

CHAPTER II

The Colorblind Perspective in School: Causes and Consequences

Janet Ward Schofield

Source:

Banks, J.A.'s Bank C.M.
(2005). *Multicultural
Education* [5th ed.].
Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons

INTRODUCTION

Race matters, or at least it has historically in the United States, although it is a scientifically imprecise construct the meaning of which is heavily influenced by social context (Jones, 1997). Racial group membership is the basis on which individuals were treated as the property of others and denied the basic rights of citizenship even after the formal abolition of slavery. The civil rights laws passed in the middle of the twentieth century were designed to do away with such group-based discrimination—to dismantle dual school systems, to ensure political rights, and to prevent discrimination in employment and housing, among other things. However, the passage of these laws created a situation that Jones (1998) has called the “New American Dilemma”—a conflict between “the values embodied in the democratic principles of freedom and equality without regard to race, and . . . the belief that current as well as cumulative racial biases persist making it necessary to take race into account in order to realize the principles of freedom and equality” (p. 645). The first of these perspectives was given voice by Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan in his famous call for a colorblind society in his dissenting opinion in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. A colorblind society is one in which racial or ethnic group membership is irrelevant to the way individuals are treated (Rist, 1974). People in favor of colorblind approaches to policy argue that taking cognizance of group membership in decision making is illegitimate since it is likely to lead either to discrimination against minority groups or to reverse discrimination in their favor. Neither of these actions is viewed as desirable. The people aligned with this side of the debate argue that, since the laws that systematically disadvantaged African Americans were overturned decades ago, a fair system is now in place and this system can only be truly fair to the extent

Adapted from Janet Ward Schofield, *Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism*, pp. 231–253. Copyright © 1986 by Academic Press Company. Used with permission.

that it completely ignores group membership—treating individuals solely as individuals and striving to ignore race or ethnicity completely.

Yet others, such as Bonilla-Silva (2003) and Levin (2003), argue that such an approach is the antithesis of fairness—that it is akin to a race between a well-nourished and well-trained athlete whom most of the spectators are rooting for and an individual who has just been released from an unjust prison term during which food was sparse and opportunities for exercise and training were denied. People taking this perspective agree with Justice Harry Blackmun, who wrote in the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) case that “in order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. In order to treat persons equally, we must treat them differently” (pp. 2806–2808). They contend that the reality of continuing racism (Jones, 1997; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Trent et al., 2003) as well as the continuing impact of prior discrimination, such as the striking difference in net worth among African Americans and Whites with similar incomes due at least in part to larger inheritances received by Whites (Jaynes & Williams, 1989), make policies designed specifically to promote the inclusion of African Americans in the economic and political life of the country both just and wise. Thus, they tend to support affirmative action and other related policies designed to do this by explicitly taking account of the relative participation rates of various groups—an approach at direct odds with the colorblind perspective.

This tension between views that see taking cognizance of racial or ethnic group membership positively and those that see it negatively is strongly reflected in controversy over how our educational system should function (Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000). Specifically, one approach to education in our increasingly diverse society calls for redoubling efforts to teach all students core information and values in an attempt to strengthen a unified American identity (Bennett, 1987; Hirsch, 1996; Schlesinger, 1992). This approach, which typically decries bilingual and multicultural approaches to education, is quite consistent with the colorblind perspective in that it seeks to ignore or deemphasize subgroup identities and differences in an effort to create a unified citizenry. In contrast, another approach, typically endorsed by proponents of multicultural education, argues that responding to diversity by including material about many groups and using approaches to teaching that recognize cultural differences is needed to serve students well and to build harmony and respect between those from different backgrounds (Banks, 2001; Nieto, 2004; Takaki, 1993; Yinger, 1994).

Interestingly, this tension between ignoring or focusing on group membership is reflected in theoretical stances with sharply differing implications even in social psychological research on improving intergroup relations, as Wolsko et al. (2000) point out. Specifically, one major line of theorizing and research suggests that it is the categorization of individuals into groups that lays the basis for stereotyping and discrimination (Brewer & Miller, 1984, 1988; Tajfel, 1978). From this perspective, the logical solution to the problem is to minimize the salience of the group or to redefine the in-group in a more inclusive way so that old “out-groups” join together in assuming a new, more expansive shared identity (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993). Another perspective, clearly much less common, suggests that intergroup relations can be improved by careful and explicit focus on group differences (Lee & Duenas, 1995; Randolph, Landis, & Tzeng, 1977; Triandis, 1976).

