Chapter 3

Colorblind Versus Multicultural Ideologies: Implications for Mental Health and Counseling

Jasmine M. Terwilliger, Nicholas Bach, Carli G. Bryan and Monnica T. Williams*  
Center for Mental Health Disparities, University of Louisville,  
Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, Louisville, KY, US

ABSTRACT

Americans are socialized to choose either a multicultural or colorblind approach when they interact with people from different cultural groups. Multiculturalism is the ideology that different cultural groups should be embraced while colorblindness is the ideology that cultural groups should be treated the same, without regard to attributes that make different groups unique. Although the intent for colorblindness was to create fairness, it often causes confusion and heightens prejudice between social groups. A comprehensive review of the literature indicates that multiculturalism is a psychologically healthier and more enriching ideology than colorblindness, which is correlated with negative mental health outcomes. However, many individuals adopt a colorblind ideology because it does not require learning about other cultures. It is suggested that multiculturalism should be promoted in organizations, the workplace, and in schools because of its merits. Counselors and therapists should utilize a multicultural approach in working with diverse clients to facilitate rapport and improve outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

Multiculturalism and colorblindness are two competing strategies used when Americans are faced with the common dilemma of how to interact with people from minority ethnoracial

* Corresponding author: Monnica T. Williams. Email address: m.williams@louisville.edu.
groups (Lewis, Chesler, and Forman, 2000). Multiculturalism is an ideology that promotes the maintenance of each distinctive ethnic group’s qualities, whereas colorblindness is the ideology that all ethnic groups should be treated the same, without regard to cultural attributes that make different groups unique (Levin et al., 2011).

In the United States, multiculturalism has not been embraced and European American culture has been accepted as the norm. Even before the Civil War, any group that was not “White” (European American) was devalued. Racism was blatant, and the marginalization of anyone who was not part of the majority was legally sanctioned, as illustrated by Jim Crow Laws, to preserve the power of the dominant group (in-group). “Colored” people were expected to accept European American culture, and European immigrants were expected to assimilate. Despite large cultural shifts during the Civil Rights Era, attitudes persist that implicitly encourage the promotion of European American culture over others (Helms, 1990).

The Census Bureau reports a continued increase in the number of people who are members of ethnoracial minority groups (Humes, Jones, and Ramirez, 2011). According to projections, by 2050 America will have a higher population of minorities than the White majority (Ortman and Guarneri, 2009). With an increase in people that are not part of the European American ethnoracial group, there is a greater need for understanding the various strategies for interacting with others.

COMPETING IDEOLOGIES

Multiculturalism has been shown to reduce racial prejudice and improve racial attitudes. For example, Levin et al. (2011) discovered that multiculturalism was negatively correlated to prejudice and promoted equality in social groups. This means that as multiculturalism increases, the level of social equality will increase as well. Another study showed that lower-prejudice individuals who were encouraged by multiculturalism showed more warmth and a positive opinion toward out-group individuals (Vorauer and Sasaki, 2010). Richeson and Nussbaum (2004) studied the relative impact of multiculturalism and colorblindness on racial attitudes and found that those exposed to the colorblind perspective produced more automatic racial bias whereas those exposed to the multicultural perspective generated more positive outcomes for ethnoracial relations.

One reason that multiculturalism may not be the ideology of choice is that it can be difficult to treat everyone fairly and differently at the same time. Those who are only comfortable with their own culture are often afraid of making mistakes when conversing with or approaching people from different cultures. Understanding and using multicultural ideology calls for education about the customs of other cultural groups, as well as recognizing people for being different, and taking this knowledge into consideration when interacting with them.

Colorblindness is the converse of multiculturalism and is an increasingly popular ideology in America, particularly among European Americans (Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, and Casas, 2007). In principle, colorblindness can be seen as equalizing in nature. The idea of colorblindness was built upon a need for fairness to all groups of people. It is speculated that colorblindness is more favored because it is easier for members of the majority culture to think of treating everyone the same rather than embracing new or different
cultures. Additionally, it has been shown at several universities that colorblindness is more popular than multiculturalism or assimilation when students are given the three options (Levin et al., 2011). Unfortunately, when the idea of “treating everyone the same” is proposed, it is typically from the prospective of the European American majority, implying that everyone should be treated as if they were culturally European American. The implicit message is then that European American culture is superior and minority cultures somehow deficient.

