relations does seem to generate greater automatic racial bias compared to a multicultural approach.

### *Explicit racial attitudes*

We were also interested in examining further the relative impact of the two ideological prompts on explicit racial attitudes. One participant from the multicultural prompt condition failed to complete these measures and was excluded from analyses. We first examined participants’ explicit attitude bias regarding the black racial group by subtracting their thermometer

<sup>2</sup> Participant sex did not moderate the results of preliminary analyses, and, therefore, was dropped.

<sup>3</sup> Analyses examining the number of errors participants made revealed no significant difference as a function of ideological prompt condition [ $t(47) = 1.36, p > .10$ ].

warmth ratings for blacks from their ratings for whites. These bias scores were then examined for differences between the two ideological prompt conditions. Similar to the results reported in Wolsko et al. (2000), there was a non-significant trend for participants in the color-blind condition to report greater pro-white bias than participants in the multicultural condition,  $t(46) = 1.8$ ,  $p < .08$ ,  $r = .27$ . Additional analyses revealed, however, that the pro-white bias expressed by participants in the color-blind condition was significantly greater than zero [ $t(23) = 3.03$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .53$ ], whereas that expressed by participants in the multicultural condition did not deviate from zero [ $t(23) = -.02$ ,  $p = ns$ ] indicative of no explicit racial bias.

Because the ideological prompts referred to many ethnic minority groups, rather than blacks specifically (see again Wolsko et al., 2000), we included warmth measures for both Asians and Latinos. For each group, we created bias scores similar to that used for explicit racial bias against blacks, and these scores were examined for differences as a function of ideological prompt condition. Results suggested that bias against Asians did significantly differ according to ideology,  $t(46) = 2.40$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $r = .33$ . Participants exposed to the color-blind prompt revealed greater bias against Asians ( $M = 5.83$ ,  $SD = 8.6$ ) compared to participants in the multicultural prompt condition ( $M = -0.71$ ,  $SD = 10.2$ ). A non-significant trend in the same direction also emerged from analyses of the scores assessing explicit bias against Latinos ( $M_s = 5.29$  and  $0.67$ ;  $t(46) = 1.50$ ,  $p < .13$ ,  $r = .22$ ). Last, in order to test whether exposure to multiculturalism may generate increased outgroup warmth relative to exposure to color-blindness, for any outgroup, we used our warmth measures regarding college students and corporate CEO's to examine explicit bias against CEO's. As expected, the prompts did not differ for such judgments [ $M_s = 36.3$  and  $32.2$ ;  $t(46) = .38$ ,  $p = ns$ .] Taken together, the present results lend support to the hypothesis that exposure to a color-blind ideology regarding inter-ethnic relations generates greater racial bias than exposure to a multicultural ideology. Moreover, the present findings highlight the importance of carefully evaluating the relative impact that approaches currently thought to promote interracial harmony have on intergroup attitudes.

### Supplemental analyses

*Correlations between automatic and explicit racial bias.* Given the consistent pattern of results that emerged for racial bias measured with the IAT and racial bias measured explicitly with the feeling thermometer, we examined the correlation between them for participants in each experimental condition. These correlations are reported in Table 1. Although previous research has found small, near-zero correlations be-

tween implicit and explicit attitude measures (see e.g., Dasgupta et al., 2000; Greenwald et al., 2002), we found moderate, albeit non-significant, correlations for both participants in the multi-culturalism condition ( $r = .29$ ,  $p < .17$ ) and participants in the color-blind condition ( $r = .34$ ,  $p < .11$ ).