The issues raised by the New American Dilemma are complex and unlikely to be easily resolved. Full consideration of them would of necessity involve work from fields as disparate as philosophy, history, psychology, law, ethics, economics, and politics. Thus, this chapter does not try to solve this dilemma. Rather, it has a more modest but nonetheless important

goal: to provide a glimpse of how the colorblind perspective works in reality in one of the most important institutions in our society—its schools.

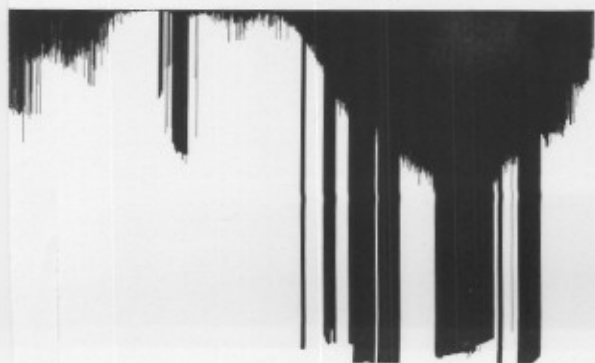
I did not set out initially to explore this question. Rather, as a scholar deeply interested in the potential of interracial school settings for improving intergroup relations, I embarked on a longitudinal ethnographic study designed to illuminate the nature of peer relations in a desegregated school and the impact that school policies, structures, and culture have on those relations (Schofield, 1989). It just so happened that having chosen a particular school for study, as described below, I found myself in an environment that strongly endorsed the colorblind perspective. Furthermore, over time, it became apparent that the institution's endorsement of this perspective had important consequences that educators at the school did not anticipate and often did not recognize. Thus, the causes and consequences of this perspective became the focus of the part of my research reported here.

I argue that two basic factors make understanding the implications of the colorblind perspective important. First, evidence suggests that this perspective is widespread in schools both within the United States and elsewhere, either as part of official policy or as an informal but nonetheless powerful social norm that applies in many situations (Eaton, 2001; Gillborn, 1992; Jervis, 1996; Pollock, 2000; Rist, 1978; Sagar & Schofield, 1984; Sleeter, 1993). Second, the colorblind approach is also frequently espoused as a goal to be sought in many other realms, including employment practices and judicial proceedings. This research led me to conclude that although in many ways the colorblind perspective is appealing because it is consistent with a long-standing American emphasis on the importance of the individual, it easily leads to a misrepresentation of reality in ways that allow and sometimes even encourage discrimination against minority group members, as later parts of this chapter demonstrate.

THE RESEARCH SITE: WEXLER MIDDLE SCHOOL

In choosing a site for the research, I adopted a strategy that Cook and Campbell (1976) call "generalizing to target instances." The aim was not to study what happens in a typical desegregated school, if such an entity can even be said to exist. Rather, it was to explore peer relations under conditions that theory suggests should be relatively conducive to positive relations between African Americans and Whites.

In his classic book *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport (1954) proposed that intergroup contact may reinforce previously held stereotypes and increase intergroup hostility unless the contact situation is structured in a way that (1) provides equal status for minority and majority group members, (2) encourages cooperation toward shared, strongly desired goals, and (3) provides the support of law, authority, and customs for positive relations. These ideas, as elaborated and refined by subsequent theoretical and empirical work (Amir, 1969, 1976; Cook, 1969, 1985; Hewstone & Brown, 1986; Pettigrew, 1986, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000; Schofield, 2001; Schofield & Eurich-Fulcer, 2001; Stephan & Stephan, 1996), constitute a useful foundation for understanding the likely outcomes of interracial contact. For example, although equal status may be neither an absolutely necessary prerequisite nor a sufficient condition for change, it does appear to be very helpful (Amir, 1969, 1976; Brewer & Brown, 1998; Brown, 1995; Cohen, 1975, 1997; Cohen, Lockheed, & Lohman, 1976; Cook, 1978, 1985; Norvell & Worchel, 1981; Pettigrew, 1998; Riordan, 1978; Schofield & Eurich-Fulcer, 2001; Stephan & Stephan, 1996,



