

**The illusion of colorblindness among faculty:  
A hindrance to campus cultural inclusiveness**

Dena R. Samuels

Women's & Ethnic Studies

University of Colorado – Colorado Springs

U.S.A.

Please send correspondence to: Dena R. Samuels, PhD, Women's & Ethnic Studies,  
University of Colorado – Colorado Springs, 1420 Austin Bluffs Parkway, Colorado  
Springs, CO 80918 or to: [dsamuels@uccs.edu](mailto:dsamuels@uccs.edu); (719) 255-4117.

***Abstract***

So-called “Colorblindness” in the context of race relations is the perception that if we don’t notice a person’s race, we can’t be racist. As such, colorblindness is often considered the ultimate goal for educators. Scholars agree, however, it is another form of racism. A review of the literature and explanations of the problematic nature of colorblindness is presented. A national quantitative study then provides empirical data demonstrating that colorblindness leads to cultural exclusion. It is correlated with increased discomfort in interacting across racial differences, and ineffectiveness in intervening in offensive behavior. Strategies are provided to counteract colorblind attitudes and behaviors.

Keywords: colorblindness; colorblind racism; faculty development; race relations; implicit bias; racial microaggressions; cultural inclusiveness

## Introduction

A diagnosis of complete colorblindness is given when a person sees all colors as gray. This assimilationist approach has, in recent decades, been applied to race and racism. A colorblind perspective suggests that one's race and race-based differences should not be considered in impression formation, decision-making, or interactions. In other words, "If people or institutions do not even notice race, then they cannot act in a racially biased manner" (Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers, 2012, p. 205). The rationale for this approach is that it would be used in order to move beyond prejudice and discrimination. The oft heard refrain, "I don't see color; we're all the same," tends to come from well meaning White folks who wish that racism were a thing of the past. The assumption stems from the idea that ignoring race will solve the problem of racism, or worse, that racism has already been solved (i.e., that we live in a post-racial society) and so we don't need to focus on it anymore. Since we do, in fact, see race, and racism is far from eradicated, ignoring race is misguided, and worse, has deleterious consequences that serve to exacerbate racism and maintain social inequalities.

So-called "Colorblindness" was first advocated during the Civil Rights era, when Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. proposed that people "will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." Colorblind perspectives make the assumption that U.S. society has already attained that objective. In the late 1970s, inside schools, a colorblind mentality prompted teachers and staff to want to transcend racial differences: "to keep the peace and to foster a sense of 'common ground' of human connections across race" (Revilla, Wells, & Holme, 2004, p. 300).

Instead, more recently, scholars have been largely in agreement that colorblindness had the opposite effect: rather than transcending social differences with the hope of inclusion, it undermined those differences causing exclusion. In his Foreword of Alexander's book, "The New Jim Crow: Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness," Cornel West (2012) concluded that colorblindness was "created by neoconservatives and neoliberals in order to trivialize and disguise the depths of black suffering in the 1980s and '90s" (p. x). It allows us to disregard these social inequalities and relieves us of having to see any manifestations of racism we might hold simply by our participation in the current social system (Bell, 2003). In other words, colorblindness was created and has been maintained to give the illusion of minimizing the impact race and racism has on our society, and ultimately, on our lives, when in fact, it does the opposite. As such, scholars have found that not only is colorblindness *not* the antidote to racism, but rather another type of racism (Bell, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Carr, 1997; Gordon, 2005).

In the past few decades, an increasing amount of research has been conducted on the failure of colorblind attitudes to minimize racism (Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers, 2012; Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, & Ambady, 2010; Bensimon, 2005; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Delpit, 1988; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Markus, Steele, & Steele, 2000; Mazzei, 2008; Revilla et al., 2004; Rosenberg, 2004; Sleeter, 2001). These studies and others, primarily conducted in the realm of pre-service teachers, overwhelmingly demonstrate the need for a different approach to racism, one that embraces racial differences rather than one that pretends to ignore them. Despite the plethora of research that critiques colorblindness, the approach continues to persist among educators. This research serves to demonstrate that colorblindness remains not

only prevalent among educators, but also detrimental to the goal of cultural inclusiveness. If educators are not given the opportunity to consider the impact of this colorblind view, they may be doing more harm than good to those who look to them as role models and mentors, namely, the students they serve.

