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LET'S CHECK YOU OUT: ARE YOU REALLY DOWN WITH DIVERSITY?

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JAELY DELEON-WRIGHT

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Jaely Deleon-Wright

Author's Name

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Date

Jackson College of Graduate Studies at the University of Central Oklahoma

A THESIS APPROVED FOR

the Department of Psychology in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Arts

By

**Alicia Limke-
McLean**

Digitally signed by Alicia Limke-
McLean
Date: 2020.05.03 10:20:21 -05'00'

Committee Chairperson

Robert D. Mather

Digitally signed by Robert D. Mather
DN: cn=Robert D. Mather, o=University of Central
Oklahoma, ou=Jackson College of Graduate
Studies, email=rmather@uco.edu, c=US
Date: 2020.05.04 10:00:52 -05'00'

Committee Member

Kristi L. Archuleta

Digitally signed by Kristi L.
Archuleta
Date: 2020.05.04 18:10:54 -05'00'

Committee Member

Committee Member

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Abstract

In United States today, the presence of people of color is becoming more of a common sight, which influences academic communities. There is more diversity in the classroom and in the work-place. Although this true, often times diversity is not enough for people of color feel included, and like they have someone to whom they can relate. There are several universities across the country that are attempting to implement multicultural diversity messages whereas others are implementing color-blind ideologies. A color-blind ideology states that people of color are not unique, but instead everyone is treated the same regardless of the color of race, gender, or age. With a multicultural diversity message in place, diversity and inclusiveness is emphasized, possibly allowing people of color to feel more included. The present study examines how colorblind and multicultural diversity messages influence the behavior and impressions of undergraduate students on different universities. Participants were exposed to either colorblind or multi-cultural diversity messages and then expressed whether they anticipated racial biases or not. Participants also completed tests of mathematics and verbal aptitude to assess whether messages affect cognitive abilities. The results of this study found that participants who read a diversity message from the university expected lower levels of bias from faculty, students, and administration than participants who read a color-blind message from the university.

Let's Check You Out: Are You Really Down with Diversity?

Background

As time has gone by, minority groups strive for equal representation. Minority groups and marginalized communities are searching for acceptance and understanding in all parts of the world and in everyday settings. This strive for equal representation has given young adults the motivation to start becoming more educated and trained at jobs that their ancestors and families previously did not do. Many students were not aware of the opportunities they could have in an academic setting, they may not have known how to go about getting an education beyond high school, or there may have simply been in different circumstances.

Although there is an increase in minority students in academic settings, the number of students actually in leadership roles at their schools is *not* increasing (Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999). Often times, even if the minority students are in leadership roles, they might feel the need to overcompensate due to the stigma and racial climate that there is today (Harper et al., 2011). Just because diversity and the amount of people of color is increasing in the workplace and in academia, it does not mean that the diversity is always accepted or desired.

To try to combat racism in educational settings, universities have traditionally taken two different approaches. In one, color-blind messaging attempts to minimize differences between groups, emphasizing that everyone should be treated the same regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or age. In the other, multicultural diversity messaging attempts to emphasize differences but value inclusivity (Wilton, Good, Moss-Racusin, & Sanchez, 2015).

Problems Minority Students Face

As diversity in academia and the workplace has increased, the research on racial and ethnic minority groups has also increased. Students who are of color tend to not work with as many people of color as they do White students, and when they do, they are treated differently by their peers (Harper et al., 2011). When the students of color are in leadership roles, they do not receive the same respect and treatment that their White male co-workers receive. Often, the people they were in charge of supervising would not take them as seriously, would joke around with them, and try to “code switch” and act differently when with them. These students of color often state they feel the need to prove that they are “competent, capable, and smart enough” because the people they were surrounded by did not think they were. Experiences like these are what make some think that there needs to be a program in place to teach students about diversity, appropriate behaviors, and possible anti-racist seminars (Hagopian et al., 2018).

