

# Predicting Whether Multiculturalism Positively or Negatively Influences White Americans' Intergroup Attitudes: The Role of Ethnic Identification

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## Abstract

Multiculturalism, or the belief that racial and ethnic differences should be acknowledged and appreciated, has been met with both positive reactions (e.g., decreased prejudice) and negative reactions (e.g., perceptions of threat) from dominant group members. The present research proposes that multiculturalism can either positively or negatively influence White Americans' intergroup attitudes depending on their degree of ethnic identification. In Studies 1 and 2, White Americans primed with multiculturalism exhibited higher social dominance orientation (Study 1) and greater prejudice (Study 2), especially when they identified strongly with their ethnicity. In Study 3, perceptions of threat to group values were found to mediate the relation between multiculturalism, ethnic identification, and prejudice among White Americans. The results are discussed in terms of their implications for threat perceptions, ethnic identification, and conceptions of diversity.

## Keywords

multiculturalism, ethnic identity, intergroup attitudes, diversity, threat

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American society has grown increasingly diverse throughout the past few decades. Racial and ethnic minorities now comprise more than half of the total population in California, Hawaii, New Mexico, and Texas (Burnstein, 2005). By some accounts, individuals of non-White descent will become the “new majority” in the United States between 2040 and 2050 (Ortman & Guarneri, 2009). Perhaps in response to these demographic changes, as well as concomitant cultural, legal, political, and economic pressures, individuals and institutions have increasingly embraced multiculturalism as a way to address the challenges of a diverse society. In fact, multiculturalism, which social scientists have described as a pluralistic ideology that emphasizes acknowledging and celebrating ethnic differences (Berry, 1984; Takaki, 1993), has been widely promoted as a means of increasing harmony and equality between groups (Fowers & Richardson, 1996). Indeed, a growing number of studies in social psychology find positive implications of multiculturalism for intergroup relations (Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007; Verkuyten, 2005; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000).

Notably, however, multicultural ideologies may also create a backlash among nonminorities (i.e., White Americans)

in the form of *increased* intergroup biases (Thomas & Plaut, 2008). Under some conditions (e.g., high-conflict situations), encouraging people to recognize and appreciate differences may produce reactions opposite to those originally intended (Correll, Park, & Smith, 2008). Given that White Americans tend to hold a disproportionate amount of power in society (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), negative responses to multiculturalism are likely to have large repercussions for diversity efforts and interethnic relations. It is therefore important to understand the sources of such backlash and the forms it may take. In particular, we propose that highly identified (but not less identified) White Americans will perceive multiculturalism as a threat to their group's core values and that

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they may therefore react to this threat by exhibiting biases against outgroups.

### Multiculturalism and Intergroup Relations

The findings in social psychology are mixed as to whether multicultural ideologies foster more or less bias against ethnic minority groups. Some scholars have argued that living in a culturally diverse society, and hence being exposed to racial and ethnic differences on a regular basis, causes dominant group members to develop more inclusive attitudes over time (Berry & Kalin, 1995; Berry, Kalin, & Taylor, 1977). Thus, thinking about interethnic differences may increase White Americans' commitment to tolerance and group-based equality. In support of this perspective, recent research has demonstrated that dominant group members who endorse multicultural statements (e.g., "When interacting with a member of an ethnic group that is different from your own, it is very important to take into account the history and cultural traditions of that person's ethnic group") tend to evaluate racial and ethnic minorities more positively (Verkuyten, 2005; Wolsko, Park, & Judd, 2006). Furthermore, when dominant group members are experimentally primed with multiculturalism, they exhibit lower levels of implicit and explicit prejudice against outgroups (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Verkuyten, 2005; see also Wolsko et al., 2000).

Other research and theorizing, however, suggests that dominant group members may see racial and ethnic differences as threatening to their ingroup. Because multiculturalism focuses on recognizing and appreciating different identities, as opposed to unifying these identities into a single "American" category (which often emphasizes White American cultural traditions; see Bonilla-Silva, 2003), it requires dominant group members to relinquish some of their core values (Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008; Wolsko et al., 2006). White Americans may therefore demonstrate resistance to multiculturalism because they believe that it jeopardizes the values of the ingroup—in other words, because it poses a symbolic threat (see Stephan, Ybarra, & Morrison, 2009). Consistent with this idea, when asked to generate reasons that others might oppose multiculturalism, dominant group members have reported that it could be considered a source of threat or anxiety (Ginges & Cairns, 2000; Verkuyten, 2004). Although to our knowledge only one study has suggested that multiculturalism can increase intergroup biases such as prejudice (Correll et al., 2008), the detrimental effects of threats to the ingroup on these measures are well documented (Stephan et al., 2002; Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999; Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, Schwarzwald, & Tur-Kaspa, 1998; for reviews, see Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006; Ybarra & Stephan, 1994).

Conversely, the belief that ethnic group categories should be ignored and that people should instead be judged as individuals, which theorists and researchers refer to as *colorblindness*

(Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000; Schofield, 2001), may be perceived by White Americans as relatively nonthreatening to their ingroup's values. Supporting this point, White Americans are generally less favorable toward multiculturalism and more favorable toward colorblindness than are minorities (Plaut, 2002; Ryan et al., 2007; Wolsko et al., 2006), perhaps in part because colorblindness is more consistent with the status quo. That is, by not acknowledging the differences between ethnic groups and ostensibly treating everyone equally, colorblind ideologies may help White Americans maintain their cultural values (Knowles, Lowery, Hogan, & Chow, 2009; Neville et al., 2000; Saguy et al., 2008).

Given White Americans' potential resistance to multicultural ideologies, it is possible that at least under some circumstances, being reminded of racial and ethnic differences could exacerbate biases against outgroups. In addition to prejudice and discrimination (Riek et al., 2006), one marker of intergroup bias that may be particularly sensitive to the threat of multicultural ideology is social dominance orientation (SDO), defined as an individual's desire to maintain hierarchical relations between groups (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). People high in SDO tend to exhibit more prejudice against ethnic minorities (e.g., Duckitt, Wagner, DuPlessis, & Birum, 2002; Guimond, Dambrun, Michinov, & Duarte, 2003), less support for policies designed to help disadvantaged group members (e.g., affirmative action; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), and greater endorsement of colorblind attitudes (e.g., Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008) than do people low in SDO, particularly if they are members of a dominant group such as White Americans (Schmitt, Branscombe, & Kappen, 2003). Most relevant to the present research, the SDO scores of dominant group members have been shown to increase as a function of perceived realistic threats to the ingroup's status (Morrison, Fast, & Ybarra, 2009; Morrison & Ybarra, 2008) or symbolic threats to the ingroup's values (Morrison & Ybarra, 2009). Thus, White Americans who believe that the acknowledgment of racial and ethnic differences threatens their group should demonstrate higher SDO as well as greater prejudice when multiculturalism is brought to mind.