### ***Race as a Taboo Topic***

The notion of colorblindness is pervasive in the U.S., mostly due to the fact that since the Civil Rights era, race has been considered a taboo topic (Tatum, 2003). Often, parents and teachers are afraid of being considered racist, so they think any mention of a person's race is off-limits. They teach this to their inquisitive children and students by silencing them or ignoring the topic altogether. As Tatum pointed out, "Their questions don't go away, they just go unasked" (p. 36), and are often left to the child to fill in the blanks.

This situation prompted a timely study by Birgitte Vittrup at the Children's Research Lab at the University of Texas. The study first asked white children between the ages of five and seven from approximately 100 different families about racial attitudes. Then, it asked white parents to use a checklist to discuss various aspects of race with their children every night for five nights. The study found that parents were, at best, uncomfortable discussing issues of race with their children, and at worst, the parents outright refused to do so. A few who actually dropped out of the study responded, "We don't want to have these conversations with our child. We don't want to point out skin color" (Bronson & Merryman, 2009, para. 10). The authors of the article point out that these parents did not want to call attention to racial differences; but rather to have their children grow up colorblind. The pre-test that was given to the children, however,

showed that they did, in fact, see racial differences, despite their parents attempts to affirm ambiguous principles such as “everyone’s equal.”

If parents and children are not taught to discuss these issues in a relatively comfortable environment, they are not likely to be prepared to discuss them in any other setting such as the classroom. By the time some of these white children grow up to become teachers, they are likely to have bought into the ideology that “we’re all the same” and that it will be perceived as racist if they even mention race. In reality, underneath our skin color, we are almost identical, but that does not mean that race as a social construct doesn’t have severe and sometimes life-threatening consequences in the world today. Colorblindness serves to discount social differences, ignores systemic inequalities, and scholars argue, contributes to racist behavior (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Gallagher, 2009). In fact, Bonilla-Silva (2009) called this relatively new form of racism: *colorblind* racism. And he is not alone. More and more scholars have begun to articulate the connection between colorblindness and racism (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Sommers, & Ambady, 2010; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2003). In fact, Carr (1997) found that colorblindness correlates not only with racial prejudice, but also with racist ideology and racism.

In the past, racism was overt; whereas this colorblind racism is covert. Outwardly, people say they do not discriminate, that they are “colorblind.” Their actions, however, demonstrate discriminatory behavior. Blaming the achievement gap on students of color rather than their inadequate education (Love, 2004), red-shirting students of color (holding them back so their assumed inferior scores are not reflected on a school’s Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) scores) (Hong & Youngs, 2008), or tracking them into

special needs classes would be examples of this new covert form of racism in the educational system.

### ***Colorblindness as a Microaggression***

Another way of thinking about colorblindness is within the larger context of microaggressions. Racial microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). They are subtle words, gestures, behaviors, and/or actions that undermine, offend, disregard, discount, disrespect, or exclude others (Sue, 2010). Microaggressions tend to perpetuate stereotypes, often unintentionally. These statements or behaviors are easily overlooked, and in the rare case that the microaggression is challenged, the microaggressor might brush it off by claiming “I was just kidding” or blame any offense on the challenger’s hypersensitivity, deflecting the impact of their words or actions.

Examples of racial microaggressions are abundant in the literature from the perspectives of students of color. They include, among others: faculty making assumptions about the intelligence of students of color; ignoring, distorting, or stereotyping the experiences of people of color; and racial segregation of students in study/work groups (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). In their study, Solórzano et al. found that African American students felt “‘drained’ by the intense scrutiny their everyday actions received in the context of negative preconceived notions about African Americans” (p. 67). Moreover, these discriminatory behaviors are not just prevalent in colleges and universities, but the literature shows they start much earlier in K12

classrooms, and are perpetuated not only toward African American students, but also other students of color (Ramirez & Carpenter, 2005; Schneider, Martinez, & Owens, 2006).

Further, Kottler & Englar-Carlson (2009) made it clear that microaggressions do not occur only around issues of race, but also gender, class, age, sexual orientation, religion, etc. For the purposes of this research, we will focus only on racial microaggressions and the effects of colorblindness to provide a framework for understanding how microaggressions operate within the contexts of other social identities. We can consider Microaggressions in three basic parts: intent, underlying messages, and impact (Sue, 2010). Microaggressions are the manifestations of stereotypes in the culture that are continually perpetuated, most often unintentionally through jokes, comments, and behavior, and often go unnoticed and so, as previously mentioned, unchallenged. Typically, a microaggressor is unaware of the impact of their words or behavior. They may consider themselves “one of the good ones;” this is how Johnson (2006) describes those who tend to not only believe in antiracism, but also might actively challenge racism when they see it, so are not likely to consider themselves racist. Their intentions might be good, but the underlying message of their comment or behavior can do more harm than good.