These types of experiences lead to a much bigger and deeper conversation. Could it be that universities are not implementing diversity and inclusion policies which does not allow people of color to feel accepted? Could it be that universities are not teaching students that diversity is something more common than one thinks? As most people know, different universities have policies and statements that talk about diversity on campuses. Although these considerations seem like simple statements, the meaning and influence they may have on potential students is considerable. Research shows that these statements not only influence people of color, but in particular women of color (Samuel, 2004; Wilton, Good, Moss-Racusin, & Sanchez, 2015). For example, female students of

color who are shown colorblind university messages perform more poorly academically than White female students shown multicultural university messages. These results could have occurred because women of color felt like they were at risk of stigma, prejudice, and stereotypes due to both their race and gender (cf. Steele, 1997). Not only do women of color have to face stigmas and stereotypes because of their gender, but also because of their race and ethnicity. Although one might think this is something that only happens in a predominately White setting, there are also racial stigmas within the minority community. This is something that should not be taken lightly, nor should it be ignored. It increases the stereotypes and expectations for people of color in day to day life.

The more students see diversity being taught in schools, the safer they felt and reported less discrimination (Collado, 2017). What students of color also realized when interacting with different faculty and staff at their schools was that often times the faculty and staff would not acknowledge their race (McCoy, Winkle-Wagner, & Luedke, 2015). The staff and faculty would try to maintain a color-blind perspective to not be perceived as racist to the students.

While thinking of all of the struggles students may face in the academia world, it is important to remember that they also face microaggressions at home as well (Morgan & Langrehr, 2019). These types of aggressions are not limited to being in public, or strangers. For example, transracially adoptive parents do not always embrace diversity and maintain color-blind ideologies. This causes them to not validate microaggressions and institutionalized racism that their adoptive children face. Similarly, individuals in interracial relationships (in which one partner is Black and the other partner is White)

often report experiencing microaggressions in interactions with the families of their significant others (Pryor, 2018).

Students have also reported different experiences of microaggressions at predominately White universities. For example, students report seeing racial slurs written in public spaces, experiencing unequal and segregated treatment, noticing the denial of racism by their peers, and hearing racist jokes that they often had to ignore (Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012). Women of color – in particular Black women – also report experiencing microaggressions due to the stereotypes that exist about them (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Browne, 2016).

This validation and understanding plays a role in individuals' mental health. Individuals experience a need for relatedness to develop positive feelings and relationships (Reeve, 2015) and meeting this need is imperative for psychological well-being. The ability to relate to others – and to feel accepted by them – influences not only mental health but the type of social comparisons that students might experience can also influence how they perceive themselves. For example, Black women who experience gendered racial microaggressions are more likely to have negative mental and physical health issues than those who do not (Lewis, Williams, Peppers, & Gadson, 2017).

Challenging Color-Blind Ideology

The way that people of color are treated can influence many parts of their lives. Color-blind ideology is slowly becoming the more dominant type of ideology in the United States. This is something that is evidently a problem given that diversity is increasing in this country. Whether it is in the workplace, academia, or any other setting, there are different types of people around individuals every single day. This does not only

mean people of a different race, but also a different ethnicity, different gender, and different religious views. These views need to be challenged to help individuals grow and be more sympathetic and kinder toward others. It was never written in history that only a certain group of people deserved to be acknowledged or allowed acceptance.

One thing that might help marginalized minority groups is that universities policies be implemented in order to help these issues be addressed. The more people are exposed to their own racial biases, the more likely they are to correct them (Perry, Murphy, & Dovidio, 2015). If students are less aware of their biases, they will become more defensive when someone tries to correct them or address the bias. The less open students are to diversity issues, the more likely they are to report greater levels of color-blind racism ideology (Neville, Poteat, Lewis, & Spanierman, 2014). However, the more students participate and are exposed to diversity events at universities, the more likely they are to challenge their color-blind ideology.