### The Effects of Ethnic Identification

Despite the emerging body of research on dominant group members' responses to multiculturalism, it remains unclear when multicultural ideologies will and will not negatively influence intergroup attitudes. The notion that such ideologies pose a potential symbolic threat to dominant groups (e.g., Ginges & Cairns, 2000) suggests that one way to resolve this uncertainty is by examining ethnic identification or the importance of one's ethnicity to the self-concept (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). Although social identity theory postulates that people often

define themselves in terms of their group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), there exists considerable individual-level variation in the extent to which membership in a particular group is central to one's sense of self. Ethnic identification has primarily been studied in minority group samples up to this point (e.g., Sellers et al., 1997). Some recent work, however, has demonstrated that White Americans can also exhibit either high or low levels of identification with their ethnicity (e.g., Knowles & Peng, 2005; Lowery, Unzueta, Knowles, & Goff, 2006).

White American identification is associated with perceived overlap between self-descriptive traits and traits used to describe ingroup members, amount of contact with outgroups (i.e., residency in ethnically diverse geographic areas), and feelings of guilt after reading about ingroup transgressions. Additionally, it is only weakly correlated with implicit (e.g., Implicit Association Test) and self-reported (e.g., modern racism) measures of ingroup bias (Knowles & Peng, 2005). Thus, identification with White Americans appears to reflect the centrality of the ingroup to the self rather than prejudice against non-White groups.

Because highly identified group members view their group as a reflection of the self (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), they are motivated to think and behave in the ingroup's best interests during times of threat (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). For example, highly identified group members are more likely than less identified members to respond to intergroup threats with prejudice and discrimination, even though the former may normally be no more prejudiced than the latter (Ellemers et al., 2002; Riek et al., 2006). In addition, highly identified White Americans have more negative attitudes toward affirmative action when it is described as harming their group than as helping minorities (Lowery et al., 2006). Furthermore, highly identified group members tend to respond with increases in SDO when their group's power and status (Morrison et al., 2009; Morrison & Ybarra, 2008) or core values (Morrison & Ybarra, 2009) are threatened. The reason for this response is that these members are more concerned than their less identified counterparts about protecting the ingroup's social identity, especially if the group is dominant to begin with (Morrison et al., 2009).

Although the threats examined in the preceding research did not involve multiculturalism, it is conceivable that multicultural ideologies produce similar effects on highly identified White Americans' prejudice and SDO. Some existing work has documented a relation between ethnic identification and responses to diversity and as such provides preliminary but inconclusive evidence that threat may be involved. For instance, among dominant group members, high ethnic identification predicts less support for minority rights (Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2006) and more resistance to multiculturalism (Verkuyten, 2005). One possible reason, which awaits formal investigation, is that these individuals consider multiculturalism a symbolic threat to their group's

fundamental values and are motivated to respond to this threat by asserting their dominant position in society (see Verkuyten, 2006). It is also important to note that Verkuyten's research was conducted with dominant group members in the Netherlands (i.e., Dutch individuals), so whether similar processes occur among White Americans has yet to be determined.

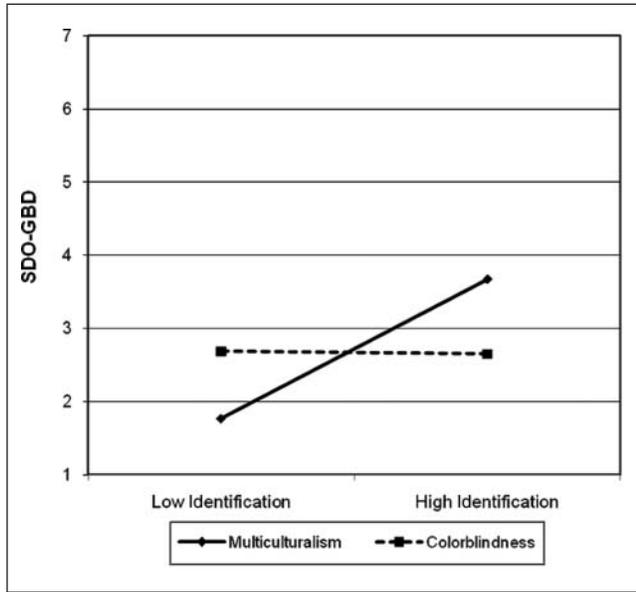
Taken together, these findings suggest that among White Americans who identify strongly with their ethnicity, being primed with multicultural (relative to colorblind) ideologies should lead to increases in intergroup bias. The rationale is that highly identified White Americans should be particularly likely to perceive multiculturalism as a symbolic threat. They should therefore respond to this threat by exhibiting more prejudiced attitudes and behaviors toward outgroups.

## Overview of Studies

The present experiments tested whether highly identified White Americans would exhibit stronger intergroup biases after multiculturalism (vs. colorblindness) was brought to mind. In Study 1, White American participants read a passage about either multiculturalism or colorblindness before completing an SDO measure. We predicted that highly identified White Americans would have higher SDO in the multiculturalism (relative to colorblindness) condition. In Study 2, White American participants were experimentally primed with multiculturalism, colorblindness, or no ideology before completing a prejudice measure. We hypothesized that highly identified White Americans would exhibit greater prejudice in the multiculturalism condition than in the other two conditions. White American participants in Study 3, in addition to being primed with either multiculturalism or colorblindness and completing a behavioral measure of prejudice, indicated the extent to which they perceived the prime as a symbolic threat (i.e., to their group's values). We predicted that the relation between multiculturalism condition and prejudice would be mediated by increased perceptions of symbolic threat among highly identified White Americans.

## Study 1

Participants in Study 1, all White Americans, read a passage about either multiculturalism or colorblindness and then completed an SDO measure. SDO was used as the dependent variable because recent research (e.g., Morrison et al., 2009; Morrison & Ybarra, 2008, 2009) has shown that SDO can increase as a function of perceived threat. Given our assumption that highly identified White Americans would see multiculturalism (but not colorblindness) as potentially threatening, we hypothesized that these individuals should demonstrate heightened SDO scores following a multiculturalism prime.



**Figure 1.** Social dominance orientation (SDO) scores as a function of condition (multiculturalism vs. colorblindness) and ethnic identification ( $\pm 2$  SD), Study 1  
Note: GBD = Group-Based Dominance.

