Color Blind or Just Plain Blind? The Pernicious Nature of Contemporary Racism

Quick acknowledgment that the title of this article is, indeed, ableist in nature due to its use of the terms "colorblind" and "blind." - JA

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(https://nonprofitquarterly.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/56/files/2005/06/Color-blind.jpg)

Editor's Note: *As many readers may know,* NPQ *and the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network issued a call for papers from people under 40 on new ideas about equity, diversity and inclusion. That call has now closed and we have been overwhelmed by the response, receiving more than 130 submissions. That response sparked our interest in running this classic article again. Over the years, I have found this strain of inquiry very instructive in thinking about why patterns of exclusion in nonprofits persist.*

This article discusses how racism has mutated to partially hide itself from view—perhaps not from the view of those who experience its effects—but certainly from the view of those who practice what has come to be called "aversive racism."

We start with a fairly stark example of what we are talking about. In 1973 we created a field experiment that divided a group of white people residing in Brooklyn, NY into those who had liberal and those who had conservative beliefs. Both the liberal and the conservative households received wrong-number telephone calls that quickly developed into requests for assistance. The callers, who were clearly identifiable from their dialects as being black or white, explained that their car was disabled and that they were attempting to reach a service garage from a public phone along the parkway. The callers further claimed that they had no more change to make another call and asked the subject to help by calling the garage. If the subject refused to help or hung up after the caller

explained that he or she had no more change, a "not helping" response was recorded. If the subject hung up before learning that the motorist had no more change, the response was considered to be a "premature hangup."

The first finding from this study was easy and predictable. Conservatives showed a higher "not helping" response to blacks than to whites (92 percent versus 65 percent) whereas liberals helped blacks and whites more equally (75 percent versus 85 percent). If we were to have left the findings here, liberals would appear to be relatively well-intentioned.

Unfortunately, this edge is cancelled out by liberals having "hung up prematurely" much more often on blacks than they did on whites (19 percent versus 3 percent). Conservatives did not discriminate in this way (8 percent versus 5 percent). The numbers were even worse when we pulled out the response to male callers. That is, liberals hung up prematurely on black and white male callers 28 percent and 10 percent of the time respectively. Thus, both conservative and liberal whites discriminated against blacks but in different ways.

What could possibly explain such behavior among people who presumably consider themselves egalitarian? The explanation, as this and many subsequent studies have demonstrated, is that many liberal white people will not publicly and consciously express bias against blacks, but, because they have unconscious negative feelings about blacks, they will discriminate in subtle ways. This subtle and unconscious bias is what we mean when we refer to aversive racism.

Many people involved in nonprofit organizations forego considerable personal gain to dedicate themselves to making the world better in some way—through making health care more accessible, perhaps, or by promoting cultural richness or through human services or social change work in an impoverished community. Racism, we can probably all agree, is antithetical to this spirit. The problem is that oftentimes these same well-intentioned people are also racist, and, as we will discuss below, they are racist without being aware of it.

Overt Racism

Racism is easy to recognize in its most explicit forms. Traditional forms of racism in the United States have even in the recent past been expressed directly and openly. Due in part to the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, however, the face of racism has changed. This legislation defined racism not only as morally improper but also as legally wrong. The spoken norm was that good people do not discriminate or in any way participate in racism.

We can probably also agree that racism has aided in producing a myriad of social ills, redlined neighborhoods suffering from inadequate infrastructures, sub-standard and segregated schools, open discrimination in employment, high infant mortality rates, and a host of other problems. Many of these problems persist and have worsened over time. How do we explain this?

Even while overt racism has declined significantly since the 1960s, some of the motivations that underlie racism still exist. Racism can offer advantages. Discriminating against others can boost one's self-esteem and promote feelings of control and superiority. Tangibly, discrimination offers economic advantages to members of the

majority group and serves to maintain that group's political, social, and corporate power. Thus racism may have, in mafia movie parlance, "gone to the mattresses" among many of the well-intentioned—retreated underground where it is harder to get at it.