2001). In addition, a substantial body of research suggests that cooperation toward mutually desired goals is indeed generally conducive to improved intergroup relations (Aronson & Patnoe, 1997; Bossert, 1988/89; Cook, 1978, 1985; Johnson & Johnson, 1982; Johnson, Johnson, & Maruyama, 1984; Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Nelson, & Skon, 1981; Schofield, 2001; Sharan, 1980; Sherif, 1979; Slavin, 1995; Slavin & Cooper, 1999; Stephan & Stephan, 1996, 2001).

Wexler Middle School was constructed in a large northeastern city to serve as a model of high-quality integrated education. When it first opened, Wexler had a student body almost precisely 50 percent African American and 50 percent White, mirroring closely the proportion of Black and White students in the city's public schools. This school, which serves 1,200 children in sixth through eighth grades, was chosen for study because the decisions made in planning for it suggested that it would come reasonably close to meeting the conditions specified by Allport and the more recent theorists who have built on his work. The school's strong efforts to provide a positive environment for interracial education can be illustrated by examination of its staffing policy. The administration, faculty, and staff of the school are biracial, with about 25 percent of the faculty being African American. The top four administrative positions are filled by two African Americans and two Whites, clearly symbolizing the school's commitment to providing equal status for members of both groups.

The extent to which Wexler met the conditions specified by Allport and his intellectual heirs as conducive to the development of improved intergroup relations has been discussed at length elsewhere (Schofield, 1989). Here, I merely report the conclusion drawn in that discussion—that Wexler came considerably closer to these criteria than did most desegregated public schools. Yet it fell seriously short of meeting them completely in a number of ways many of which were the direct result of societal conditions over which Wexler had little or no control. For example, in spite of Wexler's commitment to a staffing pattern that would provide equal formal status for African Americans and Whites, the proportion of Black teachers on its staff was considerably lower than the proportion of Black students in the school because the school system did not want to put too high a proportion of its Black teachers in one school.

In addition, a large majority of Wexler's White students came from middle- or upper middle-class homes. Although some of the African American children were middle-class, the majority came from either poor or working-class families. These social-class differences have implications for the status of African American and White students within the school. For example, in the eighth grade, which divided students into a "regular" and a "gifted" track, a much higher proportion of the White than African American students achieved scores on standardized tests that led to their placement in the gifted track. Even in the sixth and seventh grades, which had academically heterogeneous classes, this difference influenced student status (Schofield, 1980), although not in a way emphasized and formalized by a tracking policy. In sum, Wexler made stronger than usual efforts to foster positive relations between African Americans and Whites but fell markedly short of being a theoretically ideal milieu for the accomplishment of this goal.

DATA GATHERING

The analysis that follows is based on an intensive four-year study of peer relations at Wexler. The basic data-gathering strategy was intensive and extensive observation in Wexler classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, and cafeteria. Observers used the full field-note method

for recording the events they witnessed (Olson, 1976). A large number of events were observed because they were representative of the events that filled most of the school day at Wexler. However, an important subgroup of events was oversampled in relation to their frequency of occurrence because of their direct relevance to the study's focus. This strategy, which Strauss (1987) call theoretical sampling, led to oversampling certain activities, such as affective education classes, designed to help students get to know each other, and meetings of Wexler's interracial student advisory group set up to handle the special problems students might face in a desegregated school. Over the course of the study, more than 500 hours were devoted to observation of students and staff at Wexler.

A wide variety of other data-gathering techniques ranging from sociometric questionnaires to experimental work to quantitative observational approaches were also used (Sagar & Schofield, 1980; Sagar, Schofield, & Snyder, 1983; Schofield, 1979; Schofield & Francis, 1982; Schofield & Sagar, 1977; Schofield & Whitley, 1983; Whitley & Schofield, 1984). Interviews were employed extensively. For example, randomly selected students participated in open-ended interviews twice a year. Teachers and administrators were also interviewed repeatedly. In addition, graffiti in the bathrooms and on the school walls were routinely recorded, school bulletins were collected, and careful note was taken of such things as wall decorations and public address system announcements.