## Method

**Participants.** Eighty-eight White American students at a public Midwestern university (58 women, 28 men, 2 unspecified) participated in a study on “social and political attitudes” in exchange for partial course credit. Participants completed all experimental materials online and were randomly assigned to either the multiculturalism condition ( $n = 50$ ) or the colorblindness condition ( $n = 38$ ).

## Procedure and Materials

**Experimental manipulation.** Participants were first randomly assigned to read a short passage about how either multiculturalism or colorblindness can help reduce interethnic conflict. The passages served as the experimental manipulation and were taken directly from Wolsko et al. (2000). The multiculturalism passage argued that there are substantial differences between racial and ethnic groups in the United States and that these differences should be appreciated. For example:

Different cultural groups bring different perspectives to life, providing a richness in food, dress, music, art, styles of interaction, and problem solving strategies. . . . Recognizing this diversity would help build a sense of harmony and complementarity among the various ethnic groups.

By contrast, the passage in the colorblindness condition argued for the importance of recognizing that there are similarities between racial and ethnic groups. For example,

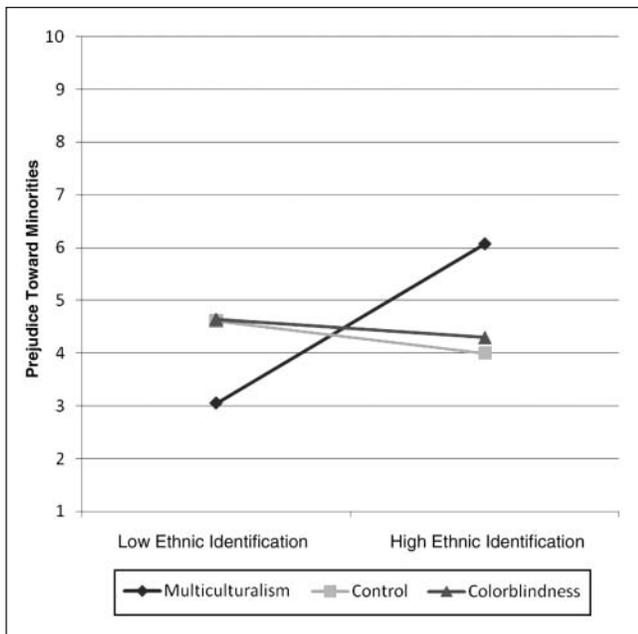
Social scientists note that it is extremely important to heed our creed in the Declaration of Independence that “all men (and women) are created equal.” That is, in order to overcome interethnic conflict and fighting, we must remember that we are all first and foremost human beings, and second, we are all citizens of the United States.

**SDO scale.** Following the experimental manipulation, participants completed the 16-item SDO scale (Pratto et al., 1994). For the purposes of this research, we focus on the eight-item Group-Based Dominance (GBD) subscale of the SDO measure (Jost & Thompson, 2000; see also Freeman, Aquino, & McFerran, 2009). The GBD subscale measures high-status groups’ desire to maintain a dominant position in society (e.g., “Superior groups should dominate inferior groups”), which may be particularly sensitive to the threat of multiculturalism. Previous work has shown that among dominant group members, SDO-GBD is a stronger predictor of ethnocentric attitudes than is the generalized Opposition to Equality (OEQ) subscale (e.g., “Increased social equality would be a good thing,” reverse-scored; Jost & Thompson, 2000; see also Freeman et al., 2009). We therefore focus on the SDO-GBD items for conceptual reasons, although as might be expected, the pattern of results is similar but slightly weaker when SDO-OEQ or the full SDO scale is used as the dependent measure in place of SDO-GBD. Participants’ responses to the SDO-GBD items were averaged to form a composite ( $\alpha = .87$ ;  $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ), with higher scores reflecting more support for group-based dominance.

**Ethnic identification measure.** Participants also completed an ethnic identification measure adapted from Sellers et al. (1997). This measure was originally designed to assess African American identity. However, researchers have since reworded the items so that they can pertain to members of any ethnic group. Example items include: “In general, my racial/ethnic group is an important part of my self-image” and “I feel a strong sense of belonging to people of my racial/ethnic group.” Half of the participants completed this measure at the beginning of the study (i.e., before the experimental manipulation), and the other half completed it at the end (i.e., after the SDO measure).<sup>1</sup> Participants’ responses to the eight items were averaged to create a single index ( $\alpha = .78$ ;  $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = .92$ ). There was a modest, positive correlation between ethnic identification and SDO-GBD ( $r = .21$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

## Results

It was hypothesized that among highly identified (but not less identified) White Americans, the multiculturalism prime would elicit more support for group-based dominance (i.e., higher SDO scores) than the colorblindness prime. To test this hypothesis, participants’ SDO-GBD scores were submitted to a



**Figure 2.** Prejudice as a function of condition (multiculturalism vs. colorblindness vs. control) and ethnic identification ( $\pm 2 SD$ ), Study 2

Condition (0 = *colorblindness*, 1 = *multiculturalism*)  $\times$  Ethnic Identification (continuous variable) regression analysis.

There was a positive, main effect of ethnic (i.e., White American) identification on SDO-GBD ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $t(85) = 1.99$ ,  $p = .05$ ). More important, the predicted Condition  $\times$  Ethnic Identification interaction was significant ( $\beta = .31$ ,  $t(84) = 2.08$ ,  $p < .05$  (see Figure 1). Simple slopes analyses at 2 *SD* above and below the mean ethnic identification score revealed that highly identified White Americans had higher SDO-GBD after being primed with multiculturalism than colorblindness ( $\beta = .46$ ,  $t(84) = 1.96$ ,  $p = .05$ ). In contrast, less identified White Americans tended to have lower SDO-GBD following the multiculturalism prime ( $\beta = -.41$ ,  $t(84) = -1.76$ ,  $p = .08$ ). Additionally, participants who read the multiculturalism passage had higher SDO-GBD the more they identified with their ethnicity ( $\beta = .43$ ,  $t(84) = 2.90$ ,  $p < .01$ , whereas participants who read the colorblindness passage did not demonstrate a significant relation between ethnic identification and SDO-GBD ( $\beta = -.01$ ,  $t(84) < 1$ , *ns*).

## Discussion

The results of Study 1 demonstrated that highly identified White Americans supported group-based dominance more when primed with multiculturalism than colorblindness. In contrast, less identified White Americans were slightly *less* supportive of group-based dominance following a multiculturalism prime. Study 2 sought to increase the generalizability of these results by using a different experimental

manipulation and dependent variable, and by recruiting adult participants instead of college students. Moreover, to provide evidence that the results were due to increases in intergroup bias among participants primed with multiculturalism (vs. decreases in intergroup bias among participants primed with colorblindness), Study 2 included a control condition in which participants were not primed with any diversity ideology.

