Talking Productively About Race in the Colorblind Era

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*I*t is the year 2015. Slavery in the United States has been formally prohibited by the Federal Government for approximately 150 years. The landmark decision in Brown vs. the Board of Education recently turned 60, and race-based affirmative action was ordered into existence by Lyndon Johnson approximately 50 years ago. Finally, in 2008, American voters elected a Black president. When considered in isolation, this succession of events would appear to represent a march of progress toward a more fully egalitarian society where individual freedoms and opportunities are not unequally partitioned by race or ethnicity. *However, it is possible to tell another story that is much more reflective of the lived experiences of Blacks in present-day United States.*

The average Black person, relative to the average White person, is approximately three times as likely to live in poverty, almost six times as likely to be incarcerated, and controls only a twentieth of the wealth (specifically, an average of *no wealth*). Tellingly, each of these racial gaps has increased in recent years. Education is often considered to be the great panacea of social ills, but here too inequalities abound. The quality of K–12 education for Blacks is inferior to Whites, and Blacks are significantly less likely to graduate from high school, and to attend or graduate from college. And one final grim statistic: The average Black person can expect to live four years less than the average White person.

In addition to these statistically quantifiable disparities, rarely a week goes by without news detailing continuing interracial strife. Again, as of the writing of this document, an ongoing social protest movement continues to grow as a result of the deaths of Black males by White police officers in Ferguson, Missouri and Staten Island, neither case resulting in grand jury charges against
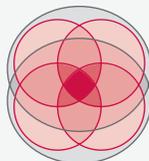
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the involved officers. Taken along with the racial gaps described above, it is still the case that Blacks and Whites appear to be living in separate and unequal versions of the United States. A similar case can be made with respect to Americans of Hispanic or Latino(a) descent relative to Whites.

These racial realities would appear to necessitate and justify a continuing societal dialogue regarding the role of race in America. However, a countervailing school of thought, often referred to as racial colorblindness, suggests the opposite: namely, that continuing dialogues are neither required nor appropriate. The purpose of this *Special Issue Brief* is to characterize and scrutinize the colorblind ideology. Close attention will be paid to underlying premises and motivations. Following this treatment, alternatives to racial colorblindness, as well as prescriptions for productive racial dialogues, will be presented.

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Racial Colorblindness: General Overview

Racial colorblindness is an ideology on the rise, and it may be argued that colorblindness is now in fact the dominant racial ideology in the United States (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Carr, 1997; Mazzocco, Cooper, & Flint, 2012; Plaut, 2010). Typically, racial colorblindness entails opposition to racial categories and categorical social perception. Instead, a colorblind advocate might argue, we should focus on individual qualities such as personality and behavior. This prohibition against racial categorization often extends to institutions and social policies. Hence, proponents of racial colorblindness might oppose both discussions of racial topics in school settings and also social programs such as race-based affirmative action. More extreme forms of racial colorblindness would even outlaw the recording of racial categories in official contexts (e.g., census data collection, arrest and incarceration records, education and economic indexes, etc.).

Another effect of the colorblind movement is the suppression of conversations in which race is implicated. Correspondingly, individuals, and particularly racial minorities, who persist in the use of racial categories are marginalized as perpetrators of "reverse racism" or as players of the "race card." In light of the extreme costs still associated with race discussed above, this stance may appear curious.

In the following two sections, two *separate but related* premises underlying racial colorblindness are examined.

Premise 1: Race No Longer Matters
(so we CAN be colorblind)

All else equal, to the extent that racial disparities, prejudice, and discrimination are perceived to (a) be things of the past, or (b) at least diminishing at an acceptable rate, racial colorblindness makes more sense (Mazzocco et al., 2006). Put simply, if there is no problem, there is no need for discussion. This premise would appear to be flatly contradicted by the racial gap statistics provided above. However, most people do not have access to these kinds of group-level statistics. And to the extent that Whites do not commonly encounter racial minorities in their everyday life, the most salient exemplars will often be successful minorities such as Oprah Winfried, LeBron James, and Barack Obama—further creating the impression that racial gaps are a thing of the past and skewing related race-based beliefs and attitudes (Mazzocco & Brunner, 2012).

