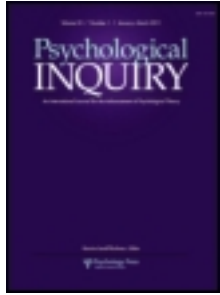


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When the World Is Colorblind, American Indians Are Invisible: A Diversity Science Approach

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Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity. (M. L. King, 1963, p. 46)

Colorblind ideologies are dangerous because they can, as Dr. Martin Luther King suggests, foster “sincere ignorance” and “conscientious stupidity.” These ideologies, which propose that race is irrelevant to social life, render invisible the experiences and the everyday realities of different racial groups. As Plaut (this issue) demonstrates in her article *Diversity Science: Why and How Difference Makes a Difference*, race indisputably affects the opportunities, psychological functioning, and life outcomes of individuals in American society. The diversity science approach, proposed by Plaut, reveals that colorblind ideologies hinder efforts to remedy past injustices and to create a more fair and equitable society for all people (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Forman, 2004). In this article, we highlight the advantages of a diversity science approach by applying it to a group, namely, American Indians, that is rarely recognized in the literature but for whom colorblindness has significant psychological costs.

Plaut’s diversity science approach is advantageous because it provides researchers with a set of concrete tools for analyzing the effects of various approaches to diversity (colorblindness vs. multiculturalism). For example, to analyze the effects of colorblind ideologies, a diversity science approach reveals the ways in which colorblindness reflects the perspectives of majority groups in society, but does not reflect the perspectives of underrepresented racial-ethnic minorities. In a colorblind world, Whites, who are unlikely to experience the negative effects of race, can actively ignore the continued significance of racism in American society, justify the current social order, and feel more comfortable with their relatively privileged standing in society. Racial-ethnic minorities, however, who regularly experience the negative effects of race, experience colorblind ideologies differently. In a world that denies their racially marked experiences and outcomes, racial-ethnic minorities feel less comfortable, less invested,

and less belonging in various contexts (e.g., in schools, workplaces, and organizations; Cheryan, Plaut, Davies, & Steele, 2009; Mendoza-Denton, Shaw-Taylor, Chen, & Chang, 2009; Murphy, Steele, & Gross, 2007; Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008). This knowledge allows society to move beyond political or philosophical arguments about the theoretical merits of various approaches and instead to directly observe and measure their effects for different groups of people. The transition from political to scientifically grounded arguments equips researchers and practitioners with the knowledge that they need to make all groups feel more comfortable and to promote equality of opportunity for all members of society.

In the current article, we employ a diversity science approach to illuminate how colorblind ideologies impact American Indians, who are severely underrepresented in most domains of contemporary life. In fact, we contend that American Indians are so underrepresented in various contexts (e.g., media, school) that they experience an extreme form of colorblindness; they are *invisible*. This psychological invisibility is characterized by the absence of positive contemporary representations or of any representations at all (Fryberg & Townsend, 2007). While colorblindness involves ignoring the experience of race and racism, invisibility goes one step further. It limits the public “ways of being” or social representations (i.e., ideas, images) of “how to be a person” that people use to orient themselves in their social world. As such, the utter lack of self-relevant social representations, or invisibility, of certain groups limits how members of these groups understand who they are and what they see as possible for themselves.

Specifically, in this commentary, we briefly describe how social representations guide the development of self, in particular, for American Indians. We use a diversity science approach to first characterize the social representations of American Indians and then to examine the ways in which social representations, informed by colorblind ideologies, limit the potential of American Indians.

Ideologies as Social Representations

Ideologies such as colorblindness affect people, in part, because they are tacitly built into people's everyday worlds (in policies, practices, and institutions) and thus function as a type of social representation. In the section that follows, we first outline how and why social representations matter for the development of self, with a particular focus on American Indians. Then, we apply a diversity science approach to illuminate how social representations or the lack of representations (i.e., invisibility) of American Indians influence psychological well-being.

The Nature and Function of Social Representations

Social representations refer to the widely shared, yet taken-for-granted, ideas and meanings that are tacitly embodied in institutions, social structures, and everyday artifacts (Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Social representations of people's social groups constitute the collective tools that people use to learn about themselves, master their environments, and communicate with one another (Moscovici, 1973/1988, 1984). They guide the development of self by providing answers to the "who am I" and "what can I become" questions (Oyserman & Markus, 1993).

Individuals negotiate and renegotiate the social representations of the groups to which they belong from one situation to the next (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). They consciously and unconsciously scan situations for self-relevant information about their group, and then they use this information to give structure and meaning to their self-understanding and to determine what aspects of these self-relevant representations define and do not define them (Fryberg & Townsend, 2007).

