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Abstract

Following increased calls for racial justice spurred by the death of George Floyd, many organizations have pledged to support the Black community and play their part in dismantling systemic racism. One common step that leaders take is to invest in diversity programs. Despite bold claims to value diversity and billions of dollars invested in related efforts, workplace discrimination continues to be a major factor in the lives of racial and ethnic minorities. Further, the American public remains substantially divided in their views of diversity programs. Many Americans value diversity, while others believe diversity efforts have gone too far. The current study employed a mixed-methods survey to explore attitudes about diversity efforts and how these beliefs shape workplace decision-making. Our analysis of open-ended responses reveal that many individuals support organizational diversity in theory, yet subtly resist inclusion. This resistance reflects abstract liberalism, the foundational frame of color-blind racial ideology. Compared to those who acknowledge discrimination, those expressing abstract liberalism are more likely to believe Blacks are responsible for their own poor outcomes in the workplace and less likely to recommend a Black male for a promotion. Our findings also reveal that even those who both openly acknowledge discrimination and believe diversity is an important goal rarely take action to counter structural inequality. We discuss these findings in the context of shifting racial attitudes and whether such a shift will lead to broader systemic change that benefits Black employees.
INTRODUCTION

In the wake of increased calls for racial justice following the recent murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, many organizations have expressed support to Black Americans and the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM). Organizational leaders have pledged to do their part in dismantling systemic racism and one common step is to invest in diversity and inclusion programs. Even prior to this new wave of racial reckoning, it was estimated that 98% of companies have some type of diversity program in place (Boston Consulting Group 2019). These may include outreach to recruit more women and racial and ethnic minorities, training programs to raise awareness of bias, talent development programs to make sure these candidates are growing professionally, and affinity groups that emphasize improving culture (Dobbin 2009; Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001; Kalev et al. 2006).

In principle, many individuals seem to agree with these efforts. In a nationally representative survey of working adults, 84% of White respondents stated that they think it is important to strive for diversity in the workplace (Williams 2020). In response to recent mass protests and calls for racial justice, White Americans, in particular, claim they are now more conscious of systemic and structural racism, demonstrated by a recent New York Times headline: “White Americans Say They Are Waking Up to Racism. What Will It Add Up To?” (Harmon and Burch 2020). This headline conveys an important question; however, does being “woke” enough to acknowledge racism and express support for diversity initiatives mean that actions will match beliefs? Further, how do non-Whites fit into this equation?

Despite color-blind ideals in the United States, striking racial inequality persists in the workplace (Pager and Shepherd 2008; Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey 2012). Looking specifically at hiring practices, there is substantial evidence of racial disparities. For instance,
resumes with ethnic sounding names are often overlooked by employers (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). Black applicants are half as likely compared to equally qualified Whites to receive a callback or job offer (Pager, Western, and Bonikowski 2009). Whites also benefit from same-race referrals, while Blacks only benefit from referrals when the referring employee is White, and the evaluator is low in prejudice (Bonilla-Silva 2018). Further, Blacks and Latinos with a clean criminal record fare no better than, or are even less likely to be hired, than Whites just released from prison (Agan and Starr 2016; Pager 2003; Pager et al. 2009). Black candidates who suppress their racial identity by “whitening” their resumes are extended greater opportunities (Kang et al. 2016). Even once Black Americans are hired into the workforce, discrimination persists, as a recent randomized experiment found identical legal memos were given lower ratings and noted for more errors when thought to be written by a Black compared to a White attorney (Reeves 2013).

While many organizations claim to value diversity and invest billions of dollars in related programming to increase diversity and inclusion, the American public is substantially divided when it comes to views about these efforts (Dobbin 2009; Embrick 2011; Newkirk 2019). Many Americans value diversity, while others believe workplace diversity efforts have gone too far (Thomas 2007). Although diversity is a common buzzword, there is a lack of systematic empirical research on what diversity means to people and the narratives individuals use to describe its relevance in our society. This project is guided by three overarching research questions. First, how do people understand and describe workplace diversity and related diversity efforts? Second, how are beliefs about workplace diversity shaped by color-blind racial attitudes? And lastly, how do these attitudes about workplace diversity influence individual employment decisions?
We use a mixed-methods survey study to explore these guiding research questions. We analyze the open ended survey responses of 311 research participants to examine what personal values and viewpoints around diversity are expressed, whether these views vary by race and gender, and the extent to which personal narratives seem to correlate with actual individual actions, such as whether participants would recommend a Black man for a promotion after being initially overlooked.