Another way to challenge color-blind ideology and possibly help tackle racism is to have people of color tell their stories of the things they encounter (Han & Leonard, 2017). Hearing stories and being educated by others regarding their experiences with diversity gives individuals different perspectives. Moreover, teaching children at a young age about diversity, inclusion, racism, and possible White privilege allows them to learn about it and change their perspectives sooner than they might otherwise (Lucia & Ruggirello, 2007).

Current Project

The different types of experiences that people of color face always go back racism and acts of discrimination. Whether they are microaggressions in dorms or in the

classroom, or something as simple as a diversity and inclusion message, people of color are affected by it. The purpose of the current project is to extend previous research that investigated differences in university messaging on academic performance (cf. Samuel, 2004; Steele, 1997; Wilton et al., 2015) to include perceptions of likely bias at the university by students, faculty, and administration.

Method

Participants

Participants registered through Sona-Systems (an experiment facilitation and registration website through the University of Central Oklahoma) to participate in this study. Of the 99 participants, 15.31% identified as male, 83.67% identified as female, and 1.02% identified as non-binary. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 69 ($M = 27.07$, $SD = 12.52$). Slightly over half of the participants identified as White/Caucasian (58.59%). Of the remaining, 7.07% were Black/African American, 5.05% were American Indian/Alaska Native, 9.09% were Asian, 1.01% were Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 11.11% were Hispanic/Latinx, 4.04% were multiracial, and 4.04% identified “other” race/ethnicity.

Of the 99 participants, 53.54% indicated they were not in a relationship, 19.19% were married, 3.03% were engaged and living with their partners, 4.04% were dating and living with their partners, 19.19% were dating and not living with their partners, and 1.01% were in other types of relationships. Moreover, 88.89% indicated they were straight/heterosexual, 3.03% were gay/lesbian, 4.04% were bisexual/pansexual, and 4.04% were asexual.

Materials

University messaging and perceptions of bias. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two university messages. In the color-blind condition, the message read as follows, “At University X, we encourage our diverse student body to embrace their similarities. We feel that focusing on similarities creates a more unified, exciting, and collaborative environment for students to grow and make friends. Indeed, such an inclusive and accepting environment helps our students learn and enables all students to succeed in the classroom and beyond. Your race, ethnicity, gender, and religion are immaterial as soon as you walk on our campus.” In the multicultural condition, the message read as follows, “At University X, we believe that embracing our diversity enriches our campus. We feel that focusing on diversity creates a more unified, exciting, and collaborative environment for students to grow and make friends. Indeed, such a diverse environment helps our students learn and enables all students to succeed in the classroom and beyond. As soon as you walk on our campus, you’ll appreciate the strength that we derive from our diversity.” Following the statement, participants rated the extent to which they expected to encounter cultural bias from other students, faculty, and administration on a scale of 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). These three items were summed so that the possible range of scores for bias was 3 to 21.

Academic performance. Participants completed two questions from a practice test for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT; see www.colleagereadiness.collegeboard.org): one from the verbal section and one from the mathematical section. Calculators were not necessary for the mathematical question. Each question contained four multiple choice

answers (one of which was correct). The answers were then coded as 1 = correct and 0 = not correct.

Demographic questions. Participants also answered several demographic questions about themselves including age, gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, relationship status, and native language.

Procedure

After registering for the study, participants were directed to www.uco.qualtrics.com. There was a statement on the informed consent form that read “By continuing I affirm that I am at least 18 years of age.” By continuing, they indicated their consent to participate in the project. Each participant completed personality measures (not used in this study) and were randomly assigned to a university diversity message (color-blind or multicultural). Following the message, participants indicated their perceptions of likely experiencing university bias, completed questions of measuring academic performance, and responded demographic questions.

Results

A 2 (race: White or non-White) x 2 (message: color-blind or multicultural) between-subjects multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) examined differences in perceptions of likely bias at the university, verbal aptitude, and mathematical aptitude. Table 1 displays the means and standard errors for each of the dependent variables. There was a main effect of race on bias perception, $F(1, 95) = 5.17, p = .03, \eta^2 = .05$. Specifically, individuals who were White ($M = 9.68, SE = 0.75$) expected lower levels of university bias than individuals who were non-White ($M = 12.32, SE = 0.89$). There was also a marginal effect of message on bias perception, $F(1, 95) = 2.95, p = .09, \eta^2 = .03$.

Specifically, individuals in the multicultural condition ($M = 12.00, SE = 0.84$) expected marginally higher levels of university bias than individuals in the color-blind condition ($M = 10.00, SE = 0.84$). There were no other significant differences observed.

Discussion

The present study demonstrated a significant effect of minority status and a marginal effect of message content on expectations of bias at universities. Not surprisingly, individuals of race/ethnicity minorities expected higher levels of bias than White individuals. The present research highlights the relationship between colorblind and multi-cultural ideologies and anticipated biases. In this study, individuals in the multi-cultural condition who knew that the university was embracing diversity expected to experience less bias than individuals in the color-blind condition. That is, although it may seem like a positive to say that everyone is equal, the results suggest that across race and gender, people will still expect more biases in a setting with color-blind ideologies.

As academic institutions vow to accept diversity and be inclusive, it is important to note that the type of environment they provide for students is critical. Students need to be able to feel accepted and like they will not experience racial biases in settings in which they work hard. It is not uncommon for faculty and staff to implement colorblind ideologies (McCoy, Winkle-Wagner, & Luedke, 2015). It is possible that professors, who are working to mentor and guide students in the right direction, are not doing this intentionally. They may simply be trying to watch what they say for fear of seeming racist. This extra caution, however, may lead to an environment in which students struggle because differences that result from their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender might not be noted or highlighted. It could also lead to students not being

recognized or celebrated the way that they should be due to barriers they are breaking within their own minority groups.

Instead, it is important, especially in academic settings, to highlight both similarities and positive differences in people. Colorblind ideologies do not allow for differences to be celebrated in this way. It is essential to recognize and celebrate all students of color and embrace multiculturalism (Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000).

Limitations and Future Directions

First, it is important to note that the wording of the question regarding bias may have been somewhat ambiguous; therefore, it is possible that – because participants may have interpreted the question as also including biases against White students – effects for bias may have been minimized as a result. Future research should clarify the wording of the questions or separate them into both positive and negative biases.

Perhaps the biggest limitation, however, was the region in which the data were collected. In the state of Oklahoma – which is largely White – there have been many instances of racism toward people of color such as shootings towards Black people, microaggressions about language toward the Latinx community, insensitive comments about Native Americans, and much more. For the most part, the state of Oklahoma has a large Caucasian-American population and not a large population of people of color. The results could possibly be a little different if it was conducted in a different state such as California and New York, where there is a lot of experience with diversity. Although there is a lot of room for growth for this topic in research, however, it still expands the literature in multicultural psychology. Other limitations included not having a sample that was diverse and the vocabulary in the university messages could have had more specific

wording. The small sample of males made it impossible to analyze interactions of gender and race (which were originally predicted), so a larger and more diverse sample would be beneficial for future research. Additionally, future studies could focus specifically on minority groups and possibly perform different academic testing to see if multicultural or colorblind ideologies influence the way that students perform.

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Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics (Means and Standard Errors) for Minority Status and Messaging Condition on Bias Perception and Academic Performance.*

| | Color-Blind | | Multicultural | | <i>F</i> |
|-----------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|-------------------|
| | White | Non-White | White | Non-White | |
| Bias perception | 11.52 (1.09) | 12.48 (1.18) | 7.84 (1.02) | 12.17 (1.34) | 2.10 [^] |
| Math aptitude | 0.57 (0.10) | 0.52 (0.11) | 0.42 (0.09) | 0.57 (0.12) | 0.67 |
| Verbal aptitude | 0.48 (0.10) | 0.49 (0.11) | 0.65 (0.09) | 0.66 (0.09) | 0.47 |

Note. $N = 99$.

* $p < .05$. [^] $p < .10$.