It is also important to understand the frames of reference that are salient when estimations of racial gaps are made. Work by Eibach and colleagues (Eibach & Ehrlinger, 2006; Eibach & Keegan, 2006) has shown that Whites often focus on the progress that has been made since some arbitrarily chosen point in the past (e.g., slavery, the Jim Crow era), whereas minorities are more likely to compare the present state to a desired future state.

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Perhaps most importantly, Whites are likely to distinguish between statistical gaps, like those discussed above, and opportunity gaps. Although statistical gaps may be acknowledged, Whites are much less likely to perceive opportunity gaps, wherein social and economic access is unequally limited by race. Instead, explanations of racial gaps are often explained as the result of suboptimal minority cultures (e.g., welfare cultures, cultures of entitlement, gang culture, etc.).

This distinction between racial and opportunity gaps relates to the belief that racial disparities will tend to naturally diminish over time. Although blatant prejudice and discrimination have declined in the preceding decades, they have certainly not vanished. To a large extent these blatant forms have been replaced by more subtle and often subconscious forms of racial resentment or discomfort. On the other side of the spectrum is the concept of structural racism, whereby racialized outcomes that tend to disadvantage minorities occur as by-products of societal institutions and systems. Ironically, the colorblind ideology itself, by masking such factors, has become yet another opportunity-limiting mechanism from the perspective of minorities.

Premise 2: Race is a Divisive Social Construct
(so we SHOULD be colorblind)

The second major premise underlying the colorblind ideology is that making racial categorization explicit tends to *create* negative racial outcomes. There are many different sub-rationales that correspond with this premise. One is that discussions of race tend to implicate Whites, thereby creating guilt and resentment. Another assumption is that acknowledging racial gaps tends to stigmatize minorities, and lends to a victim-mentality. Finally, there is the idea that discussions of race foster racial categorization, which inevitably leads to stereotyping and prejudice. The former two rationales are plainly important, and the final portion of this brief will discuss possible strategies for avoiding these potential pitfalls in discussions of race. However, the idea that racial categorization, stereotyping, and prejudice are inextricably linked is not supported by empirical research.

Efforts to minimize attention to race do not consistently reduce prejudice or discrimination. If anything, work directly comparing colorblind person perception with color-conscious strategies (e.g., multiculturalism) has generally demonstrated that colorblindness is *more* likely to be associated with stereotyping and discrimination (e.g., Correll et al., 2008; Ryan et al., 2007; Wolsko et al., 2000), as well as perceptions of interethnic dissimilarity (Vorauer & Sasaki, 2010). Furthermore, it is now well-established that racial categorization typically occurs automatically and cannot be avoided (Bargh, 1999; Park & Judd, 2005). Finally, not only are we insistently color-conscious with respect to others, but the self-esteem benefits we derive from our racial group memberships mean that we are equally color-conscious with respect to our own social identities (Hewstone, 1996). There is even some evidence that maintaining an awareness of racial categorization can play an important role in contact-induced prejudice reduction (salient categorization model). Otherwise, successful contact is likely to be perceived as a single positive interaction with a unique individual, thereby limiting generalization of positive affect to the larger outgroup.

Concerning organizational policies, studies in the domains of business (e.g., Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008), education (e.g., Schofield, 1986; Lewis, 2001; Tarca, 2005), legal justice (e.g., Schlesinger, 2011), and social services (Donnelly, Cook, van Ausdale, & Foley, 2005) demonstrate that when colorblindness becomes a formal or informal policy at a specific organization, the implications appear to be primarily negative for minorities. These studies have shown that colorblind policies prevent organizations from fully capitalizing on the potential of social diversity, obscure important category-based differences and challenges, and, thereby, foster stereotypical explanations for the struggles of minorities. Furthermore, Plaut, Thomas, and Goren (2009) found that colorblind policies fostered among minorities greater perceptions of organizational racial bias and less psychological engagement in work.

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Finally, at the level of society, racial colorblindness encourages ignorance of interracial disparities (e.g., Carr, 1997; Hacker, 2003; Jones, 1997; Plaut, 2010). An extreme form of racial colorblindness would prohibit the race-labeling of incarceration rates, unemployment gaps, and so on, rendering corresponding racial-gaps invisible. Furthermore, more acutely underrepresented minorities, such as Native Americans, are rendered largely invisible in a colorblind society (Fryberg & Stephens, 2010). Finally, racial colorblindness has been used as a legal justification for dismantling race-conscious policies such as race-based affirmative action (Lopez, 2010), and has been shown to predict opposition to affirmative action among a nationally representative sample of adults (Mazzocco et al., 2012).