Research on color-blind racial attitudes and ideology helps us understand the narratives individuals use to describe workplace diversity efforts as well as their support or opposition to them. Our results reveal respondents fall into two primary theoretical camps when discussing organizational diversity: abstract liberalism and acknowledging discrimination (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Neville et al. 2013). Similar to modern and symbolic racism perspectives (Bobo, Kleugel, and Smith 1996; Sears and Henry 2005), the abstract liberalism framework of color-blind racism involves employing American ideals of individualism and meritocracy in abstract ways to explain racial phenomena. In other words, people should be rewarded through their own hard work, and not through forced opportunity structures like diversity efforts. On the other hand, acknowledging discrimination has a powerful influence on people’s perspectives of racial inequality and how to address it. People are more likely to support diversity programs when they acknowledge the existence of racism and discrimination that perpetuates unequal opportunity structures in society (Neville et al. 2013). However, even when individuals both acknowledge racism and value diversity (e.g. saying diversity is an important goal), it does not necessarily mean they will act to take meaningful steps to include Black people in the workplace. In the following sections, we outline existing literature on color-blind ideology and workplace diversity beliefs, detail our results, and conclude by discussing the implications of this current project.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the U.S. has seen a significant ideological shift with regards to race and racism (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Sears and Henry 2005). Prior to the Civil Rights movement, racism and discrimination were much more overt features of American life, both socially and legally (e.g. Jim Crow laws). Newer, more contemporary racism is viewed as and operates differently from historic, more traditional forms of racism (Sears and Henry 2005). Whereas historic racism was marked by biological beliefs of inferiority (particularly with regards to Black Americans) and more overt expressions of racist beliefs, contemporary racism is much more subtle and subversive, and lacks a biological focus in favor of more individualistic and cultural interpretations (Byrd 2011; Quillian 2006). For example, modern or symbolic racism typically asserts that racism is a thing of the past, often suggesting that the only racism that “counts” is historic, more overt forms, and that Blacks (and other racially minoritized groups) ask for too much, too fast, and seek special favors to help get ahead, thus rendering their social advancement underserved (Neville et al. 2000). Modern and symbolic racism also draw from American ideals of individualism and hard work in order to legitimize racial prejudices against people of color (Sears and Henry 2005).

While the Civil Rights movement resulted in the abandonment of explicitly racist laws and social policies, the systemic racial inequalities they established have persisted to the present day. As new social norms have established race as a much more taboo subject, White Americans in particular found new ways to discuss—or avoid discussing—race and racism. There has also been a rise of new justifications for continuing racial inequalities, while disconnecting the disparities from race. A common form of contemporary racial attitudes is color-blind racism,
based in color-blind racial ideology, which some scholars assert is the dominant racial ideology in the U.S. post-Civil Rights (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017; Doane 2017; Gallagher 2003).

**Color-blind Racial Ideology**

Color-blind racial ideology allows Whites to discuss race without appearing racist by relying on “rational” interpretations of social outcomes. For example, one may say that inequalities are driven by things like social class or individual motivation and values, while deeming racial discrimination unimportant and insignificant because legislation has outlawed it. Whites may also use various rhetorical strategies, such as semantic moves to avoid sounding racist (e.g., “I’m not a racist, but…” or “I have a Black friend, so…”) and coded racial language to avoid speaking directly about race (“I’m not comfortable with certain types of people, so I don’t go on that side of town.”) (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017; Foster 2013). This language allows Whites to dismiss race while sounding reasonable and logical, enabling them to effectively maintain their racial privilege and the racial status quo in much more subtle, covert ways.

Neville and colleagues (2000) found a significant association between color-blindness and racial prejudice: individuals with higher levels of color-blind racial attitudes tend to exhibit greater racial prejudice. Additionally, color-blind racial attitudes may unintentionally promote racial discrimination via acceptance of erroneous views regarding racial and ethnic minorities and race relations. Finally, Neville and colleagues (2000) found that stronger color-blind racial attitudes are associated with stronger beliefs that we live in a just, fair world wherein people are rewarded based solely on merit and that individual circumstances are not related to social circumstances or structures.

In his groundbreaking work *Racism without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva (2003) identified four central frames of color-blind racism: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and
minimization of racism. Because these frames do not rely on absolutes, they make discrimination and racism much more subtle and gentle, allowing for prevailing sentiments like, “Not all blacks are lazy, but most are.” While each frame operates in different ways, they work together to form an almost impenetrable ideology. The naturalization frame allows racial matters to be normalized and explained away as “natural” occurrences. For example, racial segregation is seen as a result of individual or group choices, separate from structural policies. The minimization of racism frame downplays the significance of racism in the life chances of racially minoritized people—it is a thing of the past. The cultural racism frame uses culturally based arguments to rationalize the social locations of people of color, asserting that their standing in society is a result of their own misplaced cultural practices, a lack of motivation, or misplaced priorities.

The final frame, abstract liberalism, is the central, defining theme of color-blind racism. Through this frame, people endorse American ideals of individualism and meritocracy in abstract ways to explain racial phenomena (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2017). Using this narrative allows Whites to oppose practical solutions to existing racial inequality, yet claim their objections are reasonable, and even moral, through principled objection. For example, Whites often argue that the “most qualified” person should be hired or given opportunities for advancement and, as a result, view affirmative action as “preferential treatment” for racial minorities. In reality, however, the abstract, decontextualized nature of these arguments merely masks the larger social structures that invalidate equal opportunity and maintain White dominance in the workforce.

Policies like affirmative action and related diversity and inclusion efforts can only be seen as preferential treatment if (1) you ignore the historical exclusion and contemporary underrepresentation of people of color in social institutions, (2) your notion of meritocracy assumes Whites are most qualified, and (3) you ignore the fact that White people are
disproportionately more rewarded for their “hard work.” In this paper, we focus on the abstract liberalism frame because it is the foundational frame of color-blindness and many of our participants utilized this frame when discussing their views on workplace diversity efforts.

Color-blind racial ideology has significant impacts on how individuals, particularly White Americans, understand racism and acknowledge discrimination. While White Americans are far less likely to deny the existence of blatant individualized racism, the denial of institutional racism is much more prevalent because power is not included in their conceptualizations of racism (Neville et al. 2013). Individuals who deny institutional racism are more likely to put the onus on the individuals affected by bias and less likely to place blame on problematic policies and practices, such as informal hiring practices or lack of advancement opportunities (Neville et al. 2013). Similarly, recent research indicates that some White Americans draw from color-blindness to help present themselves as knowledgeable about institutional racism and social oppression (i.e., not color-blind) yet simultaneously absolve themselves of any complicity in racism and White privilege as well as responsibility for helping dismantle these systems (Jayakumar and Adamian 2017).

This color-blind correctness (Jayakumar and Adamian 2017), named for its similarity to political correctness, means that even the most ostensibly liberal Whites (or any race, theoretically) can contribute to the maintenance of racist practices through actions and inactions, for instance by acknowledging that discrimination in the workplace exists but doing nothing to ensure equitable hiring or promotional strategies. For example, an employee may want to appear savvy by speaking up in a diversity training to explain why it is impossible to be color-blind, but still not take concrete steps to ensure the hiring or promotion of a Black candidate, or challenge a White supervisor who is showing preferential treatment to a White protégé.
Research further illuminates differences in how Whites and non-Whites perceive and acknowledge racial discrimination. Racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to perceive and report racial discrimination (Mayrl and Saperstein 2013), although perceptions of discrimination within racial and ethnic minority groups varies based on factors like gender, socioeconomic status, education level, and racial identity. Men of color typically report more discrimination than women of color (Hausmann et al. 2008; Hersch 2011; Paradies 2006), and reports of discrimination increase with higher levels of education (Banerjee 2008; Hirsh and Lyons 2010) and socioeconomic status (Borrell et al. 2007), as well as with greater salience of racial identity (Hausmann et al. 2008).

Offermann and colleagues (2014) investigated how color-blindness and race impact perceptions of subtle racial discrimination in the workplace, finding significant differences between Whites, Blacks, Asians, and Latinos. According to their research, color-blindness in views of institutional discrimination and blatant racial issues is significantly more pervasive among Whites than in racial and ethnic minorities, with the greatest difference evident between Whites and Blacks. Further, they found that individuals with higher levels of color-blind racial attitudes are less likely to perceive microaggressions. Individuals who oppose inclusive policies and those who do not acknowledge blatant racial issues are less likely to perceive workplace discrimination, even in the case of more overt, obvious discriminatory actions.

Workplace Diversity Beliefs

As a result of contemporary conceptualizations of racism, we have generally seen a shift in the racial attitudes of White Americans away from overt prejudice towards more egalitarian beliefs about race. Compared to the past, White Americans now overwhelmingly support principles of equality such as open housing and equal access to jobs (Krysan and Moberg 2016).
More employers are also investing in diversity initiatives to lessen inequality, improve unity, and comply with civil rights laws (Dobbin 2009; Edelman et al. 2001; Kalev et al. 2006).

Unfortunately, however, social scientists have uncovered inconsistencies in White American attitudes towards race. While White Americans often express broad support for racial equality in principle, they oppose specific policies like diversity programs and affirmative action that address racial inequalities, a concept known as the principle-policy gap (Taylor and Parcel 2019). This principle-policy gap is fed by contemporary racism, like color-blind racial ideology, where Whites fail to see existing racial inequalities as the result of historical discrimination and racism (Mayrl and Saperstein 2013).

This is consistent with research finding that Whites generally view organizations as more fair and inclusive of women and racial and ethnic minorities than other groups, with Black Americans viewing organizations least favorably than all groups (Kaiser et al. 2013; Miller and Kaiser 2001; Mor Barak et al. 1998). As such, Whites may oppose organizational interventions aimed to improve diversity and inclusion, seeing these measures as unneeded and inherently unfair and biased against White people (Norton and Sommers 2011). Whites tend to view racism as a zero-sum game, where interventions meant to reduce it inevitably means their loss (Norton and Sommers 2011).

A study by Berry and Bonilla-Silva (2008) provides further support for Whites’ principled opposition to race-based policies like affirmative action through abstract liberalism narratives. Their results indicate that Whites are significantly more likely to support hiring a Black over a White candidate when the two individuals have equal hiring exam scores and the company is intentionally addressing concerns of diversity, compared to when the Black candidate has a slightly lower score or when the company is addressing past discrimination (even
though both candidates were deemed well qualified for the position). Additionally, the reasons for Whites’ responses highlighted the flexibility of the ideological framing of qualifications that can be mobilized in multiple ways to support individual interests. For example, a significant proportion of Whites who invoked specific, contextualized concerns (e.g., “diversity is important”) as support for hiring the Black candidate when both candidates have the same score completely abandoned this reasoning to oppose hiring the Black candidate when their score was lower than the White candidate, and instead relied on more principled, decontextualized reasoning (e.g., “hiring should be based on qualifications only”) (Berry and Bonilla-Silva 2008).

Historically, Whites have also favored individualistic explanations for racial and ethnic socioeconomic gaps, “revealing the dominance of an ideology of individualism alongside less popular ‘system challenging’ structuralist beliefs” that acknowledge racism and discrimination (Hunt 2007:392). This is consistent with the abstract liberalism frame of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2018). White explanations for these inequalities, such as hiring, promotion, and pay gaps, tend to not be based on notions of traditional individualism (or racism, i.e. a “belief in the innate or genetic inferiority of Blacks”) but instead based on “motivational individualism,” which attributes Black-White inequalities to Blacks’ supposed lack of will or effort (Hunt 2007:392). Thus, diversity efforts are inconsistent with Whites’ views that organizations are fair and equitable and that any inequality is a product of low effort on the part of racial and ethnic minorities. This inconsistency may trigger beliefs about diversity efforts that conform with abstract liberalism—e.g. minorities are less competent and recruited unfairly for their race rather than their qualifications and expected contributions.