## Study 2

Depending on condition, White American participants in Study 2 responded to several questionnaire items about multiculturalism, several items about colorblindness, or no items. The content in the different questionnaires served as the experimental manipulation. Next, they completed a measure of prejudice against racial and ethnic minorities. They also completed an ethnic identification scale. We expected highly identified (but not less identified) White Americans to exhibit greater prejudice in the multiculturalism condition than in the other two conditions. Participants in the colorblindness and no-prime conditions were not predicted to differ from each other, as colorblindness is often assumed to be the default mind-set of White Americans and hence should produce results similar to a “pure” control group (see Wolsko et al., 2000).

## Method

**Participants.** Sixty White American individuals (41 women, 19 men; mean age = 43.0,  $SD = 12.3$ ) from all areas of the United States were recruited from several classified ad websites to participate in a study about “social and political attitudes.” The websites allow researchers to post notifications of paid online surveys, and individuals who are interested in participating in these surveys register with the websites to view the notifications.

After logging into the study, participants were randomly assigned to the multiculturalism condition ( $n = 18$ ), the colorblindness condition ( $n = 18$ ), or the no-prime control condition ( $n = 24$ ). All participants were e-mailed a \$5 gift certificate to a major online retailer upon completion of the study.

## Materials and Procedure

**Experimental manipulation.** Participants in the multiculturalism and colorblindness conditions completed an “Opinion Survey” (see Morrison & Ybarra, 2008). The version of the survey that participants received constituted the experimental manipulation; we were not actually interested in how participants responded to the survey items. Participants in the multiculturalism condition indicated their agreement with five statements about racial and ethnic differences, taken from Wolsko et al. (2006). Participants in the colorblindness

condition indicated their agreement with five statements about racial and ethnic similarities. These statements were based on those from Knowles et al. (2009). However, we changed them slightly so that the wording resembled the Wolsko et al. statements as much as possible and focused on how to improve interethnic relations. (See the appendix for a full list of the statements.) Participants in the control condition proceeded directly to the dependent measures without completing an "Opinion Survey."

**Prejudice measure.** Following the experimental manipulation, participants rated their feelings toward several different groups on a scale from 1 (*not at all warm*) to 10 (*extremely warm*). Of particular interest were participants' ratings of Asian Americans, Black Americans, and Latinos. These groups were interspersed with several others unrelated to race and ethnicity (e.g., CEOs, supermodels, college students). Participants' ratings of the three groups were reverse coded so that higher scores reflected greater prejudice against outgroups (i.e., less warmth). They were then averaged to form a prejudice index ( $\alpha = .88$ ;  $M = 4.30$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ). "Feeling thermometers" similar to this have been used to measure prejudice in previous research (Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993; see also Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Wolsko et al., 2006).

**Ethnic identification measure.** Participants also completed the eight-item ethnic identification measure from Study 1 ( $\alpha = .86$ ;  $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ). As in Study 1, half of the participants completed the measure at the beginning of the study, and the other half completed it at the end. The zero-order correlation between ethnic identification and the prejudice measure was not significant ( $r = .13$ ,  $p = .35$ ).

## Results

We predicted that participants in the multiculturalism condition would have higher prejudice scores than those in the colorblindness and control conditions, especially if they identified strongly with their ethnicity. To test this prediction, participants' prejudice scores were submitted to a Condition ( $2 = \text{multiculturalism}$ ,  $-1 = \text{other}$ )  $\times$  Ethnic Identification (centered continuous variable) regression analysis (see Aiken & West, 1991).<sup>2</sup> All main effects were interpreted in the first block, and all two-way interaction effects in the second block, of the analysis. One participant was omitted from the analysis because she did not complete the prejudice measure, leaving 59 individuals in the final sample.

The only significant effect to emerge was the anticipated interaction between condition and ethnic identification ( $\beta = .27$ ),  $t(53) = 1.99$ ,  $p = .05$  (see Figure 2). Consistent with predictions, highly identified White Americans ( $2 SD$  above the mean) exhibited greater prejudice (i.e., less warmth toward minorities) in the multiculturalism condition than in the other two conditions ( $\beta = .59$ ),  $t(53) = 1.94$ ,  $p = .058$ , whereas less identified White Americans ( $2 SD$  below the

mean) tended to exhibit less prejudice (i.e., more warmth toward minorities) in the multiculturalism condition ( $\beta = -.41$ ),  $t(53) = -1.57$ ,  $p = .12$ . Furthermore, higher White American identification was associated with greater prejudice in the multiculturalism condition ( $\beta = .49$ ),  $t(53) = 2.16$ ,  $p < .04$ , but not in the colorblindness condition ( $\beta = -.06$ ),  $t(53) < 1$ , *ns*, or the control condition ( $\beta = -.10$ ),  $t(53) < 1$ , *ns*.

## Discussion

The results of Study 2 confirmed our hypothesis that White Americans, to the extent that they identified with their ethnicity, would respond to multiculturalism with increased prejudice against racial and ethnic minorities. That is, highly identified White Americans who were reminded of racial and ethnic differences exhibited greater prejudice than did those who were reminded of racial and ethnic similarities or those in a control (no-prime) condition. This relation between multiculturalism and prejudice did not appear among less identified White Americans.

One unanswered question from Studies 1 and 2 involves the proposed mechanism for the findings. As noted earlier, dominant group members may resist multicultural ideologies on the grounds that such ideologies pose a symbolic threat to their group's values (Ginges & Cairns, 2000). This could cause highly identified White Americans to demonstrate increases in prejudice and support for group-based dominance, as they did in Studies 1 and 2. However, the idea that perceived symbolic threat is responsible for the relation between multiculturalism, ethnic identification, and ingroup bias has yet to be tested. Testing this idea was, therefore, one goal of Study 3.

Moreover, although the results of Study 2 conceptually replicated those of Study 1, there were some methodological limitations of each study. In both studies, the group identification scale was administered in the same session as the experimental manipulation and dependent measure. The fact that the order of administration did not produce any significant effects in the analyses is reassuring. Nevertheless, it is still possible that the group identification items influenced participants' responses to the prime (if administered at the beginning of the study) or that participants' responses to the group identification items were influenced by the prime (if administered at the end of the study). To safeguard against these possibilities, the group identification measure for Study 3 was administered during a separate experimental session.