**Colorblindness and Social Interactions**

It has been suggested that colorblindness is practiced because non-minorities do not want to appear prejudiced. To test this idea, Norton, Vandello, Biga, and Darley (2008) conducted a research study in which college students made hypothetical college admissions decisions among sets of equally qualified African American and European American candidates. The students were more likely to choose the African American candidates over the European American candidates. The results of the study suggest that college students are concerned about appearing non-prejudiced due to heightened norms of political correctness across most college campuses (Norton et al., 2008). However, attempts such as these to appear non-prejudiced are a reflection of confusion and anxiety about how to respond in situations involving persons from different ethnoracial groups. This can lead to avoidance or negative feelings about minorities, simply because the majority individual does not know what s/he is “supposed” to do. This typically results in negative outcomes during minority-majority interpersonal interactions (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2005).

Research shows that people who support colorblindness may focus primarily on the dominant culture (Apfelbaum, Sommers, and Norton 2008). When people refuse to recognize minority cultures in a society, value and respect for these cultures decreases, causing negative attitudes towards minorities. These negative attitudes feed racism, illustrating a connection between racism and colorblindness.

In addition to being objectionable to minorities, colorblindness can be detrimental to non-minorities. Apfelbaum et al. (2008) suspect that many of the individuals who exhibit colorblindness are well-intentioned individuals who genuinely believe that colorblindness is a culturally sensitive approach to intergroup contact and agree that people intend to use colorblind behavior to prevent prejudice. To facilitate the goal of colorblindness, individuals may avoid the subject of race during interracial interactions. Paradoxically, research has shown that when the topic of race is avoided by European Americans, this leads to negative interpersonal perceptions on the part of African American observers, who then believe that such an approach is actually indicative of greater racial prejudice (Apfelbaum, Sommers, and Norton, 2008). Thus when a person is unwilling to acknowledge racial differences, it makes it appear as if that person does not understand how to interact properly with people from other ethnoracial groups.

Even though there have been several studies that have shown positive outcomes from multiculturalism for cross-cultural relations (Plaut, Thomas, and Goren, 2009; Richeson and Nussbaum, 2004; Ryan et al., 2007), some European Americans perceive it as a threat to their group’s core values (Morrison, Plaut, and Ybarra, 2010). This reaction is because such
individuals are concerned about preserving their in-group's social identity and status (Morrison and Ybarra, 2009). A good example of this is seen among those majority group members that are identified as having greater opposition toward affirmative action; they view such measures as harming their group rather than as helping others who have been disadvantaged (Lowery, Unzueta, Knowles, and Goff, 2006). Morrison et al. (2010) further concluded that those European Americans who highly identify with their ethnicity respond to multiculturalism with an increased level of prejudice against racial and ethnic minorities, whereas those who do not identify highly with their ethnicity have lower levels of prejudice. Although incorporating multiculturalism may be difficult for some it is nonetheless important to promote the appreciation of other cultures to provide an environment that will facilitate improved ethnoracial relations.

**NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF COLORBLINDNESS ON ETHNIC MINORITIES**

When colorblind ideology is practiced, it is more difficult to appreciate other cultures because individuals do not need to learn anything new. In one study on the impact of colorblind ideology on university students of color, minority students reported that their European American peers knew little, if anything about their ethnic group's histories or cultures (Lewis et al., 2000). Thus, it appears that many are unaware of the different cultures that comprise America due to colorblindness. Under the colorblind ideology, the unique features of different cultures are completely hidden. Furthermore, Lewis et al. suggests that colorblindness causes minorities to feel pressure to assimilate into European American culture while representing their own ethnic group. This can cause conflict and confusion in minority individuals, thus perpetuating a cycle of intra-ethnic negativity. Additionally, minorities are often negatively stereotyped, and using a multicultural approach instead of a colorblind approach will lead to a better understanding of minority cultures and decreased stereotyping (Lewis et al., 2000).

The direct effect of colorblindness on US ethnic minorities can be readily seen throughout the United States. For example, Tarca (2005) examined a public high school in Atlanta that had recently become populated with teenagers from an African American community. Black students at this high school were struggling largely because of the school faculty’s use of colorblind ideology. When asked how students of different ethnicities were treated, the high school principal stated that “when we talk about what's driven our policies here in this building, the fact that regardless of who you are, where you're from, where you live or who your parents are, if there's an issue dealing with the school we're going to treat you based on the behavior... regardless of who or where you come from.” Although the principal was trying to be fair with students, he did not take the time to consider that people from different cultures or backgrounds may act differently in certain situations. Ultimately, the faculty’s lack of understanding the Black students in the community only worsened the problem.

Fryberg and Stephens’ (2010) research on Native Americans noted that colorblindness allows European Americans to dismiss racial issues in society while being able to live comfortably with their apparent privilege. They point out that Native American culture is
misrepresented in society and many important facets of that culture have been erased from literature, media, and history. Native Americans continue to be represented in a historical context and rarely in a contemporary one. This research suggests that in a world that does not acknowledge ethnic minorities’ history and experiences, minorities feel alienated in school, workplaces, and organizations.

Colorblindness can be problematic in other contexts as well. For example, African Americans may be misdiagnosed by mental health providers when cultural differences in symptom expression are not taken into account (Whaley, 1998). Without considering adaptive responses to real experiences of racism, it is easy to misunderstand certain aspects of African American psychological development and behavior. For instance, in mental health, African Americans may be over diagnosed with psychotic disorders when only European American norms are considered (Whaley, 1998). A mistrust of European Americans, resulting from discriminatory experiences, may be misinterpreted by a medical professional as a sign of paranoid schizophrenia, contributing to incorrect treatments and the overrepresentation of African Americans in inpatient facilities (e.g., Snowden, Hastings, and Alvidrez, 2009).

**Organizations and Workplaces**

It is easy to miss cultural differences when colorblindness focuses on making everyone the same, and this is particularly true in the workplace. Researchers Stevens, Plaut, and Sanchez-Burks (2008) conducted research on organizations that celebrate diversity in the workplace versus the organizations that practice a colorblind ideology. They found that multiculturalism generated more positive views than colorblindness did from participants of different ethnic and culture groups employed at the organization. When multiculturalism was practiced, minority employees and volunteers reported feeling more comfortable and more expressive at work (Stevens et al. 2008). This suggests that multiculturalism ultimately improves organizations and businesses, as employers appreciate the cultural aspects of employees and the employees perform better.

Researchers Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, and Crosby (2008) conducted studies to determine cues that would trigger feelings of trust and security in African Americans in educational institutions and financial organizations. When more minorities were prominently featured in a newsletter at the institution, participants were more likely to trust the company than when fewer minorities were depicted. When few minorities were present, participants felt less comfortable in the company setting than when more minorities were represented.

This illustrates that the inclusion of varied ethnoreal groups created a sense of value for a more diverse clientele, which was not present in the colorblind condition where fewer minorities were represented (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008).

Happier employees are more likely to work harder due to feeling accepted and comfortable in organizations and workplaces. Researchers suggest that although colorblindness may be an easier way to run a workplace, it is not as effective as multiculturalism in achieving unity and respect amongst employees (Stevens et al. 2008). Stevens et al. (2008) introduce the concept of the All-Inclusive Multiculturalism (AIM) model in their research. The AIM model serves to promote positive and effective organizational change through the development of social capital and positive relationships at
work and enables organizational members to grow to their potential. Under the AIM model, employees respond to each other better, leading to an overall more successful company with an improved capacity to grow and expand financially. This model and ones similar to it may be helpful in successfully integrating multiculturalism into the work place.

**Acculturation and Acculturative Stress**

Acculturation is one of a few different ways individuals cope or fit in after moving to a new culture. Acculturation is defined as the phenomenon that results when groups of people from different cultures come into contact, leading to changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups (Berry, 1997).

Although acculturation includes changes that take place in both groups, there is usually more change in one of the groups, typically the minority group (Berry, 1998; Coatsworth, Maldonado-Molina, Pantin, and Szapocznik, 2005). Cross-culturally, it is important to understand the process of acculturation because so many of the people who emigrate from different countries are choosing to acculturate.

Some people have a positive experience and do not encounter much stress when they acculturate, but this is not typical. There is usually either some difficulty or stress associated with the process of acculturating. This psychological experience is called acculturative stress. High levels of acculturative stress can lead to depression, and in some cases suicide, and research has shown that those who achieve some degree of integration into the new culture experience the least stress (Berry, 1998). This is where multiculturalism can play an important role in the lives of minority and majority groups. When people are better educated about other cultures, it is easier for new people coming to the United States to be accepted and feel comfortable in their new homes. For example, many immigrants may have different needs, attitudes, and values learned from their previous environments that are often not addressed in the United States (Vasquez, 2011). Because colorblindness ignores these distinctions, it offers no help in decreasing acculturative stress.

**Multiculturalism in Schools**

Multiculturalism in schools is a concept that has received attention since students from different ethnoracial groups first began integrating in schools in the 1960s. However, true integration has never been achieved, despite attempts and balancing proportions of students throughout school districts via strategies such as bussing. Minority students continue to report exclusion from interaction with majority students (Lewis et al., 2000).

One problem is that a colorblind approach helps to maintain the misperception that Whiteness is normative, and therefore minority status is somehow less-than. One of the authors (MW) teaches multicultural psychology to undergraduates, and one exercise that students do early in the semester involves completion of a questionnaire about ethnic identity. There are often puzzled looks on the faces of the European American psychology students, as many have no idea how to answer questions about their ethnic group. They feel as if they have no ethnicity – they are simply White. The students seemed surprised to learn that all
people have a race and an ethnicity, including the European American student. Majority White status in the US allows European Americans to forget they belong to an ethnic group at all (McIntosh, 2003).

One problem is that not even educators understand multicultural issues, so they cannot adequately teach their students. The majority of teachers are European American, middle class individuals from suburban or rural backgrounds. Research points to the educational value of linking students’ lived experiences to their classroom learning, and in order for teachers to increase learning opportunities for all students, they must become knowledgeable about the cultural backgrounds of their own students (Bales and Saffold, 2011). Providing multicultural education to teachers and integrating it into school curricula is the first step to improving understanding between ethnorracial groups. It is possible to reduce prejudice when this type of education focuses on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components, which can result in positive ethnorracial relationships (Camicia, 2007). Increasing the multicultural education delivered to students and teachers alike is a method that has been shown to be effective in facilitating more harmonious cross-cultural interactions (Han and Thomas, 2010). It is even better to instill multicultural education to students at a young age because they will grow up with this knowledge and pass it on to others (Okoye-Johnson, 2011).

**IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY**

The traditional approaches to psychotherapy and diversity are often insensitive to the unique experiences of people of color. One study that focused on race and gender in psychotherapy found that incorporating an awareness of masculinity from a multicultural perspective is particularly important in the psychological practice of men (Wester, 2008). Wester (2008) describes Male Gender Role Conflict, a condition in which socialized gender roles lead to negative consequences in the individual or others. For example, male gender roles can prevent men from accepting treatment and seeking counseling because American culture tends to ignore the emotional needs of men due to stereotypes about masculinity. Compounding this is the fact that the emotional needs of stigmatized minorities, such as African Americans, are devalued due to negative stereotypes and their lower social status. Thus, when Black males attempt to seek treatment, they may encounter difficulty, particularly when treated using a colorblind approach.

Minority patients may be sensitized to racial slights, resulting in negative attitudes toward the therapist. Additionally, African American patients often evoke more complicated reactions from the therapist than European American patients since stereotypes of African Americans make them easier targets for therapists’ projections (Comas-Diaz and Jacobsen, 1991). One of the authors (MW) once observed the assessment of an African American patient by a senior psychologist who was European American. The patient was nervous, talking excessively, fidgeting, and getting in and out of his seat. At one point, the therapist said "down boy," to calm the patient, which the patient felt was degrading and made him angry. Not only were the patient’s actions being compared to those of a family pet, use of the word “boy” was particularly offensive as this term has historically been used to demean African American males.
The patient's offense was interpreted by the therapist as a sign of defensiveness, which would therefore make him a poor candidate for psychotherapy, and the patient was denied treatment. The senior therapist failed to understand the layers of insult embedded into his communications due to a lack of cultural understanding. A more comprehensive understanding of these issues would have resulted in a more fair-minded psychological assessment, leading to more appropriate recommendations and better psychological outcomes in the individual. Mental health practitioners' personal biases can influence professional perspectives in psychology and counseling, leading to wrong conclusions that do not consider the qualities of one's race and culture (Delsignore et al., 2010). The chances of biased diagnosis are lower when multiculturalism is integrated in mental health practice.

In one recent study, researchers found that when counselors communicated their own cultural background and acknowledged their client's cultural values, clients were more likely to see their counselor as credible and felt more relaxed in the therapeutic process (Owen, Tao, Leach, and Rodofà, 2011). Culturally skilled counselors are aware of how their own cultural backgrounds and experiences have influence on attitudes, values, and biases about psychological processes. When therapists recognize these they are better able to access a patient's discomfort (Delsignore et al., 2010). Multiculturalism introduces different strategies for working with diverse clients and increases the mutual understanding of attitudes, values, and beliefs, leading to a more accurate diagnosis and stronger connection between the counselors and clients.

