

Organizational and Individual Colorblindness Approaches to Past Injustice

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In front of the main library at Yale University visitors find the “women’s fountain.” Through the water on the surface, carved into marble, they can see a chronology of women admitted to Yale. At the nearby Evergreen Cemetery, the same visitors can marvel at a monument to Dr. Edward Bouchet, the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from an American university in 1874. Such sites are visible reminders that organizations that pride themselves in valuing diversity today often have a history that contradicts these values. Facing a history of exclusion, conflict, and oppression is extremely difficult. To minimize their discomfort or to avoid the challenging topic altogether, individuals and organizations often adopt a colorblindness strategy. But what does the idea that people are universally similar and that group differences should be minimized (Plaut, 2002) mean in the face of past injustice? What colorblind strategies do individuals use to cope with past injustice, and do these strategies extend to organizations? The latter question is especially important considering that colorblind ideologies often perpetuate the power dynamics underlying structural inequalities between groups (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2007; Saguy, Tausch, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2009). Because organizations are generally more powerful than individuals, the inequalities perpetuated by colorblind ideologies are even more pronounced if they are promoted on the organizational rather than the individual level. The goal of the current chapter is twofold. First, we analyze colorblindness strategies that individual White Americans use when reflecting about the history of slavery, and explore the benefits they derive from this strategy. Second, we analyze

if similar strategies exist at the level of organizations that deal with their own role in the history of slavery. Drawing on our analysis of individuals' and organizations' colorblindness strategies, we argue that moving the history of racial injustice to the center of an organization—a color conscious strategy—benefits both Whites and Blacks, and thus improves the organization overall.

Our arguments apply more broadly to organizations that adopt a colorblindness ideology to avoid engaging with uncomfortable topics that relate to members of different groups within the organization, and in the current chapter we specifically analyze the topic of slavery. We focus on the history of slavery as opposed to other topics because it is arguably at the root of racial inequality and power dynamics that disadvantage African Americans today (Ogletree, 2002; 2003). Many long-standing organizations in power in the United States have ties to slavery, either through owning slaves themselves or through having founders who made their fortunes in the slave trade; examining how organizations overall acknowledge and discuss slavery can shed light into the costs and benefits of adopting a colorblind ideology. Probably because of its centrality to current day inequality, the history of slavery is one of the most taboo topics in American society (Loewen, 1995; Rothstein, 2011). In other words, if individuals and organizations use a colorblindness approach to slavery, they will take a colorblind approach to anything.

INDIVIDUAL COLORBLINDNESS APPROACH TO THE HISTORY OF SLAVERY

While past research clearly established that members of majority groups prefer colorblind ideologies when considering topics related to race (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Knowles, Lowery, Hogan, & Chow, 2009), psychologists have not yet analyzed how these are reflected in individual beliefs about slavery. How is it possible to ignore or minimize the topic of race when writing about slavery? We conducted a laboratory study to understand how White students manage to adopt a colorblindness strategy when discussing a topic as deeply about race as slavery. We then used the strategies we identified on the level of individual participants as a lens to examine what kinds of strategies organizations use in the same situation.

Methods. Fifty-six White American participants (65.5% female) from a private university in the northeastern United States participated in this study; they each received \$18 for their participation. Selection criteria restricted participants to those who identified as White and were American citizens. One participant was excluded because they did not complete the dependent variables of interest, leaving 55 participants in the final sample. Participation in this study took approximately one hour and participants engaged in a number of activities.¹ Most important to the focus of the current chapter, they were instructed to write a letter about “the implications of slavery for intergroup relations today” to an ostensible Black fellow university student. Two independent raters later coded whether the letters adopted a colorblind or multicultural approach to the topic of slavery. After writing the letters, participants completed a large battery of computer-based questionnaires that included a measure of collective guilt.

Based on the colorblindness literature (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Brown et al., 2003; Carr, 1997; Omi & Winant, 1994; Pollack, 2004), the authors developed a coding manual to code for colorblindness and multiculturalism. In this chapter we focus on the results for colorblindness. Colorblindness was coded when participants (1) adopted a post-racial mindset, (2) shifted their focus away from race, and (3) listed pure facts. These categories are described in more details in the results section. Essays that could be characterized as colorblind but did not fit into any of these sub-categories were coded as “colorblindness other.” Once these categories were established, two independent coders coded each participant letter for the absence or presence of colorblindness (Cohen’s kappa = .86, $p < .01$) and, in a second step, specified which sub-rule best described the letter content (Cohen’s kappa = .78, $p < .01$).

