Short Report

Is Multiculturalism or Color Blindness Better for Minorities?

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A debate is raging in workplaces, schools, universities, and political and legal arenas: Is it better to ignore or acknowledge group differences? Multiculturalism, a pluralistic ideology, stresses recognizing and celebrating group differences, whereas color blindness, an assimilationist ideology, stresses ignoring or minimizing group differences. Both ideologies arguably advocate for equality, but what are their actual consequences for minorities?

Previous research documents divergent patterns of relationship between these ideologies and racial bias (see Park & Judd, 2005). Among dominant-group members, multiculturalism—whether experimentally manipulated or measured as an individual difference—predicts lower bias, whereas color blindness predicts greater bias (Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Verkuyten, 2005; Wolsko, Park, & Judd, 2006). Yet no study has examined how the diversity beliefs of members of the dominant group affect the outcomes of targets. Furthermore, no study has tested this link in the "real world" among majority and minority individuals occupying the same setting.

Therefore, in a field study, we investigated the effects of Whites' diversity beliefs on their minority co-workers' psychological engagement, a meaningful target outcome. Given that multiculturalism predicts decreased bias, and thus contributes to a positive diversity climate, and color blindness predicts increased bias, and thus contributes to a negative diversity climate, we hypothesized that Whites' multiculturalism is associated with higher minority engagement and that Whites' color blindness is associated with lower minority engagement. We tested these hypotheses in 18 work units in a large U.S. health care organization.

METHOD

Employees completed an anonymous Web-based "diversity climate survey" conducted for the organization by Victoria Plaut and Kecia Thomas. The 4,915 respondents (48% response rate; 80% female, 20% male; 79% White, 21% minority; modal

age = 42–60 years) mirrored organizational demographics (79% female, 21% male; 79% White, 21% minority; modal age = 42–60 years). Analyses included only participants who provided racial information ($N = 3,758$).

Four items adapted from Berry and Kalin (1995) tested Whites' multiculturalism (e.g., "Organizational policies should support racial and ethnic diversity"; "Employees should recognize and celebrate racial and ethnic differences"; $\alpha = .82$). We assessed Whites' color blindness with two items adapted from Wolsko et al. (2006; "Employees should downplay their racial and ethnic differences" and "The organization should encourage racial and ethnic minorities to adapt to mainstream ways"; $\alpha = .70$). For Whites, multiculturalism and color blindness are separate but related constructs, $r(2,967) = -.38$, $p < .001$, $p_{rep} > .986$ (Park & Judd, 2005).

Lack of inclusion in predominantly White environments can cause minority psychological disengagement (Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001), which in turn can hurt organizational outcomes, including productivity, profit, and turnover (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). Consequently, we chose psychological engagement as our minority outcome, measuring it with five items assessing how much employees valued job success and organizational membership (e.g., "Doing well in my job tasks and duties is very important to me"; "I am proud to tell others that I work at [this organization]"; $\alpha = .87$).

Following work on organizational climate (Schneider, Salvaggio, & Subirats, 2002), we used the multi-item $r_{WG(J)}$ statistic (James, Demaree, & Wolf, 1984) to justify aggregation of individual-level data. Computing $r_{WG(J)}$ for each variable by department yielded average values of .88 (multiculturalism), .66 (color blindness), and .93 (engagement). Average $r_{WG(J)}$s surpassed the .60 conventional cutoff, indicating adequate agreement between employees within department. One department without minority respondents was omitted, leaving 17 for analysis.

RESULTS

Minorities' departmental mean psychological engagement was separately regressed on Whites' departmental mean multiculturalism and color blindness (Table 1 presents means and

TABLE 1

Mean Scores for All Variables and Interitem Correlations

Variable	Mean score	Whites' multiculturalism	Whites' color blindness	Minorities' psychological engagement	Minorities' perception of bias
		Correlations			
Whites' multiculturalism	4.02 (0.22)	—	−.66***	.57*	−.70**
Whites' color blindness	2.64 (0.28)		—	−.54*	.54*
Minorities' psychological engagement	4.56 (0.18)			—	−.76***
Minorities' perception of bias	2.23 (0.46)				—

Note. Scales ranged from 1 to 5, with higher numbers indicating a higher level of the construct being measured. Standard deviations are given in parentheses. The raw scores for this analysis were mean scores for each work unit; the number of respondents per unit ranged from 13 to 1,234.

*$p < .05$, $p_{rep} > .878$. **$p < .01$, $p_{rep} > .950$. ***$p < .001$, $p_{rep} > .986$.

correlations). As predicted, Whites' multiculturalism significantly positively predicted minorities' engagement, $\beta = .57$, $t(15) = 2.68, p = .017, p_{rep}= .933, d = 1.38$, whereas Whites' color blindness significantly negatively predicted minorities' engagement, $\beta = -.54, t(15) = -2.50, p = .025, p_{rep} = .917, d = 1.29$.

Effects remained after controlling for departments' proportion of minorities—multiculturalism: $\beta = .71, t(14) = 3.24, p = .006, p_{rep} = .962, d = 1.73$; color blindness: $\beta = -.62, t(14) = -2.77, p = .015, p_{rep} = .938, d = 1.48$. Thus, Whites' beliefs predicted minorities' engagement above and beyond departmental demographics. Effects also remained after controlling for departmental standard deviation—multiculturalism: $\beta = .65$, $t(14) = 1.88, p = .081, p_{rep} = .839, d = 1.01$; color blindness: $\beta = -.53, t(14) = -2.25, p = .041, p_{rep} = .891, d = 1.20$. This result indicates that diversity beliefs impact engagement despite dispersion.

Given the ideology-bias relationship documented in extant literature, could minorities' perception of bias account for these effects? Presence of the item "There is zero tolerance for any form of harassment at [the organization]" (reverse-scored) in the climate survey permitted post hoc mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Indeed, minorities' perception of bias mediated associations between Whites' diversity beliefs and minorities' engagement (multiculturalism: Sobel's $Z = 2.34, p = .019, p_{rep} = .929$; color blindness: Sobel's $Z = -1.99, p = .047, p_{rep} = .882$).

DISCUSSION

Our results suggest that dominant-group members' diversity beliefs (e.g., multiculturalism and color blindness) have palpable implications for minority colleagues' psychological engagement. Paradoxically, emphasizing minimization of group differences reinforces majority dominance and minority marginalization.

These findings suggest the importance of studying basic processes in applied settings. Limitations of this study stem primarily from logistical constraints posed by the climate assessment (e.g., short measures, self-selected sample). Furthermore, the correlational results do not causally link the diversity climate set by the dominant group and the psychological engagement of minorities. Mediation of bias perception and the persistence of effects beyond dispersion and demographics, however, help constrain the causal possibilities. For example, controlling for demographics helps rule out the possibility that the presence of many highly engaged minorities causes positive diversity beliefs among Whites.

Recent research suggests potential processes linking Whites' diversity beliefs to minorities' perception of bias, and hence disengagement. Color blindness may promote interpersonal and institutional discrimination through social distancing (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008) and justification of inequality (Knowles, Lowery, Hogan, & Chow, in press; Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008), whereas multiculturalism may promote inclusive behaviors and policies (Wolsko et al., 2006). Moreover, our findings converge with research showing that minorities are vigilant to inclusion-related cues and that color blindness may signal bias (Apfelbaum et al., 2008; Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008). Making multiple advances across areas of psychology, we have shown that poor diversity climates cost and positive diversity climates benefit both minorities and organizations.

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