Aversive Racism

Aversive racism is the inherent contradiction that exists when the denial of personal prejudice co-exists with underlying unconscious negative feelings and beliefs. Unfortunately, the negative feelings and beliefs that underlie aversive racism are rooted in normal, often adaptive, psychological processes. For instance, people generally tend to like others who are similar to them. In contrast to the feelings of open hostility and clear dislike of blacks that characterize old-fashioned racism, the negative feelings that aversive racists experience are typically more diffuse, such as feelings of anxiety and uneasiness.

On top of all of this, because aversive racists consciously endorse egalitarian values and deny negative feelings about blacks, they will not discriminate directly and openly in ways that can be attributed to racism. However, because of their negative feelings they will, in fact, discriminate, often unintentionally, when their behavior can be justified on the basis of some factor other than race. Aversive racists may therefore regularly engage in discrimination while they maintain a nonprejudiced self-image. The term "aversive" in this form of racism thus refers to two aspects of this bias. It reflects the nature of the emotions associated with blacks, such as anxiety, that lead to avoidance and social awkwardness rather than to open antagonism. It also represents that, because of their conscious adherence to egalitarian principles, these whites would find any thought that they might be prejudiced to be aversive.

To make things worse, the uncomfortable and discriminatory behavior associated with aversive racism is very obvious to blacks, even while whites either don't recognize it or consider it hidden and deny it when confronted. For instance, despite the compelling evidence of contemporary racial disparities, between 40 and 60 percent of whites responding to a recent survey, depending upon the question asked, viewed the average black in the United States as faring about as well, and often better, than the average white.1 Blacks in numerous studies report a substantial difference—discrimination is a dominant force in their lives. Consequently, whereas the subtle nature of contemporary bias leads whites to underestimate the impact of racial prejudice, it leads blacks to be particularly attuned to these inconsistent and unpredictable racist behaviors. This inconsistency erodes blacks' confidence in a person and leads to a spiral of distrust. Blacks assume this disingenuous behavior is a consciously purposeful, old-fashioned racism—also a perfectly normal reaction since whites are, as a group, in a dominant power position.

How Contemporary Racism Works

Aversive racism has been investigated in psychological research over the past 25 years. One of our earliest experiments illustrates how aversive racism can operate in fairly dramatic ways. The scenario for experiment was inspired by an incident in the mid-1960s in which 38 people witnessed the stabbing of a woman, Kitty Genovese, without a single bystander intervening to help. What accounts for this behavior? Psychologists have found that feelings of responsibility play a key role. If a person witnesses an emergency and is

the only bystander, and that person knows they bear all of the responsibility for helping, the likelihood of helping is high. If, on the other hand, the person witnesses an emergency but believes that there are several other witnesses who might help, then the responsibility for helping is shared. Moreover, if the person believes that someone else will help or has already helped, the likelihood of that person taking action is significantly reduced.

Early in our 25 years of research, we created a situation in the laboratory in which white participants witnessed a staged emergency involving a black or white victim. We led some of our participants to believe that they would be the only witness to this emergency, while we led others to believe that there would be other people (whites as well) who also witnessed the emergency. We predicted that, because aversive racists do not act in overtly bigoted ways, whites would not discriminate when they were the only witness and the responsibility for helping was clearly focused on them. However, we anticipated whites to be much less helpful to black than to white victims when they had a justifiable excuse not to get involved, such as the belief that one of the other witnesses was taking responsibility for helping.

This is precisely what we found. When white participants believed that they were the only witness they helped both white and black victims very frequently (over 85 percent of the time) and equivalently. There was no evidence of blatant racism. In contrast, when they thought there were other witnesses, they helped black victims only half as often as white victims (38 percent versus 75 percent). Thus, these results illustrate the operation of subtle biases in relatively dramatic, spontaneous, and life-threatening circumstances involving a failure to help, rather than an action intentionally aimed at doing harm. And, as this research shows, although the bias may be subtle, its consequences may be severe.