*Internal analysis of prompt endorsement.* Recall that participants rated their agreement with the approach they read about on a 7-point Likert-type scale during debriefing. We examined these ratings for differences between the two experimental conditions. Results revealed that individuals in the multicultural prompt condition tended to agree with their prompt more than participants in the color-blind condition [respective  $M_s = 5.92$  and  $4.96$ ;  $t(47) = 2.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ]. Given that these agreement ratings were in the same direction as the results of primary interest, we reanalyzed the racial bias data controlling for participant agreement. Results revealed that automatic pro-white racial bias was higher for participants in the color-blind condition, compared to participants in the multicultural condition, even with agreement ratings controlled in the model [ $F(1, 46) = 5.59$ ,  $p < .05$ ]. Moreover, the difference between color-blind and multiculturalism participants' pro-white (relative to black) explicit racial bias emerged statistically reliable, when individual variation in how much people agreed with their respective experimental condition was controlled [ $F(1, 45) = 4.81$ ,  $p < .05$ ]. These results suggest that despite participants' agreement regarding multiculturalism and color-blindness after exposure to the prompts, they tended to reveal greater racial attitude bias after exposure to the color-blind perspective compared to after exposure to the multicultural perspective.

### Discussion

In the present study, we examined the relative impact of two hotly contested approaches to interracial harmony—color-blindness and multiculturalism—on racial attitudes. Consistent with predictions, we found that relative to the multicultural perspective, exposure to the color-blind perspective generated greater automatic racial bias (i.e., attitudes assessed by the IAT). We also found that explicit racial bias was relatively greater after exposure to the color-blind perspective on interethnic relations, compared to the multicultural perspective, but only when post-exposure agreement with the prompts was statistically controlled. These results suggest, therefore, that racial attitudes may fluctuate depending on the approach taken to achieve interethnic harmony. Consequently, the present findings echo the vast majority of non-experimental research in education finding that multiculturalism yields more positive outcomes for intergroup relations than color-blindness (see also Gurin et al., 1999).

While the present study is offered as an empirical comparison of the effects of these two ideologies on racial attitudes, there are some limitations that must be taken into consideration. First, the study did not include a “no ideological prompt” control condition. Such a group is necessary for an assessment of whether multiculturalism reduces prejudice and/or color-blindness increases prejudice. A second limitation of the present work is the use of students from a New England college. Future research is warranted that varies the homogeneity of the backgrounds in which individuals live, as well as the ages of participants, as the effect of the prompts may have generational or cohort effects. Future research should also examine the impact of these ideological prompts on ethnic minorities’ attitudes and beliefs, as they will be important in attaining true interracial harmony, rather than solely reducing the negative racial attitudes of whites (Shelton, 2003).

Despite these limitations, however, the present results have important implications. First, consistent with recent research, the present findings underscore the malleability of automatic forms of racial bias to features of the social context (e.g., Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Lowery et al., 2001; Richeson & Ambady, 2003), and, therefore, the importance and possibility of developing effective means to combat prejudice. Furthermore, given the emerging evidence that even subtle forms of racial bias impact behavior during interracial interactions (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002; Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, & Howard, 1997; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995; McConnell & Leibold, 2001; Richeson & Shelton, 2003), attitudes generated by ideological prompts such as those employed in the present work are not likely to be trivial. Indeed, many current approaches to bettering intergroup relations involve contact with members of different groups. To the extent that advocates of the color-blind approach also advocate contact, the actual behavior displayed by individuals during those contact situations may not yield positive intergroup relations. Future investigation is required, however, in order to ascertain whether these two ideological prompts have differential impact on behavior during interracial interactions. Last, the present findings may be of particular interest and import to educators and public policy officials as they design curricula and programs in response to the racial, cultural, ethnic, and other intergroup diversity of society.

In conclusion, we believe that the results of the present study, considered in tandem with those reported in Wolsko et al. (2000), and the recent social-psychological work re-considering the value of multiculturalism, call for additional basic research examining the varied effects of multiculturalism and color-blindness on cognition, attitudes, and behavior. In particular, it may be time for social psychologists to examine the mecha-

nisms as well as the conditions under which various ideologies regarding intergroup relations may actually serve to maintain racial inequality.

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