

# Unpacking “Colorblindness”\*/Post-Racialism

Developed by Dena R. Samuels, PhD

[www.denasamuels.com](http://www.denasamuels.com)

\* Note: The term “colorblindness” has been used in the academy for over a century to mean *freedom from racial bias*. More recently, it has been argued that it is an ableist term, not to be confused with the medical condition of the same name. It is used here in conjunction with the term “post-racial” for the purpose of unpacking both the word and the concept.

Following the Civil War when Jim Crow segregation was established, white supremacy was overtly racist maintaining clear economic, political and social lines based on race. Race mattered and white dominated, and this was public knowledge.

Whiteness began its change from white supremacy to what we now refer to as “colorblindness” during the Civil Rights period. The change came following Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech, in which he stated, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

Blatant racism in the post-Civil Rights era became socially undesirable, and Dr. King’s words were often mythologized as expressing the notion that we live in a post-racial society where color and race no longer matter. The social structure and racial hierarchy in the U.S., however, did not change. White supremacist ideology continues to remain intact, perpetuating racial inequality. Today, people of color continue to be killed, deported, and discredited, based on their race. At the same time, “colorblindness” or “post-racial” sentiments also remain. This allows white people to maintain their privileged status in society while at the same time pretending that race/color is irrelevant, and that we as a society have gotten beyond the idea of race. It is typically from a well-meaning and well-intentioned white person to a person of color that we hear the words, “I don’t see your race.” The consequence, however, is it not only denies the recipient’s existence and experience, but allows the one who offers these words, to deny their own white privilege.

**Those who adhere to colorblindness/post-racialism want racism to go away. But getting rid of the idea of race will not eliminate racism. In fact, it is a form of aversive racism.**

*Colorblindness* or *post-racialism* is characterized by the following features:

- Denies that race makes a difference in people’s lives.
  - Based on the overt and covert racism that still exists, 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).
- Assumes 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 movement (White Power, KKK, etc.). This image reinforces the idea that anyone else can’t possibly be racist in any way, or even have racist thoughts.
- Sees whiteness as the standard to which all other racial/ethnic groups must aspire.
  - Colorblindness/post-racialism believes we all will, and should, assimilate into the “mainstream,” or in other words, *whiteness*.

- Supposes that we are *only* individuals, and ignores that we are also part of a *system* of social inequalities that affects all of our lives.
  - Culture supports stereotypes and social hierarchies. Through exposure to cultural ideologies, including an adherence to the notion of colorblindness/post-racialism, 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
- Claims that to notice and/or mention race must be racist, and therefore, taboo.
  - People do, in fact, see race; we have just been taught not to discuss it. Pretending we “don’t see race” is dishonest, discounts the impact race has on our lives, and studies show it is not an effective strategy to combat racism.
- Considers intent, not impact, as important.
  - Due to 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.” Though well-intentioned, the impact of colorblindness/post-racialism can leave scars that are difficult to heal.
- Color is beautiful and colorblindness can’t see it.
  - Colorblindness/post-racialism can serve to disconnect one person from another; it can sever relationships as it continues to discount and discredit lived experiences.

Many whites are deeply afraid of dealing with race for fear of appearing racist. Colorblindness/post-racialism serves to deny race as a factor that still advantages whites at the expense of people of color. With colorblindness as a prevailing notion, white still dominates.

### **An Intersectional Approach:**

Seeing the ways in which colorblindness/post-racialism challenges equality, and disconnects us from others, in what ways might ignoring other forms of oppression (based on gender, sexual orientation, etc.) produce the same result?

#### References:

- Anderson, K. J. (2010). *Benign bigotry: The psychology of subtle prejudice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2009). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Rowman and Littlefield.
- Ferber, A. L. (2007). Whiteness studies and the erasure of gender. *Sociology Compass*, 1(1), 265-282.
- Gallagher, C. (2009). Color-blinded America or how the media and politics have made racism and racial inequality yesterday’s social problem. In A. Ferber, C. M. Jiménez, A. O’Reilly Herrera, & D. R. Samuels (Eds.), *The matrix reader: Examining the dynamics of oppression and privilege* (pp. 548-551). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Hitchcock, J. (2002). *Lifting the white veil: An exploration of white American culture in a multiracial context*. Crandall, Dostie & Douglass Books.
- Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. Wiley.
- and work by M. Duncan Rinehart, Ph.D. 2004.