Results. We found that 58% or our participants indeed adopted a colorblindness perspective when writing about slavery. Sixteen percent adopted a post-racial mindset, another 16% shifted their focus away from race, while 20% listed pure facts (see Figure 5.1). The absence of race in White participants’ essays about slavery has parallels in the remarkable absence of slavery in some mainstream representations of history, for example, when speaking of certain plantation sites (Alderman & Modlin, 2008; Modlin, 2008). In his essay about the Charleston Museum, journalist Edward Rothstein contends that, given the prevalence of the presence of slavery, “it becomes poignantly evident just how major an achievement is reflected by slavery’s enduring absence” (Rothstein, 2011, last para.). For

Strategy Participants Used

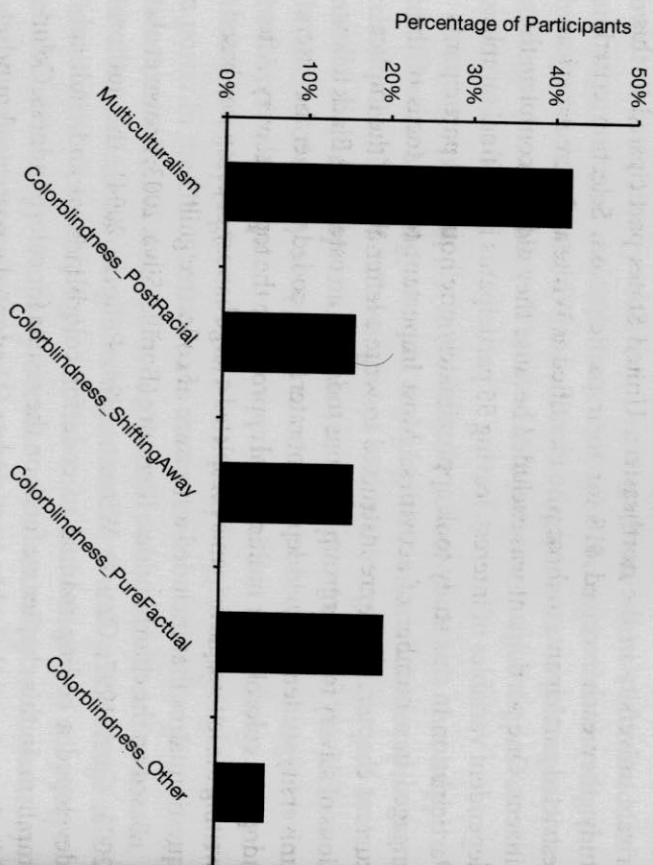


FIGURE 5.1
Colorblindness strategy participants used

example, the centrality of the enslavement of Blacks in the history of the United States, avoiding race in a letter to a Black partner represents a similar “achievement.”

COLORBLINDNESS IN INDIVIDUAL LETTERS

To understand how White students manage to adopt a colorblindness strategy when discussing a topic as deeply about race as slavery, we examined their colorblind letters more closely.

Post-racial ideology: “Let’s not dwell on it.” Post-racial area was coded for letters that suggest that America has moved beyond race. In these essays, participants acknowledge that race in America once mattered and racism did exist, but contend that those issues are no longer prevalent or should no longer matter. For example, one White student described the history

of race relations from 1865 onwards, expressed deep regret about what happened and then concluding her letter in the following way²:

It took until the 1960s for you to finally gain full rights and full opportunities, which to the best of my knowledge you maintain in most of the country to this day. I know it must be hard for you to forgive us for our past and you feel as if you are owed in some way. I understand this feeling but I also think the past is the past and there is a need to move on and accept what’s been done.

The student expressed regret for the events of the past, yet clearly distanced herself from the past and prompted her Black partner to do the same. Students often focused on the past as a reference point, and concluded that racial equality has been achieved. One asked “Who would have thought that one day the country would go from slavery to having a black president?” Another one claimed, “Those of us born after the Civil Rights Movement finally live in a world where slavery and all the other marks of black oppression such as Jim Crow Laws are taught to us as history, not as what occurs in the present day.” Both of these students focused on how far we have come relative to the past. These letters echo the findings of Eibach and Ehrlinger (2006) who suggest that it is because of this focus on the past that Whites perceive more racial progress than Blacks, who instead focus on how far we still have to go.

In addition to using the past as a reference point for judging racial progress, some White participants expressed strong opposition to Blacks “dwelling” on the past. Many seemed aware of how racially polarized constructions of the past are and used their letters to persuade their Black partners whom they presumed to have a different perspective. One particularly strongly worded letter stated unequivocally:

I think people need to suck it up and get over it. Yes slavery happened and yes it was bad but people focus so much on the past that they forget to look into the future. Times change. We have Obama as the president who is Black and Black people have more rights. Yes it is important to remember what happened but lets not dwell on it. Black people were not the only ones oppressed there were Christians, Jews, Muslims being oppressed right now. Let’s not forget about those as well. Black people sometimes use slavery as

an excuse to be racist towards White people or they make it sound like they were slaves. Excuse you but it was your ancestors NOT you. So shut the fuck up.

Another student expressed a similar opinion but in the somewhat softer style of writing that characterized the majority of letters:

America is the land of opportunity, where immigrants from all over the world come to compete for a chance to succeed. It now offers equal opportunities to all. However, the impact of slavery has changed the culture of the United States in that we are unsure what kind of retribution should be given to African Americans. We must all remember what happen, acknowledge it as a mistake, and apologize for it—but at one point we have to move on ALL TOGETHER, as one. One group cannot demand special privileges over another just because of race.