In summary, the premise that racial colorblindness is a practically beneficial policy appears to be almost wholly inconsistent with available evidence.

Racial Colorblindness: A Closer Look

The popularity of racial colorblindness among Whites suggests that it is a flexible concept that can be adapted to fit the needs of different factions within society. Consistent with this perspective, Knowles, Lowery, Hogan and Chow (2009) proposed that support for racial colorblindness among Whites may be based either upon distributive justice concerns (a desire that resources and opportunities are balanced proportionately among the races), or upon concerns with procedural justice (making sure that race does not affect resource or opportunity allocations). The former concern is aimed at preventing harm to minorities based on racial discrimination. The latter concern is more likely aimed at protecting White dominance by justifying opposition to programs such as affirmative action. Across a series of studies, Knowles and colleagues demonstrated that perceptions of racial threat and endorsement of social hierarchies both predicted support for an ingroup-serving variety of colorblindness.

In a similar vein, Mazzocco et al. (2012) proposed that high prejudice Whites are primarily concerned with defending their own ingroup against perceived threats from racial outgroups. As such, racial colorblindness provides a publicly defensible justification for preexisting opposition to programs such as affirmative action. Low prejudice Whites, in contrast, were posited to focus more on balancing the interests of the racial ingroup with those of racial outgroups. The results of three studies confirmed these propositions. It should be noted, however, that both high and low prejudiced individuals who endorsed racial colorblindness tended to oppose affirmative action. This finding is consistent with the work of Vorauer and Sasaki (2010), who demonstrated that the harmful effects of a racial colorblindness frame on intergroup attitudes and beliefs did not depend upon level of prejudice.

I am presently working on the validation of a more complete model of racial colorblindness that posits four primary variants of racial colorblindness based on (a) level of awareness of racial gaps and (b) level of anti-minority (or pro-ingroup) racial bias (Mazzocco, in preparation; see **TABLE 1**). To briefly summarize this model, among those who believe that racial gaps are trivial or nonexistent, the nature of colorblindness is predicted to vary based on level of anti-minority prejudice. The higher prejudice variety is termed *protectionist* colorblindness due to the emphasis on protecting the interests of Whites and, perhaps, to defend against appeals to White guilt or responsibility for past injustices. The lower prejudice variety is termed *egalitarian* colorblindness based on the desire to defend minorities against the negative effects of racial categorization. Among those generally aware of the true nature of interracial disparities (and corresponding White privilege), there are also posited to be two forms of colorblindness based on level of prejudice. The high prejudice variety is termed *antagonistic* colorblindness due to the interest in maintaining or increasing White social dominance. The low prejudice variety is termed *visionary* colorblindness due to the desire to achieve a colorblind society in the future, combined with the realization that society is not yet truly equal. **TABLE 1** presents a variety of underlying motivations and functions of racial colorblindness as they relate to this model.

One implication of this model is that the call for racial colorblindness unites individuals with very different beliefs and motivations under the same rally cry, lending a perception of overwhelming majority support for colorblind ideals.

Recommendations

The colorblind ideology… prohibits such conversations [concerning the nature of race in America] and, as such, becomes a powerful mechanism in the continuation of racial disparity.

American society is still beset by troubling and extreme racial gaps. Available evidence suggest that many important gaps are actually increasing, as opposed to narrowing. Furthermore, it is possible to identify several exacerbating mechanisms, such as structural and implicit racism, which are unlikely to recede anytime soon. It would, thus, appear to be imperative to engage in frank dialogues about the nature of race in America. The colorblind ideology, however, prohibits such conversations and, as such, becomes a powerful mechanism in the continuation of racial disparity. Researchers and racial justice advocates have a pressing need to frame discussions about race in such a way as to avoid such resistance. Doing so requires understanding the nature of such resistance, and it is hoped that the preceding review has shed some light onto the motivations and beliefs that underlie racial colorblindness. In this final section, I examine some additional considerations relevant to the goal of encouraging constructive discussion of race-related topics.

It should first be noted that of the four varieties of racial colorblindness described previously (see **TABLE 1**), little traction is likely to be made with the *antagonistic* and *protectionistic* varieties, which are rooted in large part in racial antipathy. In such cases, racial colorblindness can be thought of as a utilitarian ideology that allows the holder to accomplish a related goal. Were racial colorblindness to be invalidated, it is likely that some new form of subtle anti-minority or pro-White ideology would take its place. Of the remaining two varieties, the *egalitarian* version would appear to provide the greatest opportunity for change.

Among this group, it is first necessary to counter the two primary assumptions underlying support for racial colorblindness: the perception that racial gaps are minimal or receding on their own, and the belief that racial colorblindness leads to better social outcomes than color-consciousness. Regarding the former notion, we can begin with the notion that education regarding racial gap statistics *must* be accompanied by corresponding discussions involving opportunity gaps between Whites and minorities. These discussions can convey the nature of ongoing prejudice and discrimination, both explicit and implicit, and structural racism. However, discussion of these factors can create feelings of guilt among Whites that, in many cases, may manifest as frustration or resentment. One potential way to avoid such negative reactions is to engage Whites in experiences that elicit perspective-taking and empathy.

In this regard, media depictions can be extremely effective. Research in my own lab has demonstrated that representing such arguments in story-based narratives tends to increase empathy and can create attitudinal yielding on controversial topics such as race-based affirmative action (Mazzocco, Green, Sasota, & Jones, 2010). Narratives encourage a shifting of focus from individual concerns to those of the protagonists. In this way, it may also be possible to reduce the impact of self- or ingroup-based concerns, such as ingroup pride or esteem, which may also tend to create resistance to belief change. Abundant research has also shown that when perceivers shift into narrative processing mode, they are less likely to engage in normal argumentative processes (Dal Cin, Zanna, & Fong, 2004). Finally, narratives are well-suited to targeting emotions, as opposed to mere cognitive beliefs (Mazzocco et al., 2010), and this property is likely to be of particular importance in a domain (i.e., racial attitudes) in which emotions play such a central role.

Table 1
A Functional Framework of Racial Colorblindness

	ANTAGONISTIC	PROTECTIONISTIC	EGALITARIAN	VISIONARY
FUNCTIONS ON A SOCIETAL LEVEL				
Promote racial equality/harmony			●	●
Prevent discrimination against minorities			●	●
Prevent discrimination against Whites	●	●		
Preserve racial inequality	●			
FUNCTIONS ON AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL				
Avoid guilt based on race		●	●	
Avoid discomfort (conversations, etc.)	●	●	●	
Maintain favorable ingroup attributions		●	●	
Accuracy in social judgments			●	●
Avoid being labeled a racist	●	●	●	

See page 5 for a brief description of the four varieties of racial colorblindness—*Antagonistic*, *Protectionistic*, *Egalitarian*, and *Visionary*.

The second premise about racial dialogues to be addressed in the framing of communications is the idea that color-conscious strategies are practically inferior to racial colorblindness. The review of relevant research above suggests that this premise is just plain wrong. True racial colorblindness is not only impossible at the level of basic person-perception, it additionally tends to backfire in terms of stereotyping and prejudice. In this vein, multicultural strategies, in which both individuality and social categories are recognized, appear to be far superior (Plaut, 2010). Correspondingly, at the level of institutions and society, racial colorblindness tends to have primarily negative effects on racial minorities, and society as a whole. To counter the proposition that racial colorblindness is socially beneficial, it is useful to note that ignoring a problem for which the primary mechanisms (e.g., structural racism, implicit racism) are still operating can only lead to maintenance or exacerbation. In addition, the idea that discussions of race stigmatize minorities suggests by extension the victims of a crime would be stigmatized by a trial and remuneration. The focus must be on righting wrongs and moving forward, and in this respect, strategic and tactful dialogues are absolutely essential.

Conclusion

Although society has made progress in terms of racial equality, we still have a long way to go. Productive racial dialogues will play an important role in moving towards this desired future state. Such dialogues are likely to meet with resistance in the name of racial colorblindness, and so it is imperative to understand the nature of this increasingly popular ideology. Future research is required to more fully understand the colorblind ideology as well as effective countermeasures, but it is hoped that the present work can provide a partial roadmap to navigating racial dialogues in the present-day colorblind landscape.

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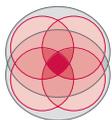
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