Unfortunately, these common, subtle barbs that are rarely contested or even questioned, are rife with meaning. The phrase, “I don’t see color,” for example, transmits the message that race does not matter in a society that was built on the fact that it does. In addition, the phrase sends the message that the experiences of people of color are being invalidated at best, denied at worst.



The most important aspect of Microaggressions is their impact on those who are on the receiving end of them (and their allies). Microaggressions lead to a rise in cortisol levels (the stress hormone), and over time, can cause mental and physical health problems that can negatively affect one's: sense of belonging, level of comfort and trust engaging with others, performance in academics, athletics, interviews, etc., chances of success, sense of personal validation, immune system, cognitive functioning, susceptibility to mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, among others, and over a lifetime, an increase in mortality rates (Sue, 2010).

At the very least, in the classroom, Microaggressions can trigger frustration, leading to feelings of marginalization and exclusion (Franklin, 1999; Pierce, 1988; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). When looked at more broadly, students who are the targets of microaggressions may not even be getting an equitable education compared with those who are not targets. Moreover, considering that a common goal of many colleges and universities in the last few decades has been to recruit, retain, and support a diverse student body, it is imperative that faculty reflect on their own assumptions and actions so as to eliminate, or at least minimize the microaggressions they may, unknowingly, be perpetuating.

### ***Colorblind Attitudes***

Many Americans believe that if they pretend not to see a person's race, then they cannot be racist. So much so, in fact, that racism can now be considered solved.

Gallagher (2009) cited national polling data to demonstrate that "a majority of whites now believe discrimination against racial minorities no longer exists" (p. 548).

Moreover, 81% of white people believe that black children have equal educational

opportunities. Interestingly, since 1995, Gallup poll data show white people's responses on this issue have remained relatively stable (Kiefer, 2003).

The same belief, however, is not shared by people of color. In contrast, black people's opinion that black children have educational opportunities equal to white children dropped from 64% to 50% since 1995 (Kiefer, 2003). Kiefer suggests that black Americans' concerns about educational opportunities for black children are justified. It is more likely that black children as compared with white children will attend school in urban, as opposed to suburban, settings. Urban schools tend to receive less funding per student, and have more trouble recruiting and retaining qualified teachers (Kiefer, 2003). In a quantitative study, Cameron and Heckman (2001) found that racial disparities in college attendance were due to long-term financial constraints of the family. Given that even after the recession of 2007-2009, on average, white families have nearly twenty times the wealth of the average black and Latino families (Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro, 2013), it is clear that economic disparities between white families and families of color have significant consequences for the educational opportunities of those households.

Given the reality of racial inequality, the discrepancy in the perceptions of white people and black people regarding educational equity highlights the inability of white people to acknowledge the racial inequalities that exist in the U.S. educational system, most likely due to colorblindness (Gallagher, 2009). And this makes sense. If white people have been taught to ignore race and not confront their own learned racism, they are not likely to see it or consider it a problem. They would have to be educated that it is, in fact, a problem. Moreover, if people, and teachers especially, do not perceive that a problem exists, they are not likely to look for solutions.

### ***Why Colorblindness is Problematic***

Colorblindness is a mentality or belief about people that is rooted in a plethora of misinformation and assumptions that conflict both with treating people of color equitably and building relationships across social differences. First, colorblindness denies that race matters. Based on the overt and covert racism that still exists, however, race certainly impacts people's lives: both those who are systematically advantaged by it (whites) and those who are systematically disadvantaged by it (people of color).

Second, colorblindness assumes that people are either racist or non-racist. When we think of a racist, we are taught to think of a member of the white supremacist or white power movement. If we continue to think that only those who have extreme prejudices are racist, it lets us off the hook from even considering that some of our thoughts, attitudes, or behaviors might be in any way racist, even unintentionally. Third, colorblindness presumes that we are *only* individuals, and ignores that we are also part of a *system* of social inequalities that affects all of our lives. The reality is that culture supports stereotypes and social hierarchies. Through exposure to cultural ideologies, including an adherence to the notion of colorblindness, we are socialized to maintain those inequalities. Only by challenging cultural stereotypes and inequalities at both the individual and systemic levels, can we overcome those inequalities.

