



From ignorance to intolerance: Perceived intentionality of racial discrimination shapes preferences for colorblindness versus multiculturalism



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ABSTRACT

Colorblindness and multiculturalism offer divergent prescriptions for reducing racial tensions. Colorblindness encourages looking beyond racial differences, whereas multiculturalism encourages recognizing them. We introduce a new construct, perceived intentionality of racial discrimination (PIRD)—individuals' beliefs about how intentional discrimination is—to help explain when and why colorblindness versus multiculturalism will be preferred, and potentially more effective, for improving race relations. We first establish the distinctiveness of the PIRD construct and assess its stability over time and across intergroup contexts (Studies 1–2). We then observe that greater PIRD predicts beliefs that colorblindness versus multiculturalism will improve race relations (Studies 2–5), in part because unintentional (versus intentional) discrimination is perceived to stem from ignorance and misunderstanding versus knowingly treating racial groups unequally (Studies 4, 5b). Evidence also suggests that PIRD may shape the actual merits of colorblindness and multiculturalism for improving race relations via encouraging donations (Study 6), positive interracial interaction intentions (Study 7), and comfort with discussing race following the widely-publicized shooting of a Black teen (Study 8). Taken together, our empirical findings demonstrate the usefulness of PIRD for understanding, predicting, and influencing individuals' preferences for colorblindness versus multiculturalism.

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1. Introduction

A series of widely-publicized violent transgressions against African Americans in the U.S. has once more thrust race to the fore of public discourse. Erstwhile claims of a post-racial era are belied by evidence that racial minorities generally remain disadvantaged in domains ranging from housing and employment to pay and incarceration rates (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014, 2015; NAACP, 2015; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2012). Indeed, there is growing consensus among Americans that discrimination is a significant problem (Pew Research Center, 2015). While it is not yet clear how to improve race relations, strategies boil down to fundamental questions of whether we should recognize or look beyond racial differences.

The tension between these ideological approaches has been well-documented in research comparing *multiculturalism*—a pluralistic approach associated with acknowledging and appreciating racial group membership and distinctions (Berry, 1984; Takaki, 1993)—with

colorblindness—an approach associated with downplaying and looking beyond such differences in lieu of a focus on individuals and their commonalities (Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers, 2012; Plaut, 2002; Schofield, 1986). Efforts to pinpoint the “best” intergroup relations approach suggest more support for multiculturalism than colorblindness, but this finding has increasingly been called into question (Apfelbaum, Stephens, & Reagans, 2012; Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Morrison, Plaut, & Ybarra, 2010; Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008; Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000). Mixed results dispute the existence of a one-size-fits-all approach to improving race relations, and highlight the need for a more nuanced framework. To date, however, little is known about what factors may moderate the effectiveness of these approaches for improving intergroup relations.

Mindful that debate about discrimination may now revolve less around whether it exists, and more around why, and in what form, it exists, we introduce one construct that may provide insight into whether advocating for colorblindness or multiculturalism is preferable. Specifically, we introduce *perceived intentionality of racial discrimination* (PIRD) as individuals' belief about the motives underlying racial discrimination, from intentional and deliberate to unintentional and

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accidental. We propose that PIRD colors the inferences people make regarding why discrimination occurs—whether it stems from racial intolerance or from ignorance regarding the potential for racial differences to contribute to unequal treatment—and consequently, whether colorblindness or multiculturalism is best-suited to improve race relations.

2. Race relations and discriminatory intent

Perceptions of intentionality develop in infancy (Carpenter, Akhtar, & Tomasello, 1998) and represent one of the quickest and most basic social inferences people make (Malle & Holbrook, 2012). The perceived intentionality of actions is often highly consequential as well, shaping perceptions of morality (Greene et al., 2009), harm (Ames & Fiske, 2013, 2015), and responsibility (Malle, 2004). Even for identical actions, intent heightens perceptions of harm and accountability (Ames & Fiske, 2015). In the legal system, for instance, perceptions of an individual's intent underlie critical distinctions between crimes (e.g., murder versus manslaughter), and consequently, the appropriate punishment. Here, we suggest that just as perceptions of intent regarding a criminal act influences judgments about appropriate recourse, so too can PIRD influence beliefs about how to improve race relations.

PIRD does not represent the amount of racial bias an individual harbors (McConahay, 1983; Nosek, 2007; Sears, 1988), but rather an individual's belief about the motives underlying racial discrimination in a particular context, or in society, more generally. This construct broadly overlaps with other beliefs tapping individuals' understanding of inequality—for instance, whether societal outcomes are just (Lerner, 1980; Tyler, 2006), meritocratic (Kluegel & Smith, 1986), and driven by hard work (Weber, 2002). However, rather than assessing the perceived extent of discrimination in society, PIRD reflects perceptions of whether racial discrimination, all else equal, is intentional versus inadvertent. This theoretical distinction is important because whereas concerns about the prevalence of discrimination may prompt more support for any intergroup relations approach, perceptions of the intentionality of discrimination may influence people's qualitative understanding of why and how discrimination occurs, and consequently, which type of approach they believe will improve race relations.