Aversive Racism in the Workplace

Labor statistics continue to demonstrate fundamental disparities in the economic status of blacks relative to whites—a gap that has not only persisted but also, in some aspects, has widened in recent years. Aversive racism may be one factor that contributes to disparities in the workplace. Subtle biases can influence both the access of blacks to the workplace and their performance in it. At the time of hiring, aversive racism can affect how qualifications are perceived and weighed, in ways that systematically disadvantage black relative to white applicants. In particular, the aversive racism framework suggests that bias will not be expressed when a person is clearly qualified or unqualified for a position, because the appropriate decision is obvious. However, bias is expected when the appropriate decision is unclear, for example because of ambiguous evidence about whether the candidate's qualifications meet the criteria for selection or when the candidate's file has conflicting information (some strong and some weak aspects).

In one study of hiring decisions, in a context that was relevant to college students, we asked participants to evaluate candidates for a position in an ostensibly new program for peer counseling at their university on the basis of excerpts from an interview. White participants evaluated a black or white candidate who had credentials that were systematically manipulated to represent very strong, moderate, or very weak qualifications for the position. Their responses were supportive of the aversive racism framework. When the candidates' credentials clearly qualified them for the position or the credentials clearly were not appropriate, there was no discrimination against the black candidate. However, when candidates' qualifications for the position were less

obvious and the appropriate decision was more ambiguous, white participants recommended the black candidate significantly less often than the white candidate with exactly the same credentials.

In subsequent research, in which participants were asked to help make admissions decisions for the university, we again found no racial bias when applicants had uniformly strong or uniformly weak college board scores and record of high school achievement. When applicants were strong on one dimension and weak on the other, however, black applicants were recommended generally less strongly than were white applicants. Moreover, participants shifted, as a function of race, how they weighed the criteria to justify their decisions. For black applicants, they gave the weaker of the dimensions (college board scores or grades) greater weight in their decisions, whereas for white applicants they assigned the stronger of the qualifications more weight. Taken together, these findings suggest that when given latitude for interpretation, whites give white candidates the "benefit of the doubt," a benefit they do not extend to blacks.

The behavior of aversive racists is thus characterized by two types of inconsistencies. First, aversive racists exhibit an apparent contradiction between their expressed egalitarian attitudes and their (albeit subtly) biased behaviors. Second, sometimes (in clear situations) they act in an unbiased fashion, whereas at other times (with ambiguous circumstances) they are biased against blacks. For blacks who may not understand the dynamics but who suffer the consequences, these inconsistencies can create a climate of suspicion and distrust.

Once on the job, aversive racism exerts subtle influences on the behavior of whites in interracial workgroups and, thereby, on the outcomes for blacks. Effective teamwork on the job requires social coordination as well as task-relevant skills. Inconsistent behavior of whites and feelings of distrust by blacks can thus have detrimental effects on team productivity.

We examined these processes in interracial pairs in which a black participant was paired with a white student who was identified as a traditionally high prejudiced person (who expressed their bias openly), an aversive racist (who expressed egalitarian views but who showed evidence of unconscious bias), or a low prejudiced white (who held egalitarian views and showed little evidence of unconscious bias). These participants engaged in a problem-solving task about challenges to college students. For example, for one task, they were asked to identify the five most important things that incoming students need to bring to campus. Because there were no objective measures of the quality of team solution, we focused on the quality of their interaction (as reflected in their perceptions of friendliness and trustworthiness and feelings of satisfaction) and in their efficiency (as indexed by their time to complete the task).

In general, whites' impressions of their behavior were related primarily to their publicly expressed attitudes, whereas blacks' impressions of whites were related mainly to whites' unconscious attitudes. Specifically, whites who expressed egalitarian ideals (low prejudiced whites and aversive racists) reported that they behaved in more friendly ways than did those who expressed their bias openly (high prejudiced whites). Black partners perceived only whites who showed no evidence of unconscious bias (the low prejudiced whites) to be more friendly than those who had biases (aversive racists and high prejudiced whites). Of all three groups, blacks were least trustful of aversive racists.