Fourth, colorblindness perpetuates the idea that to notice and/or mention race must be racist, and is therefore, taboo. We know, however, that people do, in fact, see race; we have just been taught not to discuss it. Pretending we "don't see race" discounts the impact race has on our lives, and studies show it is not an effective strategy to combat racism (Anderson, 2010). Fifth, colorblindness sees whiteness as the standard to which

all other racial/ethnic groups must aspire. Colorblindness believes we all will, and should, assimilate into the “mainstream,” or in other words, whiteness (Sullivan, 2006). In so doing, it ignores the experiences and realities of people of color. Under the misguided pretext of equality, colorblindness removes the responsibility we all have for our part in maintaining and perpetuating a racist system. As such, it dismisses the reality of discrimination many people of color experience on a daily basis.

Sixth, colorblindness considers intent, not impact, as important. Due to the lack of discussion of race (it’s a taboo, as previously mentioned), many people don’t realize the subtle negative messages their language (both verbal and non-verbal) and behavior might impose on other people. Stating that race doesn’t matter is often heard as, “I don’t want to take responsibility for any of the racial inequalities I might be perpetuating.” The impact of colorblindness, though often unintentional, can have severely negative consequences, and can leave scars that are difficult to heal. In addition, colorblindness overlooks the beautiful variations of skin color and human diversity. As such, colorblindness can serve to disconnect one person from another person; it can sever relationships as it discounts and discredits the lived experiences of people of color.

Moreover, if we believe that racism is over, then we will not be working on solutions for ending it. Most harmful is that those who adhere to colorblindness fail to grasp not only that they, too, are affected by the racism that exists in society, but also overlooks the benefits that they gain from it. It is understandable why colorblindness is so popular: on the surface, looking past race to see and connect with the individual is a laudable goal, however, people do see race, so are not being authentic when they say they don’t see color.

### ***Colorblindness Maintains Social Hierarchy***

As has been previously stated, many White people are deeply afraid of dealing with race for fear of appearing racist. Colorblindness serves to deny race as a factor that advantages whites at the expense of people of color. Gordon (2005) suggests that colorblindness is not a failure to see color. He explains that it is a form of resistance to social equity. “Colorblindness is not blindness: It is not an inability to see color. Rather, it is a refusal” (p. 139). If we don’t see color, we don’t have to address the very real effects of racism in the U.S. It allows those who adhere to it to let themselves off the hook. Gordon continues, “This resistance is learned and nurtured to protect the status quo, which privileges White people and occurs on both the individual and systemic levels” (139). In other words, Colorblindness is a form of resistance to acknowledging white privilege (Bell, 2003; Gordon, 2005; Samuels, 2013; Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008).

In a study of 144 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students, Worthington et al. (2008) found that “a colorblind approach is likely to result in perceptions of climate that are potentially more positive than is warranted, and is likely to be at odds with the perceptions of students of color” (p. 17). The authors recommend cultivating a “greater awareness of issues of racial privilege as a means of helping to improve the overall campus climate for people of color” (Worthington et al., p. 17).

This finding supports the speculations of Helm et al. (1998) when they said: “It is likely that Whites do not see the relevance of their culture to diversity issues because the overall culture on campus has been, and continues to be, designed for them” (p. 115). Yet this mentality of ignoring or denying privilege is not limited to college campuses. In five

studies with over 1100 participants representing both campus and community, Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne (2000) found that a stronger adherence to colorblindness correlated with stronger levels of racial bias, and also a belief in the notion that society is just and impartial, that “people are rewarded on merit alone and the circumstances of one's predicament have nothing to do with social structures or circumstances” (p. 68). The authors explain that those who are not aware of their racial privilege may not understand or perceive the subtle cues of racism on an interpersonal or systemic level. Neville et al. (2001) found a difference between Whites and people of color in terms of their adherence to colorblindness. On average, people of color were less likely to demonstrate colorblindness than Whites. They concluded,

For Whites, adopting a color-blind perspective may help to protect against recognizing racial inequalities in society and thus help to alleviate any conflict or dissonance that may arise from (a) believing that the United States is a country built on the principles of liberty and egalitarianism and (b) acknowledging that racism and racial inequality are present in the United States. (p. 69)

In other words, upholding a colorblind mentality allows those who benefit from the social hierarchy and status quo to remain oblivious to racial inequalities, and to their own privilege. In a sense, a refusal to accept one's privilege preserves that social hierarchy.