Space does not allow full discussion of the many varied techniques used in collecting and analyzing the data on which this chapter is based. However, two general principles that guided the research must be mentioned. First, both data gathering and analysis were as rigorous and systematic as possible. For example, sampling techniques were employed where appropriate; trained coders, who were unaware of the race and sex of particular respondents, coded the open-ended interviews using reliable systems developed for this research; and field notes were carefully indexed so that all notes relevant to a given topic could be examined.

Second, because it is often impossible to achieve extremely high levels of precision and control in field research, strong efforts were made to triangulate the data (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966). Great care was taken to gather many different types of information bearing on the same issue, to minimize the potential problems with each data source, and to be sensitive in analyzing and interpreting data that might reflect biases in the data set that could not be completely eliminated. The basic approach used in the analysis of the qualitative data is outlined in works such as Bogdan and Taylor (1975), Campbell (1975), Miles and Huberman (1984), and Strauss and Corbin (1990). Fuller details on data gathering and analysis are presented elsewhere, as is information on the strategies used to minimize observer reactivity and bias (Schofield, 1989; Schofield & Sagar, 1979).

THE COLORBLIND PERSPECTIVE AND ITS COROLLARIES

Wexler's faculty clearly tended to subscribe to the colorblind view of interracial schooling. Interviews with both African American and White teachers suggested that the majority of both groups tended to see Wexler as an institution that could help impart middle-class values and modes of behavior to lower-class students so that they could break out of the cycle of poverty and become middle-class persons themselves. Even though most of these lower-class students were African American, race was seen as quite incidental to the anticipated class assimilation process.

An African-American administrator, with perhaps more candor than many similarly oriented White administrators and teachers, made her class assimilation goals explicit and, at the same time, made it clear just which students needed to be so assimilated:

I really don't address myself to group differences when I am dealing with youngsters. . . . I try to treat youngsters, I don't care who they are, as youngsters and not as Black, White, green or yellow. . . . Many of the Black youngsters who have difficulty are the ones who . . . have come from communities where they had to put up certain defenses and these defenses are the antithesis of the normal situation . . . like they find in school. It is therefore [difficult] getting them to become aware that they have to follow these rules because [they] are here . . . not over there in their community. . . . I think that many of the youngsters [from the] larger community have a more normal set of values that people generally want to see, and therefore do not have [as] much difficulty in coping with their school situation. . . . [The Black children] do have difficulty in adjusting because they are just not used to it. Until we can adjustively counsel them into the right types of behavior . . . I think we're going to continue to have these types of problems.

The only thing atypical in the preceding remarks is the frank acknowledgment that the children perceived as lacking "the normal set of values that people generally want to see" are typically African American. More usually, this was implicit in remarks emphasizing the negative effects of growing up in a poor family or a low-income neighborhood.

As a reaction to the invidious distinctions that have traditionally been made in the United States on the basis of race, the colorblind perspective is understandable and, from a social policy standpoint, it seems laudable. However, this orientation was accompanied at Wexler by a number of other logically related beliefs, which taken together with it had some important though largely unrecognized negative consequences. These beliefs and their basis in the ongoing social reality at Wexler are discussed individually. Then the consequences of this belief system are discussed in some detail.

Race as an Invisible Characteristic

It is not a very great leap from the colorblind perspective, which says that race is a social category of no relevance to one's behaviors and decisions, to a belief that individuals should not or perhaps even do not notice each other's racial group membership. At Wexler, acknowledging that one was aware of another's race was viewed by many people as a possible sign of prejudice, as illustrated by the following excerpt from project field notes:

When I was arranging the student interviews, I mentioned to Mr. Little [White] that I thought there was only one White girl in one of his classes. I asked if I was right about this and he said, "Well, just a minute. Let me check." After looking through the class roster in his roll book he said, "You know, you're right. I

never noticed that. . . I guess that's a good thing." Our data suggest that teachers not only denied that they noticed children's race when the researchers were present, but also did so among themselves. