

MICHELLE NEALY: COLORBLINDNESS

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Current News

New Study: Colorblindness Has Negative Effect on Employees

By Michelle J. Nealy

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Summary:

University of Georgia researchers contend that multiculturalism, not colorblindness, helps minority work colleagues feel more committed to work.

Story:

In his book, *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Social Justice*, Paul Kivel, a community organizer in California devoted to racial justice wrote, "To avoid being called racist, [White Americans] may claim that they don't notice color or don't treat people differently based on color. [But] it is not useful or honest for any of us to claim that we do not see color."

A new survey published in the online version of the journal *Psychological Science* by researchers at the University of Georgia reinforces Kivel's sentiments.

University of Georgia researchers found that Whites who subscribe to an ideology of colorblindness in the workplace cause their minority colleagues to feel less committed to their work. Yet, when White employees champion multiculturalism, their minority peers feel more connected to their jobs.

The decision to embrace a workplace environment of colorblindness or multiculturalism has confounded companies and universities for decades. Proponents of colorblindness argue that assimilating into the dominant culture is best for everyone. New research strongly suggests, however, that colorblind climates harm both minority employees and the organization for which they work. "Workplaces that down play racial and ethnic differences actually make minority employees feel less engaged with their work," says Dr. Victoria Plaut, an assistant professor of psychology in UGA's Franklin College of Arts and Sciences and the study's lead author. "Minority employees sense more bias in these allegedly colorblind settings."

Plaut and Dr. Kecia Thomas, a professor of psychology, along with Matt Goren, a doctoral student in psychology, conducted their survey through UGA's Center for Research and Engagement in Diversity.

The researchers designed a "diversity climate survey" that nearly 5,000 employees of a large U.S. health care organization completed. Respondents indicated how much they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements that reflected either colorblindness or multiculturalism.

This is the first study that has examined the effect of the dominant group members' diversity belief on actual targets, Plaut says, adding that is also the first study to test these effects in the real world among majority and minority employees working in the same setting.

"This study demonstrates that White beliefs have implications for minorities' engagement, and we know from previous work that disengagement can hurt productivity and profits," Thomas says.

According to the researchers, the number of White and minority employees involved in the study was controlled so that one group didn't outnumber another.

"Numbers alone do not matter," says Plaut. "Diversity efforts, in higher education and in the workplace, are often aimed at hiring more ... more women to the sciences or admitting more ethnic and racial minority students. Numbers are important, but they are not the whole story."

More emphasis should be place on creating environments that recognize and celebrate racial and ethnic differences, Plaut contends.

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