**MULTICULTURAL TRAINING**

Most college students studying psychology only take one multicultural psychology course in their lives (Reynolds, 2011). Nonetheless, it was found that what the students learned in that course had a significant impact on their knowledge of multicultural psychology, and this is particularly important in the area of multicultural counseling (Reynolds, 2011). There are other benefits from multicultural coursework, such as increased awareness of cross-cultural issues and better understanding of people from other cultures (Okoye-Johnson, 2011; Reynolds, 2011). It is not always easy for instructors to properly teach this subject due to numerous difficulties, including varied multicultural competence among the students, emotional ties to material taught in the course, and unexpected resistance from students (Reynolds, 2011). Despite these difficulties, most teachers report that students developed reduced prejudicial attitudes and had an overall positive experience in the course of multicultural psychology (Reynolds, 2011).

It is recommended that counselors receive a variety of multicultural training opportunities to facilitate a better understanding of racial identity and gender role attitudes (Chao, 2012). Multicultural training can create self-exploration and self-discovery within counselors, leading to a better understanding of their own culture and also making them more culturally competent counselors and individuals (Chao, 2012).

Culturally competent counselors can help clients explore issues related to their race and ethnicity. Racial identity, the feeling of belonging and pride towards one's group, involves meaningful attachment to one's racial or ethnic group (Phinney and Ong, 2007), and is an important part of a person's identity that is not the focus of traditional Eurocentric models of
psychotherapy. Racial and ethnic identity is important in every group because it offers a sense of belonging and a cultural roadmap to navigating social interactions as member of a particular group, and it is essential in its influence of one’s sense of self (Phinney, 1992; Tajfel, 1981). In ethnic minorities, a strong, positive ethnoracial identity has been correlated to psychological well-being and lower levels of psychopathology (i.e., Chae, Lincoln, and Jackson, 2011; Williams, Chapman, Wong, and Turkheimer, 2012). Mental health clinicians should routinely take into consideration the patient’s level of ethnic identity when working with minority clients. Clinicians may encourage and support such clients in the exploration of their ethnic identities, as greater achievement of ethnic identity can improve overall psychological well-being (Williams et al., 2012). Such interventions might include discussions of what the client likes about his/her ethnic group, learning more about the achievements of the client’s ethnic group to bolster a sense of ethnic pride, rejection of pathological stereotypes, and increased involvement in traditional ethnic activities (Williams, et al., 2012; Williams, Gooden, and Davis, 2012). Omitting cultural concerns from the counseling room eliminates the opportunity for growth in these areas. Minorities may even devalue their own ethnoracial group if their cultural practices are not considered important in treatment (Delsignore et al., 2010).

CONCLUSION

Multiculturalism gives ethnoracial minorities the chance to celebrate their culture while promoting acceptance in a society that has struggled with the true meaning of equality. Multiculturalism promotes diversity and insists that all cultural groups be treated with respect and as equals (Fowers and Richardson, 1996). It can create a better understanding amongst individuals working and learning together. Teachers and school authorities should incorporate multicultural education into all grades of school to reduce prejudicial attitudes (Bales and Saffold, 2011). Multiculturalism should be incorporated into counseling psychology and therapy to facilitate greater of trust from patients, ultimately leading to improved diagnosis and treatment for psychological disorders (Owen et al., 2011). New research is needed, focused on the experiences and outcomes of diverse mental health patients, comparing colorblind and multicultural approaches. An overall increased awareness of multiculturalism will be helpful to improve cross-cultural relations in organizations, the workplace, schools, the media, and daily life.

It is important to understand that multiculturalism is not exclusive to non-minorities, and all persons of every culture and race should embark on the journey of becoming more culturally competent. If every person embraces a multicultural perspective it will lead to multiculturalism becoming a state of being, rather than a practice that is only used for educational and therapeutic purposes. Incorporating multiculturalism into society can be complicated when it makes European Americans uncomfortable by emphasizing on non-majority cultures (Ginges and Cairns, 2000; Verkuyten, 2006), thus explaining the preference for colorblindness.

Although multiculturalism requires effort to utilize, it is necessary and will create a better atmosphere for all cultures with less prejudice and more harmony.
REFERENCES