Both of these students are concerned that Blacks will demand special privileges because of their race. This form of colorblindness has a hard edge and asserts that even though injustices have occurred in the distant past, today everybody has the same opportunities and is personally responsible for making the most out of these. Unlike other colorblindness strategies (see below), the post-racial ideology allows an acknowledgment of the existence of present-day complaints about race-based inequality—but does so only to refute them as misdirected. These individuals anticipate the possibility of being accused of racism by calling on Blacks to “move on and accept what’s been done,” to use the words of one letter writer. The problem becomes not the injustice itself, but rather the attempts for retribution (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Therefore, Whites are relieved of the burden of blame because they are independent of their forefathers. Blacks, on the other hand, are criticized as either exaggerating problems or dwelling on the past in ways that are unfounded and prevent the rest of the country from advancing.

Strategies such as this could represent defenses that allow Whites to assert themselves as reasonable people who are trying to prevent others from whining or blaming others for self-made problems. At its most intense, this strategy allows Whites to express toward Blacks not anxiety, which would signal uncertainty about the future, but anger, signaling a claim against Blacks for some injustice. Interestingly, here the acknowledgment of Black grievances comes with a solution that only requires Blacks to act—specifically, by keeping quiet and accepting blame. By asserting their

own post-racial ideology, these people are also demanding Blacks adopt it themselves.

Shifting Focus Away from Race: “[We] all came from Africa.” Letters that downplay racial differences in discussing the implications of slavery for the present were coded as “shifting focus away from race.” In these letters, participants often emphasized the importance of paying attention to individual characteristics or the commonality of being human over classifying people according to race. For example, one student, after describing how deeply impacted she was by the slavery documentary that left her “speechless,” concluded her essay with a commitment to defeat racial inequality:

It is my goal to continue to the trend we have been able to go to since the illegalization of slavery in believing all are created and treated equally, teaching this to my children so that one day we can all look past skin color, ethnicity, etc. and see one another for the people we truly are.

Another student provided an even stronger comment on innate similarity across races and even species by encouraging her partner and everyone else:

[to] go have their genome studied to trace their primordial origins. They'll find that they all came from Africa, at some point in the evolutionary trail. Before that, we were all swinging from trees. And before that, we were slithering around in swamps. This truth exposes racism for the filthy lie that it is. Perhaps if children spent more time in school learning about the wonders of human evolution, they'd spend less of their life even entertaining the possibility that someone of a different color is better or worse than they are, or even of a different “race” than he or she is. We're all part of the human race, and we should count our blessings every day that we were lucky enough to be born a human—regardless of color—and not a salamander, or a flea, or some other lowly creature.

Most students who wrote letters in this category began by expressing their horror for the history of slavery. Adopting a colorblind mindset appeared to be their proposed solution for overcoming racial inequality. Many seemed deeply distressed by America's past and see colorblindness as an anti-racist strategy that they both utilize themselves and recommend to others, including their partner.

Another way in which attention was shifted from the specifics of Black and White relations in U.S. history was by making a broader point about the violation of human rights, oppression of minorities, or exploitation in the name of capitalism. One student appropriates the history of slavery to make a point about human rights:

Europeans were enslaving, beating, and raping each other for hundreds of years before America was discovered; American slavery was important but it is just one of the hurdles the world has jumped on its path to acknowledging human rights.

In an intergroup context, this strategy is full of potential pitfalls. Members of the former victim group often want to commemorate their own specific misfortune rather than reflect about injustice more broadly (Vollhardt, 2013). As a group, the letters that shift focus away from race demonstrate how an ideology stemming from a motivation of true egalitarianism can easily go awry and could send confusing and potentially invalidating signals to an intergroup partner.

Pure Facts. Finally, a substantial portion of White participants exclusively reported historic facts in their letters. They provided no personal opinion and instead simply listed historic facts in a style that would be more appropriate for a textbook than a personal letter to another student. We suspect that this unusual use of colorblindness is related to other studies of interracial dyads demonstrating that Whites often go to great lengths to avoid discussing race even in appropriate contexts (Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006; Pollock, 2004). It is possible that participants used this strategy in order to avoid potential discomfort that might arise from a frank discussion of current and related racial issues.

