COLOR-BLIND RACIAL IDEOLOGY

Over the past 2 decades scholars and popular authors have written about racial color-blindness as a way to characterize racial beliefs in the post–civil rights era. At its core, *racial color-blindness* refers to the belief that racism is a thing of the past and that race no longer plays a role in understanding people's lived experience. Conceptually, racial color-blindness has its roots in the law field and traditionally has been applied mainly to the Constitution. More recently, scholars have redefined the term to better capture the new social relations within the current racial climate. As early as 1997, the field of psychology questioned the underlying assumption that ignoring race and color was a desirous and appropriate approach to interracial interactions. In a pamphlet on color-blind racial attitudes, the American Psychological Association (APA) concluded that "research conducted for more than two decades strongly supports the view that we cannot be,

nor should we become, color-blind" (p. 3). The APA further provided a critique of the color-blind perspective, arguing that a color-blind approach "ignores research showing that, even among well-intentioned people, skin color . . . figures prominently in everyday attitudes and behavior" (p. 2). The APA thus argued that to get beyond racism it is essential to take into account differences between the lived experiences of people.

Defining Racial Color-Blind Ideology

There are a number of complementary but competing definitions of *racial color-blindness.* Couching racial color-blindness as an expression of modern-day racism, sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva identified four frames or types: *abstract liberalism* (i.e., emphasizing political liberalism and the availability of equal opportunities to everyone, regardless of race, and the belief that political/economic interventions only serve to create a schism between racial groups); *naturalism* (i.e., interpreting racial clustering as a natural and preferred occurrence); *cultural* (i.e., using essentialist arguments to explain racial disparities, thus rooting racial differences in cultural practices); and *minimization* of racism in today's society. Ruth Frankenberg, also a sociologist, viewed racial color-blindness as a perspective consisting of two types: *color-evasion* (i.e., placing an emphasis on racial sameness to the detriment of seeing or acknowledging differences in experiences and political realities) and *power-evasion* (i.e., the belief that resources are fairly distributed to everyone and success is attributed to individual effort).

In the *Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists,* authored by the APA, the interpersonal aspects of racial color-blindness are emphasized. Based on this perspective potential racial differences are minimized in favor of universal or human experiences. There is a great deal of commonality across cultures; however, the color-blind perspective dismisses potential differences based on racial group membership and downplays how these differences may shape human experiences. This limited awareness of the manifestation of race and racism in society is the foundation for most conceptualizations of racial color-blindness. Regardless of the definition, racial color-blindness is also thought to help justify existing racial practices or policies that ultimately create and support existing racial inequalities.

Consistent with these articulations, researchers argue that racial color-blindness reflects a broader ideological stance. Racial ideology is complex, but essentially it can be conceptualized as a global term referring to the dominant views about race within a hierarchical society. Ideology in this regard consists of a shared worldview about race that helps to justify and legitimize the current racial status quo; it accounts for individual beliefs and dominant societal racial beliefs or ideas that are commonly understood and transmitted through a variety of civil society and structural mechanisms. From this perspective racial color-blind ideology is a set of commonly held beliefs that minimize and distort the existence of institutional racism. This perspective is most consistent with the minimization type of color-blind racism identified by Bonilla-Silva and the power-evasion type proffered by Frankenberg.

Recently, scholars have challenged the assumption of the emergence of a new racism. Based on the review of the interdisciplinary literature in the United States and in other English-speaking countries, Colin Wayne Leach concluded that old-fashioned racism or the endorsement of racial inferiority/superiority ideology and actions have not been supplanted by more covert forms of racial expressions. Although he did not name racial color-blindness in his critique, Leach raised questions about whether or not a shift has occurred in the manifestation of racism since the passage of civil rights laws.

In sum, racial color-blindness is premised on the persistence of racism as manifested in contemporary racial disparities across a range of indexes, including housing, health, and employment. The complex set of beliefs used to restrict awareness of the persistence of racism is part of a larger ideological stance that serves to legitimize and further perpetuate racial inequalities. There is some debate about whether racial color-blindness is a new phenomenon or whether it reflects a dimension of racism that, until relatively recently, has received attention in the social science literature.

Measuring Racial Color-Blindness

Leslie Carr, one of the first social scientists to quantitatively examine racial color-blindness, assessed the concept with one item: "Are you color-blind when it comes to race?" He identified two types of racial color-blindness among White college students: (1) liberal (i.e., those who identified themselves as color-blind but supported affirmative action policies) and

(2) conservative (i.e., those who identified themselves as color-blind and opposed affirmative action policies), both of which were significantly related to increased racial prejudice. Later studies, however, refute the utility of using one item to capture the complexities of color-blind racial ideology.

Some researchers have created a set of survey questions to assess concepts consistent with racial color-blindness but have not explicitly adopted a color-blind racial ideology framework. For example, Samuel Sommers and Michael Norton collected statements reflective of lay theories of racism. Factor analysis of endorsement of these statements suggested a three-factor solution; one factor represented denial of the problem of racism. In their study, participants who held greater modern racism beliefs were less likely to view denial of the problem statements (e.g., "Believes that prejudice against Blacks is no longer a problem) as an expression of racism.

The Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS), developed by Helen Neville and her colleagues, is among the first scales to assess the minimization and distortion of institutional racism most consistent with the ideological view. Sample items on the scale include "Everyone who works hard, no matter what race they are, has an equal chance to become rich" and "Racism may have been a problem in the past, but it is not an important problem today." Emerging data on the CoBRAS have suggested an association between color-blind racial ideology and theoretically relevant constructs, including increased racial and gender intolerance, anti–affirmative action beliefs, and belief in a just world among Whites and internalized racism among racial and ethnic minorities.

Racial Color-Blind Ideology in Counseling

When counselors ignore the influence of race and racism, they may minimize the potential influence of race and ethnocultural factors on the therapeutic process inadvertently. This, in turn, may serve to isolate racial minorities in seeking or remaining in counseling services. Several studies have assessed the association between racial color-blindness and the therapeutic process, although not always explicitly using this terminology. Findings suggest that among White psychologists and trainees, minimization of institutional racism is related to decreased multicultural competencies, including the ability to contextualize clients' presenting concerns and express client empathy. In fact, racial color-blindness has been found to be related to both observed and self-reported multicultural counseling competencies over and beyond that accounted for by multicultural coursework and racial group membership.

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See also Affirmative Action (v3); Assimilation (v3); Diversity (v3); Multicultural Counseling Competence (v3); Political Correctness (v3); Prejudice (v3); Racial Identity (v3); Racism (v3); Reversed Racism (v3); Worldview (v3)

Further Readings

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