Unfortunately, however, social contexts do not provide equal opportunities for self-development; they do not provide the same messages about what is possible for members of different groups in society (Fryberg & Townsend, 2007). As a consequence, they render likely some ways of being and constrain and limit others (Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, & Stone, 2008; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006). For instance, because middle-class European Americans are abundantly represented in all aspects of social life (i.e., in the classroom, on television, in the business world), they can survey the list of potential selves or "ways of being" and choose the self they would like to become (James, 1890/1950; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Markus, 1993). Conversely, because American Indians are scarcely represented (i.e., they are invisible), they will have fewer potential selves or ways of being available in the process of developing and under-

standing the self (Markus, 1977; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006).

To examine the effects of invisibility, an extreme form of colorblindness for American Indians, a diversity science approach requires two steps. First, it requires an analysis of the social representations that foster and maintain the invisibility of American Indians. Second, it requires an examination of how these social representations affect the psychological well-being of American Indians.

Social Representations of American Indians

Employing a diversity science approach first requires an analysis of the prevalent social representations of American Indians. Although a comprehensive examination of the content of social representations of American Indians (i.e., warriors, chiefs, Indian princesses) is beyond the scope of this article, the representations can more broadly be categorized as historical, stereotypical, and nonexistent. In this commentary, we focus on the social representations that contribute to the invisibility of American Indians in contemporary American society, those that are historical and nonexistent.

Mainstream America (e.g., the media) generally prefers historical representations of American Indians to contemporary ones (Bordewich, 1996; C. King, 2008). In fact, popular media most commonly depicts American Indians as 18th- and 19th-century figures, such as Pocahontas, Geronimo, Crazy Horse, and Chief Joseph, and rarely depicts them in contemporary ways, as doctors, lawyers, teachers, or business people (Bordewich, 1996; Fryberg, 2003; C. King, 2008; Rollins & O'Connor, 1998). Given the prevalence of historical and the absence of contemporary representations, when non-Natives learn that a person identifies as American Indian, they may expect to see feathers, buckskin, and long braids, and thus they may be surprised or in a state of complete disbelief about the person's identity when they see jeans, T-shirts, and untethered hair. The historical nature of these representations, in effect, constitutes a type of invisibility because it can convey that American Indians—as contemporary people—do not exist.

Representing another form of invisibility, in contemporary American society, there are many domains where American Indians are not even represented as historical figures; they are not included at all. In fact, given that American Indians constitute 1.5% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008), we might expect the numbers to be relatively small, but even compared to their population proportion, American Indians are dramatically underrepresented across domains. In the media, for example, American Indian characters on prime-time television or in Hollywood films ranges from 0.2% to .04% of the total

characters (Fryberg, 2003; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005; Mastro & Stern, 2003). In the American education system, the same pattern holds. For example, only 0.4% of doctoral degrees are awarded to American Indians and only 0.5% of university faculty are American Indians (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2009).

In the rare cases when American Indians are publicly represented as contemporary figures, the representations are, in large part, informed by negative stereotypes (i.e., high alcoholism, depression, suicide, and high school dropout rates). One might think it is better to be invisible than to be negatively represented (e.g., negative stereotypes), but this idea presumes that invisibility (i.e., historical representation or a lack of representation) is meaningless. The reality however, is that negative representations and invisibility are not that different. Negative representations convey a specific message about a social group, but so too does invisibility. In domains where American Indians are invisible, these spaces, in effect, communicate that American Indians are not welcome or do not belong there.

The Psychological Consequences of Invisibility

Employing a diversity science approach, we now consider the effects of these social representations (historical and nonexistent) of American Indians on the psychological well-being of American Indians. To highlight that these social representations of American Indians have differential effects on majority and minority groups in American society, we also describe their effects on European Americans.

Effects of Historical Representations

Historical representations of American Indians are a type of invisibility because, in the absence of a variety of contemporary representations, they communicate that American Indians do not exist in contemporary American society. To examine the effects of this type of invisibility, two sets of studies were conducted to examine how popular media representations of American Indians influence how European American and American Indian students see themselves (Fryberg et al., 2008; Fryberg & Oyserman, 2010).