COLORBLINDNESS AND COLLECTIVE GUILT

To explore why participants might use a colorblindness strategy we conducted a t-test to investigate how the mentioning of colorblindness versus multiculturalism relates to mean differences in participants' collective guilt following the letter writing exercise (Doojse, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 2006). We found that Whites who scored low on

collective guilt were more likely to adopt a colorblindness strategy than Whites who scored high on collective guilt, $t(53)=2.33, p=.02$. Consistent with the two different usages of colorblindness we identified above, it is possible that students who express colorblindness are the ones who experience less collective guilt to begin with, possibly because they endorse a post-racial mindset and do not see themselves as responsible in any way. It is also possible that colorblindness is an emotion suppression strategy to deal with the anxiety the topic provokes initially.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF COLORBLINDNESS AT THE LEVEL OF INDIVIDUALS

Interacting with individuals from other groups can be extremely difficult for some Whites, involving high levels of anxiety (Blascovich, Mendes, Hunter, Lickel, & Kowai-Bell, 2001; Ickes, 1984; Mendes, Major, McCoy, & Blascovich, 2008; Shelton & Richeson, 2006). Intergroup anxiety, defined as anxiety experienced during real or imagined interactions with outgroup members, can influence avoidance of intergroup contact as well as stereotyping of outgroup members and assuming greater dissimilarity from them (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Intergroup anxiety also affects how intergroup contact unfolds. For instance, Trawalter and Richeson (2008) observed that Whites exhibited more nonverbal anxiety in interracial dyads compared with same-race dyads, and within the interracial dyads, they exhibited greater anxiety than their Black partner. Intergroup anxiety is partially influenced by perceptions of being judged by outgroup members (Vorauer, 2006). A wealth of research has shown that Whites in general fear rejection by Blacks (e.g., Shelton & Richeson, 2005) and fear being perceived to be racist (e.g., Frantz, Cuddy, Burnett, Ray, & Hart, 2004). The experience of anxiety experienced by Whites in an interracial context might present an uncomfortable state that must be regulated either by seeking information about how one is being perceived (Vorauer, 2006) or by utilizing strategies that will alleviate the anxiety. Colorblindness strategies might allow for down-regulation of anxiety, thereby relieving Whites of the burden of uncertainty about how they will be perceived.

The colorblind strategies utilized in the current study might have regulated anxiety in a number of different ways. First, using colorblindness

might reduce the likelihood of feared negative outcomes, such as being judged to be racist, and by doing so reduce current fear and anxiety. For instance, concern that one will be judged negatively by outgroup members might increase the attractiveness of focusing strictly on facts, as such a strategy is hard to argue because of its objectivity. Focusing on facts also relieves Whites of the burden of entering into an uncomfortable discussion about the lingering problems of racism. Shifting focus away from race does the same thing, but with a twist—Whites are communicating to Blacks that the Blacks should not see them as enemies but rather as a common ally, passively viewing slavery as a terrible human atrocity rather than having anything to do with race. That “horrible time” in human history is long past, and the world is all the better for it. Adopting this mindset frees Whites to feel protected from blame of Blacks because they have distanced themselves from the perpetrators of a historic crime and therefore cannot be held responsible for those misdeeds. This is perhaps an idealistic spin on colorblindness that emphasizes a common, important American value of egalitarianism while simultaneously demanding Blacks to give up their own claims of lingering inequity. Further, avoiding discussions of the effects of race and the negative emotions that can arise might help Whites feel better about their own actions, attitudes, and beliefs and reduce guilt.

In conclusion, subscribing to the colorblindness perspective that dominates engagement with past injustice in the United States, protects Whites from a number of unpleasant psychological consequences. Whites using this strategy are free to feel sad about the past but are protected from intergroup anxiety because their future is defined as being completely separate from and unaffected by slavery. In addition, they protect themselves from feeling attacked for being racist by Blacks, either by relying on irrefutable facts about the past, allying themselves with Blacks when lamenting the past as a broad-based atrocity, or pre-emptively attacking Blacks for holding onto the past too tightly.

COLORBLINDNESS IN ORGANIZATIONS

Like the White participants in the study who endorsed a colorblind ideology when discussing slavery, institutions in U.S. society approach the topic of slavery largely by ignoring it. In recent years, political, media, and

educational organizations and even historical sites and tourist organizations have been criticized for omitting important information about the history of slavery or even for misrepresenting facts. For example, many cities across the United States have had policies in place that prohibited their Black residents from physically being present in the city after a certain time in the evening (Loewen, 2005). Even though a large number of towns in the United States are estimated to have been so called “sundown towns” at some point, it is difficult to properly document this history because most towns have not kept records of the ordinances or signs that marked the town’s sundown status (Loewen, 2005). Historic representations of slavery in the public space are rare and highly contested (Fredrickson, 2010). A simple online search for slavery museums reveals that few exist and many struggle with funding shortage. Meanwhile, every year, thousands of Americans visit historic plantations in Georgia, Louisiana, North and South Carolina, just to name a few states. They learn about the “master” who owned the plantation, the architecture, furnishings, gardens, and crops but little if anything about the slave experience that was so central to life on most of these sites. Driving home the point that organizations prescribe colorblindness and thus often perpetuate structural inequalities between groups, Alderman and Modlin have suggested that “tourism landscapes are constructed and marketed in selective ways that reaffirm long-standing patterns of social power and inequalities and thus influence whose histories and identities are remembered and forgotten” (Alderman, & Modlin Jr., 2008, p. 266). Thus, there is a pattern of adopting race-blind ideologies within institutions in the United States.

