



Restoring Sight to the Racially Color Blind

A Review of

The Color Bind: Talking (and not Talking) About Race at Work

by Erica Gabrielle Foldy and Tamara R. Buckley

New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2014. 200 pp. ISBN

978-0-87154-472-8. \$37.50, paperback

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0039049>

Reviewed by

Richard D. Harvey , Ana Hernandez Kent 

The authors of *The Color Bind* discuss and investigate alternative approaches to race relations in the workplace. They argue that the “color blindness” approach, popular in recent years, regardless of intentions, can have harmful consequences for both persons of color within an institution and, more broadly, for institutions’ ability to transcend color barriers within its policies. As an alternative, they propose a “color cognizance” approach, which involves a deliberate attempt to *see color* and then discuss its implications for work and policy. *The Color Bind* compiles four case studies of groups within a social service organization in order to study their approaches to workplace diversity, their interactions with their coworkers, and their discussions about diversity.

The Color Bind has some similarities and differences with a few other recent books on race. For example, *Talking About Race* (Grineski, Landsman, & Simmons, 2013) communicates the importance of open and constructive discussions about race in the classroom, and it provides tips from students and teachers in order to incorporate more racially sensitive dialogue. A more similar example is the three-volume set, *Gender, Race, and Ethnicity Within the Workplace* (Karsten, 2006). As in *The Color Bind*, this series provides an analytical approach to the topic, offering theory-based insights and practical advice. *Gender, Race, and Ethnicity Within the Workplace* focuses on compiling existing research from several related fields, organizational socialization practices, and original methods to creating and managing diversity. Finally, “*Race and Culture* (Singh & Dutta, 2010) presents a practical training guide to people interested in improving racial and cultural issues in their workplaces.

A distinctive feature of *The Color Bind* is its use of a qualitative organizational case study method to develop a model of the factors that either facilitate or hinder work groups from talking about racial issues. The model identifies contextual factors (called the “intergroup incubator”) that influence the various “roles and relationships” that produce color-cognizant, color-evasive, or color-hostile team practices. The gist of the book and model is that color

cognizance, while difficult to attain, is ultimately a superior path toward racial and cultural understanding and cooperation.

One particular strength of the book is that it first empathizes with the various motives for why people might want and have often opted for color-blind policies. Such motives vary from the relatively more sincere attempts to avoid discrimination to the relatively more insidious attempts to deny the existence of discrimination. However, the book carefully delineates four reasons why color blindness, even when well intentioned, is harmful and ineffective. As an alternative, the authors provide a good argument for why a color-cognizant approach is better. Yet, they avoid equivocating it with a utopia and provide a comprehensive discussion of some important prerequisites and moderators of the effectiveness of this approach.

Another notable strength of the book is that the authors, who are White (Erica) and Black (Tamara), illustrate just how difficult it is to do this color-cognizance work. In Chapter 8, "The Nature of the Terrain: Flaws and Contradictions," readers are treated to a glimpse of the internal struggles and arguments (noted as "blind spots") between the authors. This collective introspection reveals just how embedded and implicit biases can be. They describe a process in which they traded notes with each other that itself could prove to be a helpful intervention within diverse teams.

The primary audience for this book is practitioners. It is written in a very accessible writing style and thus would be helpful to laypersons, supervisors/managers, internal diversity leaders, as well as outside diversity consultants. Because the focal units of their case studies are teams, individuals who do more general work with team dynamics might also find much of their group process information helpful. The authors provide "An Explanatory Model of Racial-Cultural Practice" (Chapter 7) that diversity researchers might find worthy of investigation. Some of the propositions of the model might be tested using quantitative methods as well as the qualitative methods used by the authors. For example, the nature and function of the variables identified as "intergroup incubators," (i.e., safety climate and a disposition toward learning behaviors) are conceptually similar to the ways in which organizational climate (Reichers & Schneider, 1990) and organizational learning (Kramer & Sabin, 2003) are conceptualized and proposed to function within the organizational behavior literature. Thus, research protocols from the research on these areas could be applied to the study of color blindness/cognizance.

In summary, *The Color Bind* is a well-written book that does an effective job of dismantling the color-blind approach and providing motivation and guidance for a color-cognizant approach. Readers will find a model that is rooted in both descriptive observation of best practices of the teams that were observed and in prescriptive advice flowering from the reflections of the authors.

References

Grineski, S., Landsman, J., & Simmons, R., III. (2013). *Talking about race: Alleviating the fear*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

- Karsten, M. F. (Ed.). (2006). *Gender, race, and ethnicity in the workplace: Management, gender, and ethnicity in the United States* (Vol. 1). Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Kramer, T. J., & Sabin, E. J. (2003). Managing the organizational learning process to improve the bottom line. *The Psychologist-Manager Journal*, 6, 11–30.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0095916> PsycINFO →
- Reichers, A. E., & Schneider, B. (1990). Climate and culture: An evolution of constructs. In B. Schneider (Ed.), *Organizational climate and culture* (p. 22). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Singh, R., & Dutta, S. (2010). *"Race" and culture: Tools, techniques, and trainings: A manual for professionals*. London: Karnac Books. [PsycINFO →](#)