On the other hand, racially and ethnically minoritized people assign more value to and feel more comfortable with diversity than Whites (Mor Barak et al. 1998). Avery (2011)
designed a theoretical model to explore what types of employees are more or less likely to endorse diversity and how organizational environments may influence individuals’ attitudinal support for diversity allowing this support to translate into more concrete actions and behaviors that improve diversity (e.g., diversity championing). While this research identified the importance of examining endorsement of diversity and activation of related inclusive behavior and decision making, it did not conduct an independent analysis to determine empirically whether this model is supported (Avery 2011).

Our findings add to current knowledge by illuminating how color-blind ideology shapes beliefs about workplace diversity, and subsequently how these beliefs influence individual workplace behaviors regarding racial and ethnic minorities—specifically, whether or not to recommend a Black man for promotion. By intentionally utilizing a diverse sample, we go beyond much of the existing research that mainly focuses on White Americans, particularly with regards to color-blindness. Our results demonstrate that participants fall into two primary groups with regards to organizational diversity: those who utilize abstract liberalism and those who acknowledge discrimination. Individuals who frame their views of workplace diversity using abstract liberalism are more likely to believe Blacks are responsible for their own poor outcomes in the workplace and less likely to recommend a Black male job candidate for an open position as compared to those who acknowledge the existence of discrimination. Individuals who acknowledge discrimination are more likely to recommend the Black candidate for promotion, but many still choose to not take actions that would challenge institutional racism.
DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Sample

Data come from a larger study on beliefs about workplace diversity, racial attitudes, and how context impacts workplace decision making (Williams 2017; 2018). This paper analyzes open-ended responses to an online survey experiment that was distributed through the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences at Stanford University in 2010 and 2011. Participants include 311 Stanford alumni, parents of Stanford students, and community college students, all between 17 - 92 years of age, with an average age of 44. 64% (n = 200) of the sample are women and 30% (n = 92) are men\(^1\), 54% (n = 167) are White, 3% are Black (n = 11), 6% are Latinx (n = 20), 17% are Asian (n = 54), and 8% (n = 26) identify as racially Other\(^2\). While this sample is broader than a convenience sample of undergraduate students for increased generalizability, it is not an ideal national probability sample. Additionally, because the sample does not include significant numbers of nonwhite participants, most of our comparative analysis is based on Whites and non-Whites.

Measurement

Diversity Beliefs. To examine the extent to which respondents believe it is important for organizations to strive for diversity, participants were asked, “Some people believe that diversity is an important goal for organizations, while others believe diversity efforts have gone too far. What is your view?” Participants then indicated their personal beliefs by selecting one of two fixed choices: “diversity is an important goal for organization” or “diversity efforts have gone too far”. In order to better understand beliefs about diversity, participants were then asked to respond to three related open-ended questions: (1) “What is the main reason you feel this way [that diversity is an important goal for organizations or that diversity efforts have gone too far]?”
(personal belief); (2) “What is the main reason you believe many organizations value diversity?” (external belief); and (3) “What is the main reason you believe some people in organizations feel diversity has gone too far?” (external belief). Our analysis in this paper focuses on only the first question because it clearly asks for personal beliefs from respondents, while questions two and three are framed in ways that may elicit participants’ external beliefs—what they believe others might think.

**Color-blind Racial Attitudes.** In order to better understand the impact of color-blind racial ideology, we used the Color-blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS), developed by Neville et al. (2000). The CoBRAs is a 20-item scale with three distinct factors resulting from a factor analysis: (1) Racial Privilege; (2) Institutional Discrimination; and (3) Blatant Racial Issues. We focused our analysis on the Institutional Discrimination factor, which measures attitudes related to awareness of the implications of institutional forms of discrimination and exclusion, for instance: “Social policies, such as affirmative action, discriminate unfairly against White people” and “Due to racial discrimination, programs such as affirmative action are necessary to help create equality.”

**Workplace Decision Making.** In order to further examine how narratives about diversity relate to hiring and promotions, participants were given a short vignette about two workers at a fictitious company: Darnell and John. The vignette reads:

Darnell is a fourth-year associate at Max Corp. When John, a new associate with previous experience was hired, a senior partner asked Darnell to ‘show him the ropes’ at Max Corp. Darnell, John, and the senior partner would all be working together in the same division. Darnell agreed and felt that this would be a good opportunity to demonstrate his leadership at the company. After a few months, Darnell noticed that John and the partner were getting along very well. The partner praised John’s performance, they frequently went out to lunch, and they were always chatting amongst themselves in the partner’s office. Darnell also noticed that John was receiving more of the assignments with the most prestigious clients.
A year later, John was recommended for promotion, mainly as a result of his performance on a case with a very prestigious client and a fine recommendation from the partner. Although both employees did promising work and had similar evaluations on record, Darnell was not recommended for promotion. Darnell became concerned due to the fact that, of 39 associates who were promoted this year at Max Corp, only three were members of a racial minority group. Darnell has requested that his situation be reviewed.

While neither employee is explicitly identified racially, clues suggest that Darnell is a racial minority, more specifically a Black man, as Darnell is clearly a Black-sounding name (Levitt and Dubner 2005), and Darnell expressed concern about the lack of racial minorities receiving promotions at his company, leading him to request a review of his own lack of promotion. After reading the vignette, participants were asked a series of questions related to the scenario, including who is most responsible for finding a solution to Darnell’s problem and, ultimately, whether they recommend promoting John or Darnell. We use the answer to this last question to analyze how beliefs about workplace diversity impact workplace decision making.

**Minority Responsibility.** In order to understand how participants characterized the level of responsibility racial minorities have for their own poor employment outcomes, we asked them, “In your opinion, who is most responsible for finding a solution to Darnell’s problem? Your response must total 100.” The response options were, “The Legal System,” “Max Corp Upper Management,” “Darnell,” or “The Partner.” This allowed us to measure the share of the responsibility participants believe Darnell takes in the situation compared to other external systems or actors. We categorized participant responses in the 0-49 range as suggesting that Darnell is not most responsible for his own outcome, and responses in the 50-100 range were treated as suggesting Darnell is most responsible for his own outcome.

**Analytic Strategy**

We completed a two-part mixed-methods analysis of the survey data. First, we analyzed the survey responses to our open-ended target question ("What is the main reason you feel [that
diversity is an important goal for organizations or that diversity efforts have gone too far?]) for common themes using a combined iterative and grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014). After grouping responses to this question, we took the data through a multiple stage coding process, reading each participant response individually. We first identified broad thematic concepts in responses and refined these into more specific themes by taking the data through numerous coding passes. Several themes surfaced; however, this paper focuses on two of these emergent themes: the use of abstract liberal framing and acknowledgement of discrimination (both aspects of color-blind racial ideology; see Bonilla-Silva 2018; Neville 2013).

To supplement this rich qualitative analysis, we ran basic descriptive statistics to examine the extent to which the narratives emerging in the open-ended responses varied by race and gender. We also analyzed whether the color-blind narratives expressed were consistent with responses to quantitative survey questions, such as diversity beliefs, color-blind racial attitudes, and attitudes about responsibility for disadvantaged minority outcomes. Lastly, we analyzed the responses emerging within these two themes to uncover patterns in how individuals behave in response to the workplace decision from the study vignette (i.e. deciding whether or not to promote a Black man).

**FINDINGS**

Many respondents discuss diversity and inclusion with arguments about meritocracy. Meritocracy arguments often amount to the view that diversity efforts go too far and are problematic because it assumes racial minorities lack necessary skills and qualifications. In other words, diversity is good as a general concept, but racial minorities are just not as qualified, which is consistent with abstract liberalism. This viewpoint often denies the significance of discrimination, racism, and structural inequalities and blames racial minorities for these existing
inequalities. Other respondents directly acknowledge discrimination and racism and discuss this as a rationale for why diversity efforts in organizations are important. These participants focus less on qualifications and merit (either possessed or lacking) and more on the need for organizations to do something to address inequity.

Generally, women are more likely to believe that diversity in organizations is an important goal than men: 83% of women indicated this belief, as compared to only 75% of men. Women, including White women, are also more likely to acknowledge discrimination and select the Black man for promotion. For example, 40% of White women promote Darnell compared to only 10% of White men. These findings are consistent with research showing that White men typically believe company policies are fair and inclusive as a result of formal workplace processes, while White women, due to their awareness of informal discriminatory practices, are less likely to believe equality has been achieved (Mor Barak et al. 1998). Thus, as a result of personal experiences with discrimination or empathy for other women who experience discrimination, women typically have more favorable beliefs about workplace diversity initiatives (Mor Barak et al. 1998). This study suggests that these experiences with discrimination and empathy may result in more support of diversity efforts designed to promote racial diversity.

**Abstract Liberalism**

When answering our focus question (“What is the main reason you feel this way [that diversity is an important goal for organizations or that diversity efforts have gone too far]?”), 18% of the total sample (n = 55) directly expressed beliefs that are consistent with abstract liberalism. These individuals cite that qualifications or abilities are more important than efforts to increase diversity in organizations. This frame of thinking is significant because it often serves to
mask prejudiced ideas that minorities, in particular people of color, are assumed to be inherently less qualified. Of the 55 respondents who expressed comments about qualifications or abilities as being more important than diversity, 61% (n = 34) were women and 29% (n = 16) were men, which is roughly proportionate to their representation in the sample. This group was racially diverse, with a slight overrepresentation of Whites (58%, n = 32) and underrepresentation of nonwhites (29%, n = 16)–Blacks (<2%, n=1), Asians (14%, n = 8), Latinos (5%, n = 3), and individuals who identify as Other (7%, n = 4). More importantly, some noteworthy distinctions appeared with regards to how certain racial groups framed their responses.

Unqualified Minorities. In response to our focus question, 17 respondents made a direct reference to unqualified minorities, and all 17 were either White or Asian. These are both important points with racial significance. First, while many of these respondents did not explicitly state that “minorities” was a reference to race, many did, which indicates how the term “diversity” is often implicitly understood as “race” or “racial diversity” (Bell and Hartmann 2007; Berrey 2015). Second, some Asian Americans may be more likely to exhibit racial attitudes that align more closely with Whites, due to complex factors including the racialization of Asians as “honorary White” (Bonilla-Silva 2018; Tuan 1998), beliefs among Asians that they have more in common politically with Whites (Samson 2015), and the adoption of color-blind attitudes that mirror White cultural worldviews (Chen et al. 2006). As such, it is illuminating, if unsurprising, that White and Asian respondents would represent the biggest groups directly discussing minorities as unqualified workers.