Perhaps even more strikingly than passive avoidance of the topic, some organizations adopt a colorblind position even when forced to confront the topic of the history of slavery. To understand how organizations manage to adopt a colorblindness strategy when engaging with the topic of slavery, which seems to be deeply related to race, we examined how the three types of colorblind ideology identified in the colorblind letters (i.e., post-racial ideology, shifting focus away from race, and pure facts) are used by some organizations. Facing the history of slavery poses different kinds of challenges and also provides different opportunities for organizations based on their specific goals as we will outline below. In particular, whether they teach or sell history, fear facing reparations lawsuits, or have primarily an educational mission seems to be associated with what strategy they use.

Post-Racial Ideology: "Let's Not Dwell on It." In letters from individuals this strategy was characterized by an acknowledgment that although race in America once mattered and racism did exist, those issues are no longer prevalent or should no longer matter. Organizations that teach or "sell" history seem to be particularly prone to using this strategy. In an attempt to move forward, such organizations may be tempted to ignore or even remove evidence of past oppression from the present. A different example is New South Books who published a version of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* where they removed the word "nigger" and replaced it with the less offensive word "slave" (Version of *Huckleberry Finn*, 2011). This idea was initiated by Mark Twain scholar Alan Gribben and embraced by New South books with the stated purposes of counteracting the pre-emptive censorship that occurs because teachers worry about offending students and their parents (La Rosa, 2011). According to Twain scholar Dr. Gribben, removing the N-word is adapting Mark Twain's original book to an altered cultural context. In his opinion, this strategy is not an attempt to be colorblind: "Race matters" he asserts "but it is mostly how you express that in the 21st century" (Schultz, 2011, para. 3). Critics disagree, referring to New South Book's efforts as an attempt to "needlessly whitewash a period that deserves no whitewashing" (Petri, 2011, para. 2). They argue that removing the N-word deprives teachers of the opportunity to teach about the complexities of race relations in America. Others contend that facing that history in all its offensiveness is important for transcending it (Fishkin, 2011). Both supporters and critics agree that New South Books is selling a book, which enables adopting a colorblind perspective towards the uncomfortable and potentially divisive topic of slavery – they disagree, however, whether adopting this perspective is desirable.

In addition to adopting a well-intended post-racial mindset, some organizations may express strong opposition to "dwelling" on the past. Organizations that fear monetary or other forms of compensation requests for example in the form of reparation litigations seem to be particularly prone to use this strategy. For example, when the insurance company Aetna Inc. together with several other companies faced a reparation lawsuit for its early ties to the transatlantic slave trade (Ogletree, 2002) their chairman, John W. Rowe, MD, issued the following statement: "We do not believe a court would permit a lawsuit over events which—however regrettable—occurred hundreds of years ago. These issues in no way reflect Aetna today" (Aetna statement, 2002). This statement is an example for the "let's

not dwell on the past" colorblindness strategy because it emphasizes that the past is the past and, while regrettable, does not matter today. John W. Rowe did offer an apology for Aetna's "role in an awful period in our country's history" and reasserted their commitment to reducing racial disparities in health care and investing in a broad range of minority programs at the annual shareholders meeting in 2002 (Excerpts of remarks, 2002; www.aetna-foundation.org).

Taking this strategy one step further, Jeff Jacoby, *Boston Globe* columnist, criticized Kennedy Thompson, the former chairman of another company, Wachovia bank, for apologizing in the first place because of the implications this apology might have for reparation requests (Jacoby, 2005). His column is an epitome of the "let's not dwell on the past" colorblind ideology. He argues:

Thompson's apology was for something Wachovia didn't do, in an era when it didn't exist, under laws it didn't break. And as an act of contrition for this wrong it never committed, it can now expect to pay millions of dollars to activists for a wrong they never suffered. (para. 5)

His broader argument is that most Black Americans did not descend from slaves and most White Americans came as immigrants after slavery and would therefore be better off leaving the past alone. He further contends that America already paid its price for slavery with the civil war (Jacoby, 2005).

Shifting Focus Away from Race: "[We] All Came from Africa." In letters from individuals this strategy was characterized by downplaying racial differences in discussing the implications of slavery for the present, emphasizing the importance of paying attention to individual characteristics or the commonality of being human over classifying people according to race and integrating slavery in broader conceptual frameworks such as the violation of human rights, oppression of minorities or exploitation in the name of capitalism. Organizations with a clear mission to educate such as universities and museums should be prone to adopt this strategy. Acquiring and disseminating knowledge is central to such organizations. In this context, coming to terms with an organization's history can become a search for meaning, a process of redefining an organization's tradition and identity (Brown University, 2006). During this process, educators and students, perhaps unwillingly, may shift their focus away from organizations' involvement with the transatlantic slave trade and instead engage in a broader discourse about racism, oppression, and human rights.

This is at least partly what happened at Columbia University when, in 2007, a noose (which is understood to be a symbol with particular reference to Black lynching in the Southern US) was found hanging from a Black professor's office door (Michels, 2007). Similar incidences happened at the University of Maryland, where in 2007 a noose was found hanging in a tree near the Black Cultural Center on campus (Martin, 2007), and at UC San Diego where a noose hung from a campus library bookcase (Gordon, 2010). A noose is a common and very specific symbol of Black lynching in the Southern United States. In response to this incident, Columbia University adopted some strategies that fall into the shifting focus away from race category. For example, according to *The New York Times*, at a meeting between students and Columbia University president Lee C. Bollinger, "students have used the noose as a point of departure to talk about other issues, including Columbia's plans to expand into adjacent neighborhoods" (Gootman & Baker, 2007, para. 16). Bollinger also issued a statement saying that the incident "is an assault on African-Americans, and therefore is an assault on every one of us" (Michels, 2007, p. 2). In the same vein, when the events sparked a protest, students held signs saying, "Oppression of any is oppression of us all" (Gootman & Baker, 2007). These strategies emphasize the commonality of being human over classifying people according to race and integrate the noose, a specific symbol of Black lynching in the South, with broader conceptual frameworks including the violation of human rights, oppression of minorities, gentrification or exploitation in the name of capitalism. To be sure, there is value in adopting a comparative perspective and the universal principles of human rights are a hard fought achievement of tremendous value. Yet it is important to be mindful that such a comparative perspective can also shift focus away from the specifics of Black-White relations and an organization's own history with regards to racism and slavery.

Brown University is a good example of a university that remembers and commemorates the specifics of the history of slavery at the institution while simultaneously embedding the historical facts in a larger discourse on universal human rights and crimes against humanity. Ruth J. Simmons, the first African American president of an Ivy League school, did not wait for an incendiary racial incident to react to intergroup relations at Brown; instead, she proactively tackled the topic of slavery. In 2003 she founded a Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice to research the University's historical relationship to slavery and the transatlantic slave trade (Brown University, 2006). Her goal was also to set an example, for if universities

that are organizations devoted to the discovery and dissemination of knowledge cannot face their past, few organizations probably can (Brown University, 2006). Brown University managed to use this as an opportunity to reflect on their traditions and their identity, acknowledge what happened and how it impacts the present and engage in an open dialogue about this uncomfortable topic. They also used the history of slavery at Brown University as a teachable moment not only about U.S. history but also about the history and development of universal human rights more broadly. The Steering Committee issued a detailed report (Brown University, 2006) outlining how the school benefited from slavery, the involvement of early supporters of what was then called College of Rhode Island, in the transatlantic slave trade. According to this report, Esek Hopkins was both a member of Board of Trustees of College of Rhode Island and also commander of the deadly slave ship *Sally*. The committee's activities included educational programs, with talks and lectures at Brown University and beyond (Goldschmidt, 2011), as well as a museum exhibition and the commissioning of a memorial commemorating the university's ties to slavery (Baum, 2012).

Pure Facts. In letters from individuals this strategy is characterized by simply listing facts without providing a personal opinion. Simply listing facts is what the so-called slavery disclosure ordinances passed in Chicago in 2002 as the first of its kind demand from companies wanting to do business with the city (Slater, 2002). Revealing such facts does not compromise a company's ability to do business with the city—they simply have to make the information public. In compliance with this ordinance, Wachovia, JP Morgan Chase, ABN AMRO, Lehman Brothers, and US Bank have all disclosed involvement in the slave trade (see City and County of San Francisco, 2007 for summary). Oakland, Milwaukee and San Francisco, Los Angeles, Detroit, Philadelphia, Berkeley, New York City, and Philadelphia, Cleveland, and the whole state of California followed suit in subsequent years with similar initiatives to Chicago's ordinance, though with somewhat less fanfare (Benner, 2005; City and County of San Francisco, 2007).

While cities' requirements usually are limited to companies researching and making public their historical involvement in slavery and the slave-trade, companies often accompany these historical findings with an apology and in some cases even restitution efforts in the form of programs that serve Black Americans today (e.g., Excerpts of remarks, 2002; www.athafoundation.org). Unfortunately, public information only provides insight into how companies present themselves publicly after publishing the

potentially disturbing historic fact. Whether they use the slavery disclosure ordinance as an opportunity to engage in an internal dialogue about these issues remains unknown.

BENEFITS OF COLORBLINDNESS AT THE LEVEL OF ORGANIZATIONS

Given that institutional ideologies are often created and maintained by individuals in an institution (Dacin, Goodstein, & Scott, 2002) and individuals' cognitions are embedded in and shaped by their social reality (Johnson, 1998), it is perhaps not surprising that we were able to map colorblindness strategies we identified in individuals onto the strategies used by a range of organizations. Because institutions are composed of individuals, it is also likely that the benefit companies derive from these strategies is similar to what we argue occurs on an individual level: regulation of collective anxiety.