Plaut, Thomas, and Goren (2009) found that minimizing social group differences fortifies the power of majority groups, predicts greater bias, and increases the marginalization of already disenfranchised groups. As Ferber (2007) suggests, “While many people naively embrace [colorblindness] as non-racist, it reinforces and reproduces contemporary racial inequality” (p. 272).

### ***Colorblindness as a Barrier to Building Relationships***

Several studies have demonstrated the adverse interpersonal effects of colorblindness. Apfelbaum, Sommers, and Norton (2008), for example, found that “avoiding race during interracial interaction predicted negative nonverbal behavior” (p. 918) and that acknowledging race predicted nonverbal friendliness. The authors concluded “Whites’ intention of using colorblind behavior to prevent the appearance of prejudice—and, more generally, to promote positive interracial interaction—often backfires” (p. 929).

Todd and Galinsky (2012) found that when individuals are given a colorblind message as opposed to a multicultural message, they are less likely to take on another’s perspective. This lack of empathy can make connection, understanding, and compassion between people much more challenging. Building relationships across difference, on the other hand, means taking a person’s social identities, experiences, background, and history into account to really get to know who they are and where they came from. Without that, at best, the relationship will only ever be superficial; at worst, it will be the negative outcome of an even unintended microaggression.

Scholars are clear on the fact that colorblindness is incompatible with cultural inclusiveness. And yet, because there is no national standard for diversity and inclusiveness, and no national requirement for education or self-reflection on these important issues, colorblindness may still be considered the goal not only for society, but more specifically, for educators. The research study considers if we have made any progress in this area. Based on the theoretical framework discussed in this study, it is predicted that:

- 1) the more likely one is to consider themselves colorblind, the less comfortable they will be interacting with people who have a different race than they do;
- 2) the more likely one is to consider themselves colorblind, the less likely they will be to respond to microaggressions;
- 3) the more likely one is to consider themselves colorblind, the less likely they will be to acknowledge that white privilege exists.

### **Methods**

The current study was part of a larger national study on faculty preparedness to build cultural inclusiveness (Samuels, 2014).

#### ***Participants***

The survey was tested on a national random sample of 637 faculty members. These faculty members came from every kind of institution including public, private, and military academies, in both 2-year and 4-year institutions. Of the sample, 84% identified as white, and 13.6% identified as people of color. Whites, therefore, were slightly overrepresented in this sample as the national average is approximately 80%, and faculty members of color were slightly underrepresented, as the national average is approximately 17% (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Female respondents comprised 49% of all respondents, which is higher than the national average of female faculty (42%). Male respondents consisted of 41% of all respondents, which is lower than the national average of male faculty (58%) (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). There were 56 respondents (8.7%) who chose not to identify their gender, and 55 respondents (8.6%) who chose not to identify their race.

#### ***Survey Instrument & Procedures***



There are many campus climate surveys that tend to measure the cultural environment on a campus, and how a particular institution is faring in terms of diversity, but they do not tend to delve into the both the attitudes and behaviors of faculty members. Thus, I was forced to create my own survey instrument on faculty preparedness to build cultural inclusiveness (Samuels, 2014). The instrument was validated, and made use of a 7-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree).

For this study, the relevant items from the survey instrument are:

1) “I don’t see skin color when I interact with people.” This item was used to measure how colorblind a respondent perceived themselves to be.

2) “I *consciously* treat campus members (students, faculty, and staff) of color with both respect and acceptance.” This item was used to measure how colorblind a respondent is in actuality.

3) “I am uncomfortable interacting with people on campus who are different from me in terms of their race.” This item again measured how colorblind a respondent is in actuality, and was reverse-coded to offer varying levels of difficulty to the respondent (Shultz & Whitney, 2005) and to simultaneously circumvent acquiescence bias (Schuman and Presser, 1996).

4) The two items that measured effective responses to microaggressions were worded as follows: “I respond effectively when insensitive comments are made by students in my classroom;” and “I respond effectively when insensitive comments are made by other faculty or staff.”

5) “In U.S. society, White people have certain unearned advantages that people of color do not receive.” This item was used to measure an acknowledgement of white privilege.