A 38-year-old Asian woman provides an illustrative response citing, “Companies go out of their way to hire less qualified minorities. It’s actually not fair the other way round.” Similarly, a 51-year-old White man claims that he has seen unqualified minorities given
preference over more qualified people, saying he, “Witnessed [a] number [of] cases where better performers were skipped for diversity candidates.” A 49-year-old White woman put it perhaps most bluntly, simply saying, “I don’t want to be operated [on] by a surgeon who was hired for diversity reasons.” All of these responses assume that minority candidates are inherently underqualified or unqualified, and Whites are assumed to be more qualified, apparently for no other reason than they are not minorities. These arguments also necessitate a belief that efforts to diversify are fundamentally at odds with hiring qualified people; in other words, it is impossible that a potential hire could be both highly qualified (even the most qualified) and someone who will add diversity to an organization.

A longer response from a 59-year-old White woman also demonstrates how color-blind ideology is used to soften an otherwise hard stance against diversity efforts:

Because efforts to attain diversity, by definition, discriminate against someone of another group. I believe that educational opportunities and job opportunities should be decided objectively and without regard to race, religion, sexual orientation or gender. I also believe that efforts to develop diverse populations in the educational or business situation cause people to undervalue the minority individual and to believe that that person did not objectively deserve the position and is therefore less capable and less to be relied upon. That defeats the purpose of the effort and further perpetuates ugly stereotypes.

First, the claim of “reverse discrimination” is a classic trope of color-blind ideology. It is consistent with Norton and Sommers (2011) who note Whites tend to see racism as a zero-sum game where Whites must lose if bias against Blacks decreases. Claiming diversity efforts discriminate against Whites denies the existence of systemic privileges afforded to Whites and seeks to maintain the structure that perpetuates historical inequalities. Second, the burden of discrimination is placed on minority groups through the use of the rhetorical tool of projection: the respondent suggests that intentional efforts to diversify spaces will cause people to question whether or not minorities are worthy of the positions they have been given—not earned through
their hard work—further propagating negative stereotypes. While the narrative is seemingly concerned about the perceived value of and stereotypes faced by minorities, in reality, it merely absolves people from their responsibility to challenge stereotypes or of their complicity in a structure that works against and devalues minorities. For Whites in particular, their use of color-blind ideology allows them to “logically” oppose actual strategies that would reduce inequalities (i.e. diversity efforts), thus perpetuating the racial status quo and cementing their privilege.

General Comments on Qualifications. Thirty-three respondents made more general comments about the qualifications of ostensible new hires, but even the more general comments still highlight that most respondents implicitly understand diversity to mean racial diversity. A few examples are representative of the types of responses common among participants:

“Diversity is not a goal in itself. Organizations should get the best talent no matter where it comes from.” (67-year-old Latino man)

“Merit should matter more than race.” (45-year-old Asian man)

“People should be hired on their talents and abilities, not because of their color or ethnic origins. Isn’t this reverse discrimination? We should not, in 2010, have different scales of measurement for the sake of diversity.” (53-year-old White woman)

These comments suggest that the respondents do not recognize historical patterns of homogenous workspaces and how current processes rarely help ameliorate disparities, or they simply do not believe diversity is a significant problem. The belief that we should not “have different scales of measurement for the sake of diversity,” as the White woman respondent says, suggests that some respondents believe both simultaneously.

All of the examples are laced with the logic used by many people who oppose similar policies put in place to directly address systemic and longstanding inequalities in access to jobs and education for members of minority groups. Coupled with the implicitly-coded meaning of “diversity,” this logic showcases yet another aspect of color-blind ideology: by using the abstract
language of meritocracy, individuals can formulate “reasonable” arguments (“We should hire the best person for the job, regardless of race or gender”) while simultaneously opposing practical solutions to existing inequalities, like affirmative action policies or other proactive hiring processes (Bonilla Silva [2003] 2017). These individuals often reference token examples like former President Obama as evidence why affirmative action policies are no longer necessary, a common strategy for those employing colorblind ideology.

**Acknowledging Discrimination**

Given continuing racial inequalities that exist in the workplace, the ways in which participants in this study acknowledge—or fail to acknowledge—the existence of discrimination is particularly telling. In response to our focus question, only 22% of participants (n = 68) acknowledged discrimination in their narratives about diversity. The majority of these individuals directly acknowledged discrimination through explicit references to “discrimination,” “injustices,” “racism,” or similar ideas. Approximately 23% of women acknowledge discrimination, while 17% of men acknowledge discrimination; interestingly, identical percentages (22%) of Whites (n = 36) and non-Whites (n = 24) acknowledged discrimination.

A few representative examples illustrate the ways in which these respondents referenced discrimination directly:

“Because racial discrimination and prejudice is very prevalent among today’s society.” (26-year-old Black woman)

“I worked for Ikea, they have a very high goal of diversity, and this opened my eyes to how racist some companies are. Perhaps they do not publicly advertise themselves as hiring only one type of ethnicity but when you [go] to their stores they seem to only have certain people working there.” (22-year-old Other woman)

“Stereotypes and racism, to any extreme, have been driving forces behind employment and promotion decisions. I believe organizations should make diversity an important goal in order to help streamline these decisions to be merit-based rather than racially-based.
Without diversity, organizational stereotypes and racism remain unaffected.” (29-year-old White man)

The last quote from the White man is an example of an ostensibly “woke” White person: one who acknowledges discrimination, yet also frames his acknowledgement through abstract liberalism, suggesting that merit matters more than race. As discussed later, this reasoning is often used as a rationale or justification for inaction regarding racial inequality in the workplace.

