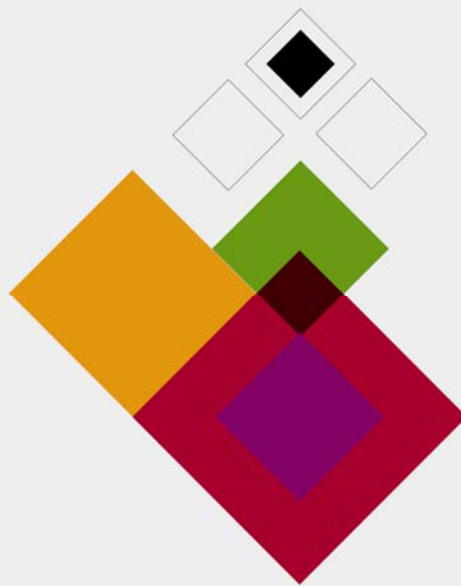


# The Dangers of *Not* Speaking About Race



**A Summary of Research Affirming the Merits of a Color-Conscious Approach to Racial Communication and Equity.**

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## Foreword

The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity has a number of projects that engage the question of how most effectively to address issues of race justice. In some of our work we specifically examine how people talk about race and how such conversations impact their behavior. In other work we look at how issue "frames" operate. And in still other projects we look at the efficacy of using class-based or universal policy approaches to racial matters. These projects cover large and complicated conceptual territory; our findings are sometimes counterintuitive.

It is impossible to quickly summarize all of this work, much of it ongoing. What we can say at this point is that context, audience, and environment all matter in determining how best to promote racial justice. We have found that even racial justice advocates sometimes bring an incomplete understanding of race, class, and their interaction, and that this partial understanding affects the questions they ask and the conclusions they draw about the value of their efforts.

The following pages summarize the findings of a study assessing the relative efficacy of color-conscious and color-blind approaches to promoting racial equity. This study, directed by Kirwan researcher Dr. Phil Mazzocco, concludes that a properly structured color-conscious approach can effectively build support for affirmative action policies even among self-identified conservatives. The finding is consistent with a decade of social psychological and sociological research showing that color-conscious communications are much more likely than color-blind approaches to provide solutions to racial problems such as discrimination and inter-group conflict.


We are happy to provide a longer, more detailed write-up of this work to interested readers.

If you are interested in seeing related Kirwan work please visit our web site ([www.kirwaninstitute.org](http://www.kirwaninstitute.org)) or contact us. As we continue to develop this work, we will reach out to many of you for feedback and suggestions.

Sincerely,



Andrew Grant-Thomas  
Deputy Director



John Powell  
Director

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Copies of the unpublished manuscript (Mazzocco & Newhart, 2006) discussed within can be obtained by contacting Philip Mazzocco ([mazzocco.6@osu.edu](mailto:mazzocco.6@osu.edu)).

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## The Dangers of *Not* Speaking About Race: An Overview

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In the face of large and persistent racial disparities, racial justice advocates continue to debate the relative merits of color-blind and color-conscious approaches to promoting racial equality. Advocates of color-blind approaches argue that social policies and communications that avoid the issue of race will attract more public support and be more effective in the long run. Advocates of color-conscious approaches acknowledge that race is often a divisive issue in American life, but contend that policies and interventions based on less divisive distinctions, such as social class, can at best provide only partial solutions to problems grounded in racial identity.

A robust and growing body of research within the social sciences suggests that a thoughtful color-conscious approach to social policy and related messaging indeed can attract public support for racially equitable policies and is likely to be more effective than a color-blind approach. Below, we compare and contrast the color-blind and color-conscious approaches to social policy and communication framing around race in light of the available research findings.



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## The State of Current Theory and Research

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The color-blind approach, popularized in the mid-1980s, is informed by research and theory developed within the field of social psychology.<sup>1</sup> Because individual self-esteem derives in part from group memberships, people generally want to belong to the “best” groups. When group boundaries are flexible and inclusive, we often seek membership in groups perceived as high in status. Racial group boundaries, however, are typically “hard” and inflexible. Thus, we are driven to *perceive* our own racial group as the best (in-group love), and to *perceive* other racial groups as inferior (out-group hatred). This impulse is reflected in our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. The thought component corresponds to stereotyping (negative beliefs and expectations regarding out-groups). The feeling component corresponds to emotional prejudice (in-group love or out-group hatred). Motivated by these thoughts and feelings, we tend to favor members of our own group and discriminate against members of other groups.

Social psychological research done in the 1980s and early 1990s generally supported the view that drawing attention to race in any way would automatically result in stereotyping and that such stereotyping would invariably lead to prejudice and discrimination. Many social psychologists therefore concluded that it would be best to divert attention away from race and toward individual characteristics or higher-level categories such as humanity (two kinds of color-blind approaches). However, subsequent work revealed that racial categorization occurs automatically and that efforts to minimize attention to race do not consistently reduce prejudice or discrimination (see Park & Judd, 2005).<sup>2</sup> Not only are we insistently color-conscious with respect to others, but the self-esteem benefits we derive from our racial group memberships mean that we are equally color-conscious with respect to our own identities (Hewstone, 1996). Diverting attention away from race, it seems, is simply not possible.

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<sup>1</sup> See Park & Judd (2005) for a comprehensive review of the research covered in this section.

<sup>2</sup> Some research documents an *increase* in racial tensions in some settings in conjunction with the color-blind approach to race (e.g., Schofield, 1986).

If we cannot divert attention from race, are we doomed, then, to remain divided by it? It is certainly true that color-conscious approaches can create or exacerbate tensions in settings where racial groups are believed to compete with each other for social status or opportunities. However, work on a multicultural orientation has demonstrated that it is possible to invoke race in ways that do not trigger negative stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination. By “multiculturalism” we mean a color-conscious approach that fosters awareness of racial and ethnic differences and an appreciation of how racial diversity contributes to societal health and success. Under the multiculturalism frame, pride in being a member of the “best” group is replaced by the pride that comes with membership in a group with something unique and valuable to contribute to the larger society. Under this frame we are likely to regard the strengths of other groups as socially beneficial rather than threatening.

A growing stream of empirical research within social psychology affirms the benefits of encouraging a multicultural perspective on race. For example, two recent studies found that multicultural frames that highlighted racial categories reduced prejudice but that color-blind frames did not (Walsko, Park, Judd, and Wittenbrink 2000; Richeson and Nussbaum 2004). By drawing people’s attention to the positive attributes of groups to which they do not belong, color-conscious approaches are much more likely than color-blind approaches to provide solutions to problems such as prejudice, discrimination, and inter-group conflict.



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## “Color-Blind Racism”

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The research summarized in the previous section suggests that a color-conscious, multicultural approach to race relations is much more likely than a color-blind approach to reduce racial bias. As the research presented in this section suggests, a color-conscious approach to social policymaking is also preferable insofar as it allows us to draw attention to enduring racial disparities, as well as to the structural factors that produce them. A color-blind policy strategy necessarily deflects attention from those crucial realities.

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has constructed a theory of “color-blind racism” based on ignorance or denial of racial disparities and underlying structural factors (see also Carr, 1997). He suggests that in the United States race-related issues are understood primarily by means of four dominant frames (Bonilla-Silva 2003). The first frame involves a minimization of the existence of ongoing racial disparities. To the extent that disparities are acknowledged at all, the second frame blames them on pathological non-White cultures, rather than on structural constraints or White privilege. The third frame justifies racial phenomena as natural (e.g., racial segregation as a natural result of our preference to interact with others like ourselves). Finally, the fourth frame upholds ideals such as equality and meritocracy, but either fails to take into account important preconditions such as a balanced playing field or assumes a balanced playing field based on the first frame.

Ironically, each of these four color-blind frames can legitimately be defended as “non-racist,” and Bonilla-Silva argues that a person’s embrace of the frames does not imply prejudice on his or her part. Statements consistent with the four frames can be sincerely prefaced by “I’m really not a racist, but...” Nevertheless, color-blind racism tends to produce harmful outcomes insofar as acceptance of its frames engenders opposition to social policies that promote racial equality. If one believes that there are no racial disparities, or that existing disparities are the “fault” of people of color, or are natural phenomena, then there is no need for policies intended to reduce those disparities. Moreover, any race-targeted program can be seen as superficially inconsistent with the principles of equal opportunity and meritocracy.



## Empirical Investigations

Using a sample of 331 white college students, Mazzocco and Newhart (2006, Study 1) recently measured individual differences in color-blind racism. They found that color-blind racism was an extremely powerful predictor of opposition to programs such as affirmative action. In fact, differences in the degree of adherence to the tenets of color-blind racism were better predictors of students' racial policy attitudes than gender, family income level, prejudice, or political ideology. These findings were replicated in a second study and strongly suggest that attempts to gain public support for racially progressive social policy must account for color-blind racism.