The survey was accessed on-line, with the use of Qualtrics. An incentive to complete the survey was offered. Respondents were given the opportunity to enter into a drawing to win a \$50 gift card. Their entry into the drawing was separated from their responses to maintain anonymity in the study.

### Results

Faculty members are overwhelmingly *not* colorblind; they see social differences. In fact, 491 (77%) respondents somewhat to strongly agree that they *consciously* treat campus members who belong to traditionally marginalized social groups with respect and acceptance. Moreover, on average, respondents agreed that they treat *campus members of color* with respect and acceptance ( $M = 6.2$  out of 7). If they were colorblind, they would not be conscious of treating people from marginalized groups differently.

Results indicated that the more likely faculty members are to consider themselves colorblind, the less comfortable they will be interacting with people who have a different race than they do. Although the effect size is small ( $r = -.165$ ), it is statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ). So even though they may believe that they don't see color and in fact, may not want to see color, they do, and they are also less comfortable in their cross-racial interactions than their colleagues who don't perceive themselves to be colorblind (those who acknowledge racial differences).

Further results from this study showed that the more colorblind faculty members reported themselves to be, the less likely they were to claim they responded effectively

when insensitive comments were made by students in their classrooms ( $r = -.189$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The same was true when they responded to insensitive comments made by other faculty or staff ( $r = -.151$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Surprisingly, respondents only “somewhat agreed” that white privilege exists at all ( $M = 5.1$  out of 7). Responses to this item contained a large variability ( $SD = 1.69$  on the 7-pt. scale). This suggests that some respondents disagree that social inequalities exist while others agree. The study also found a strong correlation between the acknowledgement of white privilege, and colorblindness. The more respondents acknowledged that white privilege exists, the more likely they are to be colorblind ( $r = .41$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This finding runs contrary to what was hypothesized based on Privilege Theory (that those who don’t acknowledge the existence of racism don’t want to acknowledge race). However, it may be that colorblindness in this case is a reaction to the discomfort of the knowledge that white privilege exists. In other words, if faculty members admit the existence of white privilege, their reaction may be to jump to the conclusion that ignoring race is the optimal solution, and hence, their basis for self-identifying as colorblind.

### **Discussion**

Colorblindness is often deemed the goal of the country: that we should ignore, or at least pretend to ignore race under the auspices of promoting equality. Many faculty members have bought into the illusion of this concept. They want to believe that they are colorblind (and claim that they are) because they have been taught that this is the appropriate response to racism. The research demonstrates, however, that they do, in fact see color. This disturbing finding demonstrates the need for education around these issues in that if we continue to promote the notion that colorblindness is a socially just goal to

strive for, and perhaps one that allows us to hold on to the false claim that if we are colorblind we can't be racist, we are at best doing a disservice to the social justice movement, and at worst potentially damaging race relations on a continuous basis.

Additionally, if the presumed goal of colorblindness is to ignore our differences, that is not happening. Again, this research demonstrates that we do, in fact, see and acknowledge racial differences. Moreover, the premise that colorblindness will solve racism is challenged here as this research shows that a colorblind mentality actually exacerbates discomfort, which decreases the likelihood of building relationships across differences. This is the case, too, when dealing with insensitive comments whether by students or colleagues. Colorblindness then not only serves to ignore that race has any impact on our lives, but also lets us off the hook from responding to racism when it arises inside or outside the classroom.

Interestingly, and contrary to the literature, there was no significant difference between white faculty and faculty of color in terms of who was more likely to be colorblind. Further, there was no significant difference between white faculty and faculty of color in terms of acknowledging that privilege for whites exists. Perhaps this is due to the fact that faculty of color who have succeeded in the system as evidenced by the fact that they have become faculty members in the academy absorb the same messages as white people do, and thus, may also buy into both the notions that we are all equal now, and that colorblindness is the ultimate goal to strive for. Gordon (2005) explains that if we perceive colorblindness on the individual level, "It becomes a way to validate ourselves as 'good' people without having to relinquish the privileges that we receive from the existing system" (p. 140). If we are "good," then we must not be part of the

problem. This rationale can serve to quash cultural inclusiveness, and can hinder any kind of self-reflection on what each of us can do to become agents of change in this area.

