

'Colorblindness' hurts minority employees, but multiculturalism inspires their commitment

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A new study by psychologists at the University of Georgia shows for the first time that whites' beliefs about diversity can hurt or help their minority peers.

The large-scale survey results, just published in the online version of the journal [Psychological Science](#), reveal that [minority employees](#) feel less committed to their work when white employees promote "colorblindness." Yet when white workers champion multiculturalism, the research finds, their minority peers feel more connected to their jobs.

"Contrary to popular beliefs, workplaces that downplay racial and ethnic differences actually make minority employees feel less engaged with their work," said 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 against them in these allegedly colorblind settings."

The study's other authors are Kecia Thomas, a professor of psychology and senior advisor to the dean for diversity leadership, and Matt Goren, a doctoral student in psychology. The research team conducted their survey through UGA's Research and Engagement in Diversity program, a unit of the Franklin College.

Whether to embrace colorblindness or multiculturalism has confounded companies, universities and courts for decades. Proponents of colorblindness argue that assimilating minorities into the dominant group is best for everyone. The new UGA research strongly suggests, however, that colorblind climates harm both minority employees and the organizations for which they work.

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, such as:

- "The organization should encourage racial and ethnic minorities to adapt to mainstream ways."
- "Organizational policies should support racial and ethnic diversity."
- "Employees should downplay racial and ethnic differences."
- "Employees should recognize and celebrate racial and ethnic differences."

"Previous research has documented the differences between these two philosophies and [racial bias](#)," said Plaut. "Among dominant group members, multiculturalism predicts less racial bias, while colorblindness predicts greater racial bias. But this is the first study that has examined the effects of dominant group members' diversity beliefs on actual targets. It is also the first study to test these effects in the real world among majority and minority employees working in the same setting."

Thomas agreed.

"This study demonstrates that whites' beliefs have implications for minorities' engagement, and we know from previous work that disengagement can hurt productivity and profits, as well as increase

turnover," she said. "In an economic downturn, when resources are scarce, having an engaged workforce is particularly important."

Plaut said that in general people don't realize that their beliefs about others are palpable to those others. She said the climates that these beliefs create affect minority employees' commitment to their work.

Source: University of Georgia ([news](#) : [web](#))

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