When discussing their reasoning behind why they feel that diversity is an important goal for organizations or that diversity efforts have gone too far, about one-third of these respondents (n = 21) indirectly acknowledged discrimination, which typically involved implicit comments about inequalities or “equal opportunity for all” without a specific reference to race, gender, or another form of diversity. One example from a 56-year-old White woman was very representative of those who indirectly referenced discrimination, particularly since 15 of these respondents were also White women: “All people deserve an equal opportunity. We are the sum of our parts, which is only fully recognized when all parts get to contribute.” By saying that “all people deserve an equal opportunity,” the implication is that some people do not have an equal opportunity—in other words, inequality, at least to some degree, exists.

**Workplace Decision Making**

Before analyzing the workplace decision making outcome, we analyzed how abstract liberalism (n = 55) and acknowledging discrimination (n = 68) relate to other diversity beliefs and racial attitudes measures in the survey. Individuals who acknowledge discrimination are extremely unlikely to say that diversity efforts have gone too far (<3%), while over two-thirds of those expressing abstract liberalism believe that diversity efforts have gone too far. As expected, CoBRAS scores measuring the extent to which one acknowledges institutional discrimination are higher for those expressing abstract liberalism narratives compared to those acknowledging
discrimination (mean = 18.5 vs. 15.1). Finally, we examined who respondents believed was responsible for resolving the situation where Darnell was passed up for a promotion—Darnell himself or something external to Darnell (the deciding partner, the organization, or the law). Only four percent of those who acknowledge discrimination believe the responsibility is primarily on Darnell, while 24% of those expressing abstract liberalism believe Darnell is most responsible for solving his own problem.

**Insert Table 1 here.**

Next, we analyzed the extent to which the narratives of abstract liberalism or acknowledging discrimination seemed to correlate with the participant’s decision to promote a Black job candidate (see Table 2). After reviewing the vignette, participants were told to only recommend one of the two candidates for promotion: John, a White candidate, or Darnell, a Black candidate. The firm partner recommended John, although both candidates were qualified and there was some indirect evidence of bias. In the total sample, 35% of participants challenged the employer’s decision and recommended Darnell, while 65% recommended John.

**Insert Table 2 here.**

Forty-seven percent of individuals who acknowledged discrimination recommended Darnell for promotion, which is a higher rate than in the general sample. Of these, women and racial minorities who acknowledge discrimination were the most likely to select Darnell, at 59% and 50% percent respectively. Racial minorities include those who identify as Black, Asian, Latino, and Other. None of the White males who acknowledged discrimination recommended Darnell for promotion.

Twenty-six percent of those who endorsed abstract liberalism promoted Darnell, which is less than the general sample (35%) and substantially less than those who directly acknowledged
discrimination (47%). White males who endorsed abstract liberalism were very unlikely to promote Darnell, at eight percent. The decisions of White women were most influenced by the color-blind ideology. While 59% of White women who acknowledge discrimination were willing to recommend the Black candidate, only 30% of those utilizing abstract liberalism made the more inclusive promotion decision. Overall, White men were very unlikely to recommend Darnell across frames and women of color were the most likely to promote Darnell, despite the color-blind views expressed.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Through this current project, we sought to answer three main questions: (1) how people understand and describe workplace diversity and related diversity efforts; (2) how beliefs regarding workplace diversity are shaped by color-blind racial attitudes; and (3) how attitudes about workplace diversity influence workplace behaviors with regards to racial and ethnic minorities. We add to current knowledge by demonstrating how color-blind ideology shapes beliefs about workplace diversity, which in turn impacts whether or not people are likely to recommend a Black man for promotion. Additionally, our intentional inclusion of a diverse sample moves beyond most extant research on color-blindness that focuses primarily on White Americans. Our results demonstrate that participants fall into two primary groups with regards to organizational diversity: those who utilize abstract liberalism and those who acknowledge discrimination. Individuals who frame their views of workplace diversity using abstract liberalism are more likely to believe Blacks are responsible for their own poor outcomes in the workplace and less likely to recommend a Black male job candidate for promotion as compared to those who acknowledge the existence of discrimination.
When analyzing participant responses to our focus question, a number of participants utilized abstract liberalism, making references to ostensible qualifications of new hires. More meaningfully, these comments typically focused on racial minorities, which involves an assumption that minority candidates are inherently underqualified or unqualified, while Whites are assumed to be more qualified, seemingly only because they are not minorities. Interestingly, our questions did not specify race as a focal point; as such, the fact that respondents most often connected their thinking to race demonstrates how diversity is often implicitly understood as racial diversity (Bell and Hartmann 2007; Berry 2015). The arguments our respondents used imply (or assert) that efforts towards diverse hiring practices are fundamentally at odds with hiring qualified people. Respondents appear to believe that it is impossible to hire someone who is both highly qualified and will add diversity to an organization. This is important because such logic not only relegates minorities to the label of unqualified, but also works to maintain the racial status quo in which Whites continue to be the dominant group in the workforce, all but ensuring their concentration in positions of power.