### **Conclusion**

The American Psychological Association (APA, 1997), in a pamphlet on color-blind racial attitudes, concluded that "research conducted for more than two decades strongly supports the view that we cannot be, nor should we be, colorblind" (p. 3). APA further provided a critique of the colorblind perspective arguing that a colorblind approach

ignores research showing that, even among well-intentioned people, skin color . . . figures prominently in everyday attitudes and behavior. Thus, to get beyond racism and other similar forms of prejudice, we must first take the differences between people into account. (p. 2)

Gay and Kirkland (2003) advocate "self-reflection and cultural critical consciousness" as essential for increasing culturally inclusive pedagogy. The authors state that this process involves

thoroughly analyzing and carefully monitoring both personal beliefs and instructional behaviors about the value of cultural diversity, and the best ways to teach ethnically different students for maximum positive effects. Corresponding behaviors have to be changed to incorporate more positive knowledge and perceptions of cultural diversity.

And they add that to make education more relevant to students of traditionally marginalized groups, educators "need to have a thorough understanding of their own

cultures and the cultures of different ethnic groups, as well as how this affects teaching and learning behaviors” (p. 182).

Educators are rarely, if ever, given the opportunity to consider social differences, nor the chance to reflect on their own attitudes and behavior inside or outside the classroom (Samuels, 2014). This in itself fosters colorblindness for it ignores, and by extension teaches educators to ignore, social differences. One of the many consequences to this situation is that educators may not be aware if something they say or do might be construed as offensive to others, and may be unwittingly perpetuating microaggressions against other campus members.

In any educational setting, providing an opportunity for awareness, self-reflection, knowledge, and skill building on issues of diversity and cultural inclusiveness is critical to ensure the belongingness of students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Sue et al. (2007) confirmed this need by stating, “The prerequisite for cultural competence has always been racial self-awareness” (p. 283). And it could be argued that part of the education of all teachers must be the subtle forms of not just racism, but also sexism, heterosexism, ableism, etc., that they might perpetuate unknowingly.

What we don’t know we don’t know is also known as implicit or unconscious bias. Implicit bias is covert, unconscious prejudice against a particular social group (Sue, 2010). If we are not aware of our biases, we are not likely to work to change them. One way of learning which implicit biases we hold is by using Harvard University’s Project Implicit website. By taking one of their many brief Implicit Association Tests (IAT), anyone can uncover their own biases around race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, among others. The IAT measures attitudes and prejudices toward specific groups and

is available on the Internet. The test asks respondents to quickly categorize words or images as positive or negative by the click of one or another letter on the keyboard (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). Once we know what our implicit biases are, we can work to change them.

Research shows that when we challenge a stereotype in our minds before we interact with someone who is a member of a particular social group, we can overcome our biases. Powell (2012) cites three ways that science has shown we can conquer negative biases. The first is by viewing positive images of people from stereotyped groups. Even simply invoking those images in our minds can overcome bias. Second, when organization members see a person of color in a leadership position, prejudice decreases throughout the organization. And third, cross-cultural relationships reduce implicit bias.

To minimize microaggressions, we need to become aware that we have said or done something offensive, and so must be open to other people's critique of our behavior. We can consider what our intent was, but what is most important is learning about the impact our actions have on others. What underlying messages are we sending through our words, gestures, and behaviors (Sue, 2010)? As we commit to learning more about the ways we might be contributing to microaggressions, and we continue to build relationships across differences, we can begin to uncover the attitudes, language, and behaviors that serve to increase exclusion.

To challenge the systems that maintain colorblindness, we must acknowledge all of our privileged identities (whether we are male or heterosexual or white or wealthy, etc.) and verbalize them. This serves as a cue to people from traditionally marginalized

social groups that we acknowledge the current system of social inequalities and we understand or are beginning to understand how our privileges operate in our lives to include us and exclude others (Samuels, 2014). If we can recognize our own identities, it provides the space and opportunity for others to acknowledge and affirm their own (Gordon, 2005).

In order for this self-reflection and awareness to occur, Delpit (1988) suggests “we must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness” (p. 297). This type of deep self-reflection requires some courage to make the invisible, visible; to see and acknowledge what we don’t want to see and acknowledge. To be, as Hobson (2014) declares, color *brave*, not color*blind*. We need to educate ourselves and other educators on the realities of social inequalities and the fact that colorblindness is not only ill advised, but also detrimental to the very goals those who adhere to it presumably subscribe to.

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