These two sets of studies revealed that historical representations of American Indians have divergent psychological consequences for European Americans and American Indians. After exposure to historical representations, such as American Indian mascots and Disney's *Pocahontas*, Fryberg and Oyserman (2010) found that European Americans benefit psychologically from these historical representations of American Indians. Indeed, compared to a no exposure control condition, exposure to historical representations enhanced feelings of self-worth of European Ameri-

cans. In contrast, and despite the claims that American Indian mascots and Disney's *Pocahontas* are positive, they harm American Indians. Compared to a no exposure control condition, these historical representations, which are largely created by majority group members (e.g., Whites), depress feelings of self-worth (i.e., self-esteem), community efficacy (i.e., the confidence that one's community can improve itself), and achievement-related possible selves (i.e., future achievement goals) for American Indians.

These studies suggest that when people interact with the social representational world, their experience importantly depends on their social identities. European Americans benefit from being positively and abundantly represented in the social representational world and they benefit from the limited ways in which "others," in this case how American Indians, are represented. Conversely, American Indians, if they are represented at all, see the historical American Indian that mainstream American society provides for them. Utilizing a diversity science approach, these studies reveal that social representations of American Indians, like all social representations, are not neutral; they contain and communicate the desires and the intentions of those who create them (i.e., White Americans), and they obscure or actively deny the perspectives of minority groups (i.e., American Indians). These representations have effects that are consistent with these intentions or desires: they advantage the majority groups who create the social representations, whereas they disadvantage the minority groups who are represented and who often lack the power to change the representations. As a result of the divergent consequences, the social representational world often serves to maintain and reproduce social inequality.

Effects of Invisibility on American Indians

To assess whether the lack of representation of American Indians, another type of invisibility, conveys to American Indian students the message that they do not belong in school, we conducted an experiment (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2010). Specifically, the experiment examined whether students' ability to bring positive academic social representations to mind, in this case representations of people who went to college, impacts belonging. European American and American Indian students were asked to write down two people they know who went to college, eight people who went to college, or they were not asked to think of any people (control condition). Then they completed a belonging measure.

Overall, we found that European American students reported significantly more people who went to college and, perhaps not surprisingly, had higher levels of belonging than American Indian students. Moreover, they reported high levels of belonging across all conditions,

and their level of belonging was not influenced by the number of people they knew who went to college. In contrast, American Indian students had much more difficulty thinking of people who went to college—less than half of American Indian students could report two people who went to college and only about 20% were able to report eight people who went to college. American Indian students who brought to mind a higher number of people who went to college reported higher belonging, whereas those who reported fewer people did not differ from the control condition.

The results of this study highlight that the social representational contexts in which European American and American Indian students participate (i.e., being represented vs. being invisible) importantly influence how students understand themselves (i.e., American Indians feel less belonging in school). Specifically, this study suggests that having access to a variety of social representations of one's group, as in the case of European Americans, is a valuable resource, and that, in contrast, being invisible in a given domain, as in the case of American Indians, threatens belonging and limits opportunities to elaborate possible images of one's self in the future (i.e., possible selves).

Conclusions

When the world is colorblind, American Indians are invisible. A diversity science approach transforms this assertion from the realm of the political or philosophical to the realm of the observable and measurable—to the domain of science. A diversity science approach is advantageous because it provides analytical tools to systematically examine the effects of ideologies, in this case, colorblindness, on different groups of people. Applied to American Indians, a diversity science approach first tells us to analyze the types of representations available for American Indians and then to examine their effects. Research demonstrates that in contemporary American society, American Indians are represented as historical figures (e.g., Indian mascots) or they are not included at all. This invisibility leads to advantages for European Americans (e.g., increased feelings of self worth and belonging) and disadvantages for American Indians (e.g., depressed feelings of self and community worth, fewer academic possible selves and belonging; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2010; Fryberg et al., 2008).

By documenting the effects of social representations, such as colorblindness, on different groups of people, a diversity science approach provides tools for taking advantage of all that diversity has to offer and for taking steps toward remedying America's deeply entrenched racial inequalities. First, this approach reveals flaws in the political or philosophical arguments that colorblindness promotes and/or ensures equality.

In fact, the science reveals that denying or ignoring the consequences of race does not make them cease to exist; rather, in many cases, it can serve to maintain or even amplify them. Second, this approach highlights the power of ideology to shape individuals' opportunities, psychological functioning, and life outcomes. Specifically, the science reveals that colorblindness is experienced quite differently depending upon how people are positioned in the racial hierarchy. Finally, by highlighting the different effects on different groups of people, this approach equips researchers and practitioners with the knowledge needed to level the "social representational playing field": to employ equality-enhancing rather than inequality-producing ideologies. In our increasingly diverse world, a diversity science is critical: It brings arguments about ideologies and their effects out of the realm of "sincere ignorance" and "conscientious stupidity" and into the realm of research-based observations and solutions.

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Note

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