Our results further revealed that whites' racial attitudes could be systematically correlated to the efficiency of the interracial teams. Teams with low prejudiced whites solved the problem most quickly. Interracial teams involving high prejudiced whites were next most efficient. Teams with aversive racists were the least efficient. Presumably, the conflicting messages displayed by aversive racists and the divergent impressions of the team members' interaction interfered with the task effectiveness of the team. To the extent that blacks are in the minority in an organization and are dependent on high prejudiced whites or aversive racists on work-related tasks, their performance is likely to be objectively poorer than the performance of whites who predominantly interact with other whites. Thus, even when whites harbor unconscious and unintentional biases toward blacks, their actions can have effects sometimes even more detrimental than those of old-fashioned racists on interracial processes and outcomes.

Combating Contemporary Bias

Like a virus that has mutated, racism has evolved into different forms that are not only more difficult to recognize but also to combat. The subtle processes underlying discrimination can be identified and isolated under the controlled conditions of the laboratory. However, in organizational decision-making, in which the controlled conditions of an experiment are rarely possible, this process presents a substantial challenge to the equitable treatment of members of disadvantaged groups.

Because of its pervasiveness, subtlety, and complexity, the traditional techniques for eliminating bias that have emphasized the immorality of prejudice and illegality of discrimination are not effective for combating aversive racism. Aversive racists recognize prejudice is bad, but they do not recognize that they are prejudiced. Thus, aversive racism must be addressed at multiple levels—at the personal level, the organizational level, and the societal level.

We have focused our efforts at understanding the problem of race relations in the United States by examining one aspect—the influence of the racial attitudes of whites in interpersonal interracial encounters. We have shown that contemporary forms of racial bias among whites, particularly liberal whites, are aversive and less blatant than the traditional form but still result in significant damage. Moreover, because aversive racists may not be aware of their unconscious negative attitudes and only discriminate against blacks when they can justify their behavior on the basis of some factor other than race, they will commonly deny any intentional wrongdoing when confronted with evidence of their bias. Indeed, they do not discriminate intentionally. In addition, we have illustrated how awkward and inefficient group processes become when aversive racism affects communication. This not only has disproportionate negative outcomes for blacks but it may also prevent our ability to move forward at the various levels on which racism needs to be addressed.

So what can we each do about racism when we don't know what we don't know yet? Here are some simple (but not easy) suggestions for action.

- When a person of color brings up race as an issue in an interpersonal or organizational setting—listen! If the person indicates he or she is

offended, don't be defensive. Instead try to understand the other person's perspective on the issue. Remember your perceptions can be very different from the everyday experience of others. As the data indicate, whites tend to underestimate the impact of discrimination. Do not begin talking quickly, explain why they are misinterpreting the situation, or begin crying. These are some of the most infuriating responses people of color encounter when they challenge a situation that feels wrong. Take time, if you need it, to think about the situation after listening fully to the other person's perspective. If you hear problems third-hand, don't get angry because you were not approached directly. You probably need to talk through the situation at some point, but remember it is almost never completely safe for a person of color to challenge a dominant perception. Listen deeply.

- On an organizational level—we must all begin to look beyond the general diversity of skin color to the issues of race and power in our organizations. Start by looking at who sits in the loci of power. With power comes the ability to affect frames of reference, style, rules and priorities. With a shift in power, issues that were unseen by whites for years and obvious to people of color emerge quickly as actionable items. (Read the case study from Planned Parenthood in Rhode Island, Summer

2002, page 37, for a description of this dynamic in action.)

- On the level of institutional racism—the aversion to addressing race concerns that is demonstrated through this research carries through to an aversion to discussing race as a driver in and a blind for bad social policy. (See Lani Guinier's article, Summer 2002, page 12, for more on this.) We must stop thinking that someone else will intervene in the state of emergency posed by institutional racism and begin to address the appalling realities of its effects actively, head-on and in deeply committed cross-cultural partnerships.

In conclusion, we can no longer be passive bystanders to racism. We have to hold ourselves responsible. Abstaining from wrongdoing that is immediately obvious to us is not enough. It doesn't begin to address the now convoluted and confusing nature of contemporary racism. In order to address contemporary racism, even and especially among well-intentioned people, it is necessary to establish new, positive norms for action that replace our current norms for avoidance of responsibility.

Endnote

1. See Morin, Richard. 2001. "Misperceptions Cloud Whites' View of Blacks." Washington Post, Wednesday, July 11, page A01.