For educational organizations it seems that adopting a post-racial or shifting focus away from race strategies is anxiety reducing. In the case of New South Books, the explicitly stated purpose of removing the N-word was to reduce teachers' and students' anxiety when reading Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and thus to make the new edition of the book more marketable. Perhaps less explicitly it seems that Columbia University's response to finding the noose on a Black professor's door also served as an anxiety regulation goal. Shifting focus away from race and the history of lynching in the South with well-meant slogans such as "oppression of any is oppression of all" creates an inclusive climate where all members of campus feel like they belong. Yet, through engaging in a broad based discussion of oppression, crimes against humanity, and hate, individual students and the organization avoid analyzing their own specific privilege and how the history of slavery may have contributed to that.

For companies, listing facts related to their historic ties to the transatlantic slave raises image concerns. Unlike individuals in our study who wrote letters in private and anonymously, organizations are often in the public spotlight and do not get away with listing facts alone. Once they make facts related to their historic involvement in the slave trade public,

supporters of slavery-disclosure ordinances hope that the public demand they take a position and some may be reluctant to do business with them (Slater, 2002). In other words, demanding pure facts from companies is a colorblindness strategy as we identified in letters from individuals above, that supporters of the ordinance hope will ultimately lead to a color-conscious strategy.

THE COST OF COLORBLINDNESS

Our analysis of individual letters and our case analyses of organizations showed that many individuals and organizations adopt the predominant colorblindness strategy when they reflected about slavery. In line with previous research suggesting that colorblindness can be construed in different ways by Whites (Knowles et al., 2009; Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008), we found that the colorblind strategies Whites as well as organizations adopted in discussing past injustice fell into broader categories that ranged in terms of how overtly aggressive they were toward the outgroup. Some individuals demonstrated colorblindness by denying associations with the past, thus denying their own responsibility and placing the burden on African Americans as a group. On an organizational level, we observed this strategy in arguments against redistribution payments. Other individuals and organizations seemed to use colorblindness to deal with their own anxiety and maintain an egalitarian self-image while addressing the challenging topic of slavery. We argue that from an organizational perspective, regardless of what Whites' motivations are behind it and regardless of some of the short-term benefits that they derive from it, there are serious long-term costs for organizations that use colorblindness as a way of ignoring injustice and inequality or to deal with conflict.

For Whites, ignoring race means that they might never be comfortable talking about racial inequality, since they may associate colorblindness with reduction in distress and thus negatively reinforce avoidance of such topics. Discomfort with discussions of this nature might lead to greater and greater discomfort talking about race owing to a continued fear of being misperceived as racist. It may well lead to avoidance of interacting with Blacks

altogether. Further, Whites might be less likely to promote social change if they are not willing to confront modern day racism. Overall, when faced with a system or institution that denies their multicultural reality, Blacks are forced to choose whether to fight for change in ways that can be further traumatizing, or whether to passively wait for Whites to change on their own without any incentives or urging. A third option is to disengage from the system entirely. In the context of an organization, adopting a colorblind ideology might be counter to its interests because of the potentially detrimental effects on Black members. Organizations may have an unselfish interest in addressing race openly in order to reduce discrimination, but such openness also has rewards for the interests of the organization. Overall, Blacks and Whites can all thrive in organizations that do not resort to a simple colorblind ideology. In the next section, we discuss how organizations might play a role in creating a validating or invalidating context in which these discussions might be had.

BENEFITS OF ADOPTING A COLOR-CONSCIOUS STRATEGY

Many organizations in the United States shape and reflect individual colorblindness beliefs. This cycle, where organizational and individual colorblind strategies mutually reinforce one another, is difficult to break. Moving the injustice underlying structural inequalities between groups to the center of an organization should break this dynamic. Adopting a color-conscious strategy should benefit both Whites and Blacks and thus improve the organization overall. For instance, a clear position on race might help lessen racial tension in the long run, thereby minimizing long-term conflict that might contribute to an unpleasant atmosphere. In addition, there is evidence that the more Blacks fear unfair treatment, the more they disengage and contribute less to an organization (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008). Finally, Whites themselves benefit when organizations are egalitarian, in terms of increased happiness and productivity (Mendes, Gray, Mendoza-Denton, Major, & Epel, 2007).

Because people use social context to decide whether a mental experience is a reasonable belief and good judgment (Mitchell & Johnson, 2009), an

organization that explicitly owns up to a history of benefiting from a system that exploited or oppressed specific minority groups (e.g., Black Americans, women) should make it difficult for members in the organization to maintain a colorblind perspective. Denying or ignoring injustice is harder—though not impossible—in an environment with vivid reminders of the injustice. A recent literature review on self-criticism in dominant groups that is inherent in a color-conscious strategy showed that while rare, self-criticism is nevertheless possible and more likely to occur if representations of injustice are vivid, public, and memorable (Leäch, Zeinedine, & Cehajic-Clancy, 2013). Organizations ideally should prevent Whites from relying on coping strategies that help them maintain a colorblind, self-serving ideology by offering them institutional support to bolster their efforts of addressing institutional change in a healthier way. Moving injustice to the center of an organization further reinforces and affirms members of the formerly oppressed group who now find their own perspective represented. This experience should satisfy their need for empowerment (Shnabel, Nadler, Ullrich, Dovidio, & Carmi, 2009) and respect (Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010) and thus may increase their trust in and engagement with the organization. Adopting a color-conscious strategy thus should serve members of both the dominant and subordinate group at least in the long run.