Another objective of Study 3 was to ensure that participants were in fact thinking of White Americans as a whole (rather than specific European ethnicities) when completing the identification measure. In Studies 1 and 2 participants were asked to report their ethnicity on a demographic survey, separate from the identification questionnaire. Thus, it is difficult to determine which group(s) they had in mind

during the task. To address this issue, participants in Study 3 marked their ethnicity on a checklist (“White/European American” in each case) immediately before responding to the identification items.

### Study 3

In Study 3, White American participants completed the same experimental manipulation as in Study 2 before completing a measure of willingness to allocate their school’s funds to diversity-related student organizations. This served as a behavioral measure of outgroup prejudice, with lower scores indicating less support for racial and ethnic minority groups. They also answered questions about the extent to which they perceived the experimental manipulation as threatening to White Americans’ power and status (i.e., realistic threat) or to White Americans’ core values (i.e., symbolic threat). We hypothesized that highly identified, but not less identified, White Americans would be less willing to allocate funds to diversity-related organizations—that is, display greater prejudice—after being primed with multiculturalism (vs. colorblindness or no diversity ideology).

Multiculturalism focuses on the appreciation of different cultural identities and values, and it does not explicitly involve other groups gaining power and resources at the expense of White Americans (e.g., Fowers & Richardson, 1996; Takaki, 1993). We therefore expected perceptions of symbolic threat, but not necessarily perceptions of realistic threat, to mediate the relation between multiculturalism condition and allocation decisions for White Americans whose sense of self was tied to their ethnicity. Consistent with this idea, Stephan et al. (2002) found that for both highly identified White Americans and Black Americans, perceptions of symbolic threat from the outgroup predicted greater prejudice.

### Method

**Participants.** One hundred twenty-five White American undergraduates at a public Southeastern university (116 women, 7 men, 2 unspecified) were recruited to participate in an online study in exchange for partial course credit. Each participant was randomly assigned to the multiculturalism ( $n = 39$ ), colorblindness ( $n = 37$ ), or control ( $n = 49$ ) condition.

One participant was excluded from analyses because her Cook’s Distance score was .45, rendering her an extreme outlier (McClelland, 2000). The remaining 124 individuals were retained in the final sample.

**Materials and Procedure.** All experimental materials were administered online. Participants completed the eight-item ethnic identification measure from Studies 1 and 2 in a separate mass testing session no less than 1 week before the experiment ( $\alpha = .65$ ;  $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = .76$ ). Unlike in Studies 1 and 2, however, participants were asked to indicate their race/

**Table 1.** Correlations Between Variables, Study 3

	Diversity allocation	Ethnic identification	Perceived realistic threat	Perceived symbolic threat
Diversity allocation	—	.05	-.13	-.31*
Ethnic identification	.05	—	.11	.06
Perceived realistic threat	-.13	.11	—	.63**
Perceived symbolic threat	-.31*	.06	.63**	—

Note: The correlations involving the threat measures include the 75 participants in the multiculturalism and colorblindness conditions only; all other correlations include the full sample of 124 participants.

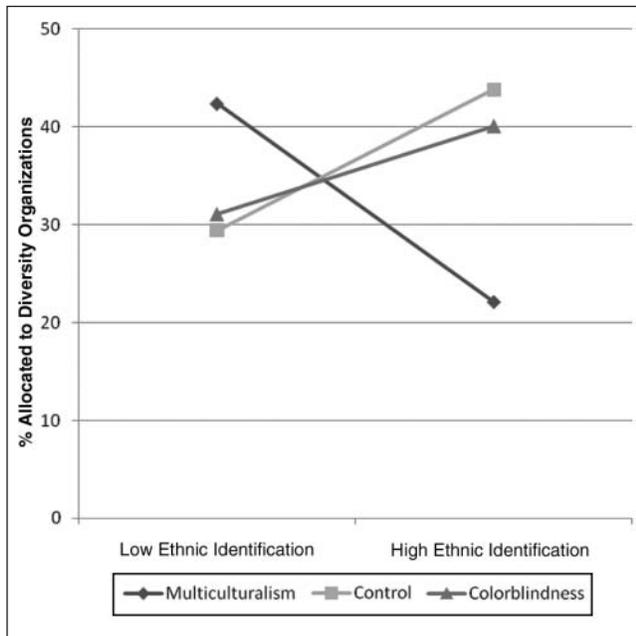
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

ethnicity from a checklist of options immediately before responding to the identification items. All participants checked “White/European American.”

The first task participants completed in the actual experiment was the priming manipulation, which was the same as that used in Study 2. Specifically, at the beginning of the study they responded to survey items about racial and ethnic differences (multiculturalism condition), racial and ethnic similarities (colorblindness condition), or no items (control condition). Next, participants in the multiculturalism and colorblindness conditions answered the following two questions on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*): (a) “To what extent do the above items seem to suggest that White/European Americans’ core values are being threatened?” ( $M = 2.60$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) and (b) “To what extent do the above items seem to suggest that White/European Americans power and status are being threatened?” ( $M = 2.91$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ). Participants in the control condition did not answer these questions because they did not respond to either the multiculturalism or colorblindness items. The correlations between all measured variables in this study are reported in Table 1.

The first question was designed to measure perceived symbolic threat to group values (see Morrison & Ybarra, 2009), and the second question was designed to measure perceived realistic threat to the group’s power and status (see Morrison & Ybarra, 2008). These two questions were highly correlated ( $r = .63$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but they were analyzed separately because they refer to distinct types of psychological threats (see Riek et al., 2006; Stephan et al., 2009).

After responding to the threat items, participants read that the university administration was conducting a survey on students’ attitudes toward the allocation of money to student groups and services on campus (see Plaut & Markus, 2010). Specifically, the survey assessed how much money participants thought should go into organizations that are



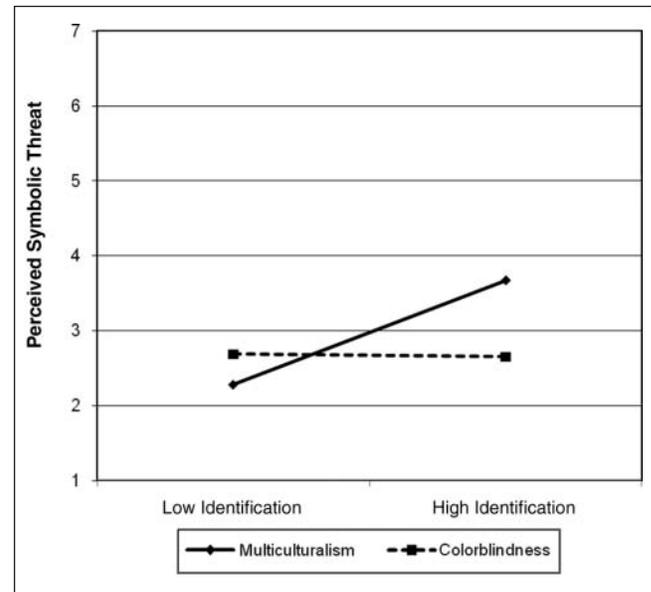
**Figure 3.** Diversity allocation as a function of condition (multiculturalism vs. colorblindness vs. control) and ethnic identification ( $\pm 2$  SD), Study 3

accessible to everyone versus targeted to particular groups of students. Participants were presented with two different columns, each of which contained the names of seven campus organizations (both real and fictitious). One column only included diversity-related organizations (e.g., Hispanic Student Association, International Student Life Office), and the other column only included organizations that were accessible to everyone (e.g., Peer Health Resources, University Career Center).