Whether or not—and more importantly, how—someone acknowledges discrimination can be indicative of color-blind ideology. Individuals who are deeply entrenched in color-blindness typically avoid recognizing discrimination and racism at all costs, as doing so directly contradicts their position on race. Additionally, the flexibility of color-blindness allows for the simultaneous acknowledgement of discrimination and denial of its significance. While very few of our respondents actually acknowledged discrimination, whether directly or indirectly, those who did acknowledge discrimination were much more likely to express support for diversity efforts and to subsequently promote Darnell, a Black man. Our results also echo existing research indicating that women are more likely than men to have favorable beliefs about diversity initiatives because
of their own experiences or empathy for other women who have experiences with discrimination and inequality (Mor Barak et al. 1998; Swin et al. 1995). Women in our sample were more likely to acknowledge discrimination, support diversity, and take action by promoting a racial minority than men, for both Whites and non-Whites.

Existing racial attitudes research supports our findings with regards to Darnell resolving his own denial of promotion. According to a recent study by Pew Research (2017), 54% of Whites and 48% of Hispanics believe that Blacks who cannot get ahead are mostly responsible for their own condition. Limitations in our sample prevent us from making more nuanced analysis of race–there were relatively few racial and ethnic minorities in the overall sample, which necessitated that we collapse our sample into White and non-White. Future research should seek to investigate differences that may exist among non-Whites through more intentional inclusion of higher numbers of racial and ethnic minorities.

The strongest contribution of this project is that our findings connect color-blind narratives to outcomes, more specifically whether or not participants would actually promote a Black man. Put another way, the study vignette presented us with an opportunity to see whether participants’ beliefs aligned with their actions–overall, they did not. The overwhelming majority of our respondents indicated that diversity is an important goal for organizations, yet when it comes to promoting a racial minority, nearly two-thirds of all participants chose not to do so. Even more telling is that only 10% of White men chose to promote Darnell, and a lower proportion of White women chose to promote Darnell as compared to non-White women.

Existing research helps to explain this, showing that while White American’s support of various principles of equality (e.g. integrated schools, interracial marriage) has increased significantly in recent decades, their support of actions and policies that directly address
inequality is much lower, and has even decreased in some cases (Krysan and Moberg 2016). The implications of these findings are particularly important for understanding how White Americans approach issues of diversity in real life, highlighting the disconnect between beliefs and actions. In the case of our study, White participants who claim diversity is important had the opportunity to enact these beliefs and thus reduce the impact of structural racism in the workplace, yet the majority of them continued to uphold a racial status quo that maintains White privilege and dominance.

Based on existing research and our study results, White participants demonstrate such a stark disconnect between their beliefs and actions in large part to avoid the label “racist.” Color-blindness facilitates this disconnect through an ability to simultaneously recognize and diminish racism. This works for even the most ostensibly liberal, “woke” Whites as well, through color-blind correctness (Jayakumar and Adamian 2017), wherein Whites can acknowledge discrimination or tout the importance of diversity in workplaces yet do nothing to change workplace structures that perpetuate White advantage.

In this way “wokeness” serves as a form of symbolic capital, highlighting another potential reason why some of the White participants in our study say one thing but do another: acknowledging the existence of racism, particularly structural forms that impact spaces like the workplace, has become somewhat of a “trendy” thing to do. We have observed many examples of this in light of increased spotlight on BLM (Parker, Horowitz, and Anderson 2020; Wortham 2020). Even a cursory glance at recent media stories support this idea, from stories detailing how best to create diverse workplaces (Pedulla 2020; Robert 2020) to those still making the business case for diversity (Schindler 2019). Combined with color-blindness, this trendiness allows Whites in particular to reap the benefits of superficial recognition of racism and White
advantage—they signal “wokeness” but can avoid any real responsibility for enacting changes that might result in a change in the status quo.

Our findings are important because they illuminate how color-blind ideology not only impacts conceptualizations of diversity efforts as racial matters, but more importantly actual outcomes of these practices. Our findings demonstrate how people give lip service to diversity efforts (“Of course diversity is really important for organizations...”), likely in an effort to save face or not appear racist, to seem like a “good,” equitable person, yet when it comes down to making a decision that supports espoused ideals, their actions do not align. Color-blindness serves as the ideological mechanism that allows many of the individuals in our study to express support for the principles of diversity and diversity efforts while simultaneously not taking any real action to address existing inequalities in the workplace. Although this is a completely subconscious process for some, while part of conscious effort for others, the end result is still the same: Whites maintain advantage, and people of color maintain disadvantage—the racial hierarchy is reinforced, and the (racial) wheel keeps turning.
NOTES

1. Nineteen participants did not indicate gender.

2. Thirty-three participants did not indicate race.

REFERENCES


Table 1. Diversity Beliefs and Mean Racial Attitudes by Narrative Frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Acknowledge Discrimination N = 68</th>
<th>Do not Acknowledge Discrimination N = 243</th>
<th>Abstract Liberalism N = 55</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diversity efforts have gone too far</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>68.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledges Institutional Discrimination - Mean CoBRA Score</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darnell is Most Responsible</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: While it is possible for individual responses to fit within both the “acknowledge discrimination” and “abstract liberalism” framing, only 5 of our respondents had overlapping responses (2 White men, 1 White woman, 1 Other woman, and 1 Latina woman). Because these numbers were so low and do not change the overall results, this table includes the 5 responses that are double counted.
Table 2. Vote Yes to Promote Darnell, by Narrative Frame, Race, and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Acknowledge Discrimination N = 68</th>
<th>Do Not Acknowledge Discrimination N = 243</th>
<th>Abstract Liberalism N = 55</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Women</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Racial Minorities</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women of Color</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men of Color</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Women</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White Men</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>