Another positive consequence of adopting a color-conscious strategy is that it allows organizations and communities to learn from the past and accept its present-day implications with greater understanding. This benefit was acknowledged by the Wachovia Corporation's chairman, Ken Thompson, who stated, "We want to promote a better understanding of the African-American experience, including the unique struggles, triumphs and contributions of African-Americans, and their important role in America's past and present" (Benner, 2005, para. 6). When Wachovia was denying an involvement with slavery, the company had no stated intention of promoting understanding about the Black American experience; after accepting, investigating, and publicly acknowledging its involvement in the slave trade, the company was able to move forward in a productive way. Similarly, state and city ordinances asking companies to disclose their involvement with slavery have sometimes included voluntary funds and grants specifically for Black Americans (e.g., the San Francisco ordinance; City and County of San Francisco, 2007); again, these would not be available

were it not for the institutions choosing to adopt a more color-conscious strategy of handling race.

BEYOND LIP SERVICE: THE NEED FOR TRUE CHANGE

There are a number of important caveats to consider when exploring ways for organizations to adopt a color-conscious approach to inequality and injustice. First, organizations have to be ready for true change. Because “a society is not just the sum of individual group experiences but rather the result of power struggles and the economic subordination of racial ethnic groups” (Andersen, 1999, p.14), organizations have to be ready to undergo true structural change if they want to effectively change the intergroup dynamics within their institution. Acknowledging past injustice is only convincing if it is accompanied by true structural change. Members of minority groups tend to expose mere lip service for what it is; for example minorities are sometimes dissatisfied with a public apology that comes without financial compensation (Blatz, Schumann, & Ross, 2009). Second, in the beginning dialogues about past injustice may lead to an increase in tension because views are even more polarized (Paluck, 2010) and Whites are extremely uncomfortable with the topic. However, over time as the anxiety decreases, Whites should endorse a more color-conscious view, Blacks’ trust should increase, and overall there should be more agreement between Blacks and Whites. Third, both Whites and Blacks have to be exposed to the information about injustice. The representation has to be truly public and both Blacks and Whites need to know that both groups are accessing it. Otherwise, it becomes the problem of one group—and that problem leads to segregation and discontent instead of meaningful dialogue.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

We would like to conclude by providing a few practical implications that follow from our theoretical reasoning for organizations that wish to address

a difficult and challenging topic that involves unequal power dynamics. An example for such a topic could be a sexual harassment case that was unresolved in a company or a history of not admitting Black Americans in an educational institution. First, it is important to create broad-based public representations of the injustice. For example, the organizational leadership could send out an email that informs members of the organization about the injustice, or they could erect a memorial in a public place within the organization. It is important to make clear that all members of the organizations are exposed to the information. The email should obviously be addressed to everybody (rather than, for example, only women in the organization) and the memorial should be situated at a public location that all members of the organization pass by regularly. Furthermore, the information should be specific to the injustice that occurred in a given organization rather than creating a broader, universal message about equality and social justice. In the case of the previous examples, the email should describe the specific sexual harassment case that happened in the company, and the memorial should commemorate the individuals that were unjustly denied admission to the educational organization. The information should *not* attempt to make a broader statement about human compassion, injustice, or other social problems.

In addition, organizations should create venues for dialogue between members of the different groups and encourage a discussion of core issues. Organizations understandably often strive to avoid such potentially divisive dialogues; however, we argue that these dialogues can at times yield positive results. In past research, Blacks were more comfortable when talking about a race-relevant rather than race-neutral topic (Trawalter & Richeson, 2008) while Whites were at least equally anxious in both conditions. For example, an organization can invite members to an event to inform about the injustice. This event should include small group discussions with groups composed of diverse members of the organization. Finally, organizations should encourage individuals to interact as individuals rather than ambassadors for their groups. For example, if they have small group discussions, facilitators of these discussions should encourage individuals to introduce themselves and provide individualizing background information. This facilitates a positive individual experience against the backdrop of public representation of injustice. According to our theorizing, the unique combination of public representation of the specific injustice that happened in an organization together with the opportunity

for dialogue with members of diverse groups who engage with the process as individuals rather than ambassadors for their own separate groups can create a climate where diverse members of an organization collaborate with each other to transform their organization from colorblind to color-conscious.

NOTE

1. For a detailed description of the study please refer to Dittmann, 2012.
2. The authors corrected typographical errors and false spelling in the original quotations.

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