Participants were told to indicate what percentage of the university budget for student groups and organizations (from 0% to 100%) should be allocated to the types of organizations in each column, and they were told that the two numbers had to add up to 100%. The diversity allocation score reported here is the percentage allocated to the diversity-related organizations; it served as a behavioral measure of outgroup prejudice, with lower scores indicating less support for organizations targeted toward racial and ethnic minorities. We expected this measure to be particularly sensitive to perceptions of symbolic threat because it involves one's willingness to support the prevalence of diverse cultural values and identities on campus.

## Results

**Diversity allocation.** As in Study 2, participants' scores on the dependent measure were regressed onto condition (2 = multiculturalism, -1 = other), ethnic identification (centered continuous variable), and the two-way interaction term. A variable comparing the colorblindness (1) and control (-1)



**Figure 4.** Perceived symbolic threat as a function of condition (multiculturalism vs. colorblindness) and ethnic identification ( $\pm 2$  SD), Study 3

conditions was also included in the regression, as well as its interaction with ethnic identification.

The only significant effect to emerge was the predicted interaction between condition (*multiculturalism* = 2, *other* = -1) and ethnic identification ( $\beta = -.25$ ,  $t(118) = -2.68$ ,  $p < .01$  (see Figure 3). Decomposition of the interaction at 2 SD above and below the mean identification score indicated that highly identified White Americans were less willing to allocate campus funds to diversity-related organizations in the multiculturalism condition than in the other two conditions ( $\beta = -.62$ ,  $t(118) = -3.07$ ,  $p < .005$ , whereas less identified White Americans were marginally more willing to do so in the multiculturalism condition ( $\beta = .34$ ,  $t(118) = 1.73$ ,  $p < .09$ ).<sup>3</sup> Additional simple slopes analyses revealed that ethnic identification predicted less support for diversity-related organizations in the multiculturalism condition ( $\beta = -.30$ ,  $t(118) = -1.99$ ,  $p < .05$ , but not in the colorblindness condition ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $t(118) < 1$ , *ns*, or in the control condition ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $t(118) = 2.10$ ,  $p < .04$ ).

**Perceived threat.** To test the effects of condition and ethnic identification on perceived threat, we regressed participants' scores on each of the threat items onto a dummy-coded condition variable (0 = colorblindness, 1 = multiculturalism), ethnic identification, and their interaction term. The analysis on perceived symbolic threat (i.e., to White Americans' core values) revealed a marginal overall effect of multiculturalism condition ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $t(72) = 1.90$ ,  $p = .06$ , and a significant interaction between condition and ethnic identification ( $\beta = .38$ ,  $t(71) = 1.98$ ,  $p = .05$  (see Figure 4). Decomposition of this interaction indicated that highly identified White Americans

(2 *SD* above the mean) viewed the multiculturalism items as posing a greater symbolic threat than the colorblindness items ( $\beta = .74$ ,  $t(71) = 2.58$ ,  $p = .01$ , whereas less identified White Americans (2 *SD* below the mean) did not ( $\beta = -.26$ ),  $t(71) < 1$ , *ns*. No other simple slopes were significant.

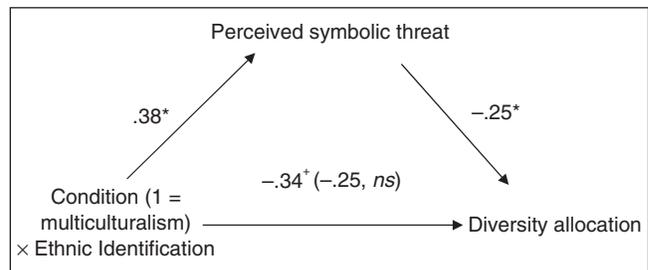
The analysis on perceived realistic threat (i.e., to White Americans' power and status) revealed a marginal overall effect of multiculturalism condition ( $\beta = .22$ ),  $t(71) = 1.92$ ,  $p < .06$ , and a significant interaction with ethnic identification ( $\beta = .44$ ),  $t(71) = 2.38$ ,  $p = .02$ , in the same pattern as the preceding results. However, given that this item did not correlate with the diversity allocation dependent measure, it cannot mediate the effects of condition and ethnic identification on diversity allocation. Therefore, it will not be discussed further.

**Mediation analysis.** Because highly identified participants believed that the multiculturalism items were more threatening to White Americans' values than the colorblindness items, it was possible to test whether perceived symbolic threat mediated the relation between multiculturalism condition, ethnic identification, and allocation decisions. To test this possibility, a mediated moderation analysis was conducted (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Muller, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2005).

Multiculturalism condition (the proposed independent variable; 0 = *colorblindness*, 1 = *multiculturalism*) and ethnic identification (the proposed moderator) interacted to predict both diversity allocation (the proposed dependent variable;  $\beta = -.34$ ),  $t(71) = -1.77$ ,  $p = .08$ , and—as noted previously—perceived symbolic threat (the proposed mediator;  $\beta = .38$ ),  $t(71) = 1.98$ ,  $p = .05$ . Thus, the first two criteria for mediated moderation were generally met. To test whether symbolic threat would mediate the relation between condition, ethnic identification, and diversity allocation, participants' allocation scores were regressed onto condition, ethnic identification (centered), perceived symbolic threat (centered), and the Condition  $\times$  Ethnic Identification interaction term. In this analysis, the interaction between condition and ethnic identification was reduced to nonsignificance ( $\beta = -.25$ ),  $t(70) = -1.28$ ,  $p = .21$ , whereas the relation between perceived symbolic threat and diversity allocation was significant ( $\beta = -.25$ ),  $t(69) = -2.11$ ,  $p < .04$ . An analysis of conditional indirect effects at 2 *SD* above and below the mean ethnic identification score, using a bootstrapping procedure ( $n = 1,000$  estimates), indicated mediation among highly identified White Americans (Boot =  $-5.14$ ,  $SE = 3.35$ ), 95% CI  $[-14.46, -.32]$  and no mediation among less identified White Americans (Boot =  $1.63$ ,  $SE = 2.10$ ), 95% CI  $[-.85, 9.30]$  (Preacher, Rucker, & Hayes, 2007). Thus, perceptions of symbolic threat mediated the relation between condition and (lack of) support for diversity-related organizations (see Figure 5).