We suggest that when individuals perceive racial discrimination in society to be relatively intentional, they believe that discrimination stems from knowingly and willfully treating groups unequally versus from ignorance and misunderstanding regarding unequal treatment between groups. From this view, the perceived source of discrimination is racial antipathy and conflict in which individuals and institutions, when left to their own devices, will consciously use racial differences as a basis for unequal judgment, treatment, and access to resources. Therefore, when PIRD is high, we expect that people will see the prescriptive value in colorblindness (versus multiculturalism) for improving race relations. We expect this to be the case because colorblindness decreases the salience of racial group membership and differences (Brewer & Miller, 1984), and increases self-other overlap (Inzlicht, Gutsell, & Legault, 2012), often by promoting a common ground and basis of shared values (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Though racial categorization does not cause discrimination (see Park & Judd, 2005 for a review), it is a necessary precursor to such acts, and thus we expect that people will see the value in blurring and diluting the very distinctions that are the basis for intentional acts of discrimination. Moreover, some evidence indicates that such lay beliefs may be accurate: past work has found colorblindness to be relatively beneficial in high-conflict intergroup settings (Correll, Park, & Smith, 2008; Thomas & Plaut, 2008). By contrast, because multiculturalism increases the salience of racial group membership and differences—even if only with respect to their importance and positive qualities—promoting it when PIRD is high may not only be ineffective, but equate to “pouring gasoline on the fire.” As Park and Judd (2005) caution and question:

...there is a danger in pushing for the multicultural ideology because it too has a negative version...we would not want to foster an approach that enables those with a more malicious agenda to use group differences as a means for justifying inequitable treatment of sectors of the population...Is it the case that multiculturalism might work well during times of relative harmony and abundant resources, but when we enter periods of conflict and competition over scarce resources, because the group boundaries are firmly in place, conflict will all the more readily occur along group lines? (p. 125)

On the other hand, when PIRD is low, we expect that people will more strongly believe that discrimination stems from ignorance and misunderstanding regarding unequal treatment between groups. From this view, racial discrimination emerges because individuals and institutions are not mindful of the importance of racial differences and how they can contribute to unequal judgment, treatment, and access to resources (e.g., unconscious biases or subtle forms of institutional disadvantage; Light, Roscigno, & Kalev, 2011). Therefore, when PIRD is low, we expect that people will see the prescriptive value in multiculturalism (versus colorblindness) for improving race relations. We expect this to be the case because, unlike colorblindness, multicultural messages implicitly presume that individuals and institutions want to be egalitarian—that they are not intentionally discriminating, and that they would act to rectify their biases if made aware of them. Accordingly, multiculturalism is likely to be preferred for its focus on educating actors regarding the benefits of diversity and the ways in which institutional processes can disproportionately impact members of different racial groups. Some evidence indicates that such beliefs may be accurate as well: multiculturalism has been shown to attenuate implicit racial biases (Lai et al., 2014; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Wolsko et al., 2000), increase perspective taking (Todd, Hanko, Galinsky, & Mussweiler, 2010), and sharpen detection of ambiguous forms of discrimination (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, & Ambady, 2010)—outcomes that would be expected to decrease the likelihood that inequalities are perpetuated or legitimized (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000). By contrast, when PIRD is low, we expect colorblindness to be viewed as a less effective tool for improving race relations. We expect this to be the case because colorblindness does not celebrate, discuss, much less acknowledge, racial distinctions, and thus is not well-suited to help individuals and institutions appreciate their merits and potential disparate impacts.

3. Study 1

Study 1 had two primary goals. The first goal was to establish the reliability and discriminant validity of PIRD by examining whether it is conceptually distinct from racial prejudice and other measures of ideological worldviews in the intergroup relations literature (i.e., implicit theories of prejudice, social dominance orientation, and right-wing authoritarianism). The second goal was to assess the stability and convergent validity of PIRD. To do so, we examined the stability of PIRD over time (i.e., collecting data from the same participants separated by two weeks) and the equivalence of PIRD to versions of the PIRD tailored to specific racially discriminatory contexts (i.e., policing and the workplace) and to the perceived intentionality of other forms of discrimination (i.e., gender discrimination and age discrimination).

We expect PIRD to show relatively strong associations with related inferences of the intentionality of other forms of discrimination (e.g., based on gender and age), but to be empirically distinct from other ideological intergroup beliefs. The PIRD captures individuals' descriptive beliefs about why there is racial inequality whereas related constructs in the intergroup literature tend to focus on prescriptive preferences for unequal social arrangements and policies (e.g., social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism: Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994; Zakrisson, 2005). Because PIRD reflects descriptive beliefs about other people, and is influenced by a multitude of social perception

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