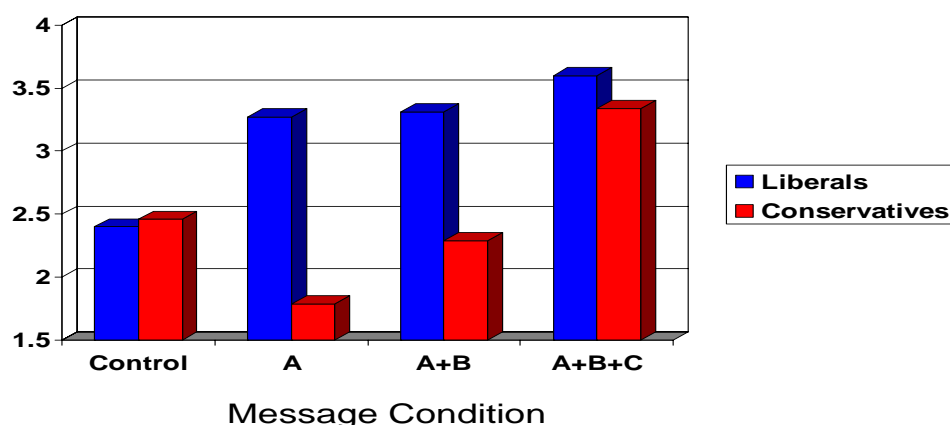
In a follow-up study by Mazzocco and Newhart (2006, Study 2), the four frames of color-blind racism were countered by a series of persuasive arguments. One hundred sixty-seven college students were given messages that countered the frames of color-blind racism. The first component (Message A) countered the first color-blind frame by alerting participants to ongoing racial disparities. The second (Message B) countered frames 2 and 3 by explaining these disparities as the result of decidedly unnatural past and present structural constraints. The third component (Message C) countered the fourth frame by arguing against the blind application of abstract notions such as meritocracy. In the study, one group of participants received only message A, another group received both messages A and B, and a third group received all three message components (A, B, and C). A fourth group of students received no messages at all.

**Message A – Contained information regarding racial disparities.**

**Message B – Provided structural explanations for racial disparities**

**Message C – Critiqued the misapplication of concepts like meritocracy  
and equal opportunity.**

Figure 1 – Support for Progressive Racial Policy



Not surprisingly, self-identified liberals were more likely to support programs like affirmative action the more messages they received. On the other hand, conservatives who received only message A, or only messages A and B, were actually *less* supportive of progressive racial policies than those who received no messages at all. We speculate that conservatives exposed only to counters against some, but not all, of the color-blind racism frames simply invoked the remaining frames to avoid persuasion, believing policies such as affirmative action to be inconsistent with their political ideologies. However, as Figure 1 shows, when all four frames were effectively addressed, conservatives yielded in their opposition.<sup>3</sup>

It should be noted that in this research liberals and conservatives who received no messages had similarly low levels of support for progressive racial policy. Correspondingly, despite their traditional support for progressive social policy, liberals were no different in their acceptance of the color-blind racism frames than conservatives. These findings strongly attest to the importance of maintaining a color-conscious approach to race. Further studies will continue to address the relationship between political ideology, color-blind racism, and racial policy attitudes.

<sup>3</sup> Attitudes towards several types of racial policy were combined into a composite with a possible range of one to nine. Lower scores indicated less support for the racial policies in question. Examination of Figure 1 reveals that no group was above five, the scale midpoint, indicating continuing opposition. However, it should also be noted that the messages that participants read were not professionally produced, and also were not long (requiring only a few minutes to read). What is key is that statistically significant movement on the attitude composite did occur between the control group and the group who received all message components, demonstrating that racial policy attitudes are malleable if targeted using the color-blind racism framework.

Our initial studies drew on college students, a group often assumed to be more liberal than the average American. However, in these studies more students reported their primary party affiliation as Republican than reported Democrat or Independent combined. Furthermore, our research participants were likely to have taken the issue of racial policy seriously given that they would all likely compete with non-Whites for jobs or advanced degree positions in the near future -- and had recently done so in the college application process. Our future research will target more diverse adult samples.<sup>4</sup>

The color-blind approach assumes that communications that deal explicitly with the issue of race will meet with resistance. The studies reported above suggest that color-conscious approaches will be resisted by some groups (i.e., conservatives), but only if not carefully constructed. It is probable that past studies purporting to demonstrate the dangers of frank talk about race and racial inequality have failed to adequately address the mental frames associated with color-blind racism. In our own study reported above, we showed that merely talking about racial disparities actually *reduced* support for progressive racial policy among conservatives. However, when all the color-blind frames were addressed simultaneously, opposition declined appreciably.



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## Conclusions and Recommendations

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**R**ace can be a divisive issue. It is tempting to take a color-blind approach that reduces attention to race and instead refers to other categories, such as class. In fact, until recently, the social scientific literature appeared to support this course of action. However, recent advances within the fields of social psychology and sociology have demonstrated that the color-blind approach to race may be impractical, at best, and at worst harmful to the quest for racial equality and interracial good will. In contrast, a color-conscious approach is not only feasible, but has been proven to be an effective means of targeting race-related attitudes. Color-conscious approaches show promise in fostering an appreciation of another group's positive societal contributions, as well as structural constraints and advantages. Both of these factors should encourage support for programs such as affirmative action, and may also be instrumental in the battle to reduce prejudice, discrimination, and inter-group conflict.

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<sup>4</sup> Mazzocco and Newhart's (2006) two studies also included non-white participants. By and large, race (as well as gender and family income level) played only a trivial role in determining support for the color-blind frames.



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