## Discussion

The results of Study 3 build on those of Study 2 in several ways. The use of adult participants instead of college



**Figure 5.** Mediation analysis, Study 3

\* $p < .08$ . \* $p < .05$ .

students demonstrates that the effects of multiculturalism and ethnic identification on intergroup bias can generalize to different populations. Additionally, the use of diversity allocation as the dependent variable demonstrates that these effects are applicable to a different, behavioral measure of prejudice. In both the adult (Study 2) and college student (Study 3) samples, highly identified White American participants primed with multiculturalism (relative to colorblindness) exhibited more prejudiced attitudes (Study 2) and behaviors (Study 3). Most important, the mediating role of perceived symbolic threat was established empirically, shedding light on one process by which multiculturalism may increase White Americans' bias against outgroups.

## Combined Analysis: Studies 1 Through 3

Across all three studies there was a consistent relation between multiculturalism condition and intergroup bias among highly identified White Americans. However, the simple slopes were analyzed at 2 *SD* above and below the mean ethnic identification score. When the interactions were instead decomposed at 1 *SD* above and below the mean, the effect of condition for highly identified White Americans was significant in Study 3 only. Although 2 *SD* above and below the mean provides a better test of truly high and low identifiers' reactions to multiculturalism than does 1 *SD* (because these people are further from the scale midpoint and therefore more strongly agree or disagree that their ethnic identity is important to them than those 1 *SD* away from the mean), it is a less conservative approach. To see whether the results across all three studies would hold at 1 *SD* above the mean ethnic identification score, we submitted them to a combined analysis (for a similar procedure, see Briñol, Petty, & Wheeler, 2006). The analysis included 198 participants total: 88 from Study 1, 35 from Study 2, and 75 from Study 3 (multiculturalism and colorblindness conditions only). Participants' scores on both the ethnic identification scale and the dependent measures were standardized. Then the standardized dependent measure was regressed onto condition (0 = *colorblindness*, 1 = *multiculturalism*), ethnic identification, sample (two dummy variables), and all two- and three-way interaction terms.

Other than a positive overall effect of ethnic identification ( $\beta = .19$ ),  $t(187) = 2.63$ ,  $p < .01$ , the only significant effect to emerge was the Condition  $\times$  Ethnic Identification interaction ( $\beta = .34$ ),  $t(182) = 3.29$ ,  $p = .001$ . Simple slopes analyses at 1 *SD* above and below the mean ethnic identification score revealed that highly identified White Americans demonstrated significantly more intergroup bias in the multiculturalism than colorblindness condition ( $\beta = .37$ ),  $t(182) = 2.66$ ,  $p < .01$ , whereas less identified White Americans demonstrated no relation between multiculturalism condition and intergroup bias ( $\beta = -.11$ ),  $t(182) < 1$ , *ns*. These results suggest that the effects of multiculturalism on intergroup bias in the present studies were driven primarily by increases among highly identified participants.

## General Discussion

Overall, the present studies, conducted with three populations that varied in age and region of the country, suggest that highly identified White Americans are more likely to exhibit intergroup bias in response to multiculturalism than colorblindness. If anything, the opposite tends to be the case among less identified White Americans. These results shed light on a puzzle in the psychological literature—namely, when does being reminded of racial and ethnic differences have positive versus negative effects on intergroup relations? Some research has suggested that multiculturalism increases White Americans' tendencies to be inclusive and, as a result, improves intergroup attitudes (see Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Ryan et al., 2007; Wolsko et al., 2000; Wolsko et al., 2006) and produces more positive outcomes for minorities (Plaut et al., 2009). Other research, by contrast, has suggested that both White Americans (Ginges & Cairns, 2000) and dominant group members in non-U.S. countries (Verkuyten, 2004, 2006) perceive multiculturalism as a symbolic threat to their group's values. Given that intergroup threats can increase both outgroup prejudice (Stephan et al., 1998, 1999, 2002) and endorsement of group-based dominance (Morrison et al., 2009; Morrison & Ybarra, 2008, 2009), multiculturalism could cause some dominant group members to adopt *less* tolerant attitudes. Our effects generalize to multiple measures of intergroup bias (i.e., high SDO scores, prejudice against specific groups, support for diversity-oriented organizations), and to both college student and adult samples.

### Implications for Ethnic Identification

On the basis of our results, we argue that White Americans' reactions to multiculturalism are contingent on their level of ethnic identification. Because highly identified group members are particularly likely to respond to information that calls their group's identity into question (Riek et al., 2006), and because multiculturalism emphasizes that society should be heterogeneous (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Takaki, 1993), White Americans who consider their ethnicity an

important (vs. less important) part of the self react to multicultural ideologies with higher SDO and greater prejudice, possibly as a means of protecting their group's core values. By contrast, less identified White Americans, who are not as concerned with protecting their ingroup (Ellemers et al., 2002), exhibited a trend in each study to become *less* prejudiced in response to multiculturalism (relative to colorblindness). To these individuals, recognition of racial and ethnic identities may foster feelings of acceptance rather than threat.

Previous studies have examined the effects of ethnic identification on endorsement of multicultural ideologies (Verkuyten, 2005), as well as on responses to intergroup threat (e.g., Riek et al., 2006). Our studies are the first to investigate how highly identified and less identified White Americans respond to multiculturalism that is experimentally primed. Because more institutions and organizations are progressively incorporating the tenets of multiculturalism into their everyday practices (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Plaut, 2002; Plaut, Stevens, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, 2010; Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008; Wolsko Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2004), it is becoming increasingly imperative to understand when White Americans will and will not react to multiculturalism with prejudiced attitudes and behaviors. Taking ethnic identification into account is one means by which researchers can begin to approach this complex issue.

Although the present studies showed that White Americans' chronic identification with their ethnicity moderates responses to multiculturalism, it is possible that the salience of one's ethnic identity in a given situation also plays a role. For example, recent research has suggested that White Americans who live in ethnically heterogeneous areas are more likely to see their ethnicity as a central part of their self-image than those who live in homogeneous areas, perhaps because their interactions with diverse groups of people make them more aware of their own ethnicity (Knowles & Peng, 2005; see also McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978). This could in turn cause the former to react to multiculturalism in more negative ways than the latter, especially if their contact with ethnic minorities is mostly negative (see Correll et al., 2008). Indeed, one potential reason that White American participants in previous studies (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Wolsko et al., 2000) demonstrated lower levels of prejudice following a multiculturalism prime is that the studies were conducted in areas (rural New Hampshire and Boulder, Colorado) where White Americans were a clear majority and thus were unlikely to identify strongly with their ethnicity. Likewise, although the present studies demonstrated the moderating effect of identity importance (i.e., level of ethnic identification), it is possible that the form of an individual's White American identity (Goren & Plaut, 2010; Knowles & Peng, 2005; Morrison & Chung, in press; Perry, 2002), in addition to how strongly he or she identifies as White American, plays a role in determining responses to multiculturalism. These constitute important directions for future research.

### Implications for Multicultural and Colorblind Ideologies

The present studies contribute to our understanding of how perceptions of diversity ideologies can affect intergroup attitudes. These studies demonstrate that multiculturalism, similar to other forms of perceived threat (see Morrison et al., 2009; Morrison & Ybarra, 2008), triggers prejudice and endorsement of group-based dominance among highly identified White Americans. Given that multicultural ideologies have the potential to produce these negative effects, and that highly identified White Americans in the present studies did not respond in the same way to colorblind ideologies (i.e., those emphasizing that people of different groups should be treated as individuals regardless of group membership; see Schofield, 2001), it is tempting to conclude that promoting colorblindness would foster racial and ethnic harmony. However, such a strategy may be detrimental for several reasons (Park & Judd, 2005; see also Plaut, 2010). In each study, there was tendency for White Americans who identified less strongly with their ethnicity to exhibit *more* intergroup bias after a colorblindness than multiculturalism prime, suggesting that colorblindness does not always improve interethnic relations (see also Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). Furthermore, colorblind ideologies may reinforce the status quo by legitimating existing inequalities between White Americans and racial and ethnic minorities (Knowles et al., 2009; Neville et al., 2000; Saguy et al., 2008). One possible consequence of ignoring group differences is that dominant group members will not perceive or be motivated to address the injustices that those in less privileged positions may face (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Schofield, 2001).

In addition, although White Americans tend to hold more favorable attitudes toward colorblindness than do non-White Americans, the latter are overall more receptive to multiculturalism than are the former (Plaut, 2002; Ryan et al., 2007; Wolsko et al., 2006). In fact, under some conditions, racial and ethnic minorities may even perceive colorblindness as threatening their group's identity (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008), and ignoring group differences has the potential to impair interactions between White Americans and minorities (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008). Thus, in focusing on how to make White Americans more comfortable with diversity, it is at least as important to ensure that minorities do not feel threatened or excluded (Stevens et al., 2008). Furthermore, there are clear benefits of fostering multiculturalism for individuals and institutions, including increased creativity and open-mindedness (e.g., Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008).

Instead of abandoning multicultural ideologies, one option is to change the way multiculturalism is typically described. For example, reframing the language of multiculturalism so that it clearly includes both White Americans and minorities (see Plaut et al., 2010; Stevens et al., 2008) may cause highly identified White Americans to respond to multiculturalism with greater tolerance. It might also be effective to highlight both differences between groups on one

hand, and the common goals that these groups might share on the other hand (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2000; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). Such approaches, which should be tested in future research, could help decrease highly identified White Americans' intergroup biases and quell their perceptions of threat from multiculturalism, but without suggesting that people are essentially the same.

### Conclusion

The present article sheds light on the conditions under which multicultural ideologies increase versus decrease White Americans' prejudiced attitudes and behaviors. In particular, multiculturalism fosters intergroup bias among highly identified White Americans (who perceive and are motivated to respond to multiculturalism as an intergroup threat), more so than less identified White Americans (who are less inclined to perceive multiculturalism as threatening). It is our hope that illuminating these potential consequences of multiculturalism, as well as increasing awareness about how multiculturalism can be perceived, provides an initial step toward developing interventions that will ultimately improve interethnic relations.

### Appendix

#### Multiculturalism items:

1. We must appreciate the unique characteristics of different racial and ethnic groups in order to have a cooperative society.
2. In order to live in a cooperative society, everyone must learn the unique histories and cultural experiences of different racial and ethnic groups.
3. When interacting with a member of a racial/ethnic group that is different from your own, it is very important to take into account the history and cultural traditions of that person's group.
4. If we want to help create a harmonious society, we must recognize that each racial and ethnic group has the right to maintain its own unique traditions.
5. Learning about the ways that different racial and ethnic groups resolve conflict will help us develop a more harmonious society.

#### Colorblindness items:

1. We must stop obsessing so much about race and ethnicity in order to have a cooperative society.
2. Learning about the similarities between racial and ethnic groups will help us develop a more harmonious society.
3. In order to live in a cooperative society, everyone must remember that we're all just human and not become preoccupied with race and ethnicity.

(continued)

## Appendix (continued)

4. When interacting with other people, it is very important to remember that putting racial and ethnic labels on people obscures the fact that everyone is a unique individual.
5. If we want to help create a harmonious society, we must recognize that race and ethnicity are artificial labels that keep people from thinking freely as individuals.

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## Notes

1. In Studies 1 and 2, the order of administration of the ethnic identification measure was counterbalanced across participants. To ensure that order did not affect participants' responses in either study, a Condition  $\times$  Ethnic Identification  $\times$  Order regression analysis was conducted with the Group-Based Dominance subscale of the Social Dominance Orientation scale (Study 1) or prejudice (Study 2) as the dependent measure. Neither of these three-way interactions reached significance ( $t_s < 1$ ). Moreover, participants' ethnic identification scores were not significantly affected by experimental condition or its interaction with order ( $t_s < 1$ ).
2. This approach to regression analysis, known as effects coding, is appropriate when one group (i.e., the multiculturalism condition) is predicted to differ significantly from the others (i.e., the colorblindness and control conditions), which should not differ from one another (see Aiken & West, 1991). Following the guidelines of Aiken and West (1991), a variable comparing the colorblindness and control conditions (0 = *multiculturalism*, 1 = *colorblindness*, -1 = *no prime*) was included in the analysis, along with all relevant interaction terms. No main or interaction effects of this variable emerged, so it will not be discussed further.
3. When the diversity allocation and perceived symbolic threat results of Study 3 were analyzed at 1 *SD* above and below the mean identification score (rather than 2 *SD*), the simple slope remained significant for highly identified White Americans and was nonsignificant for less identified White Americans. In addition, the mediation by perceived symbolic threat held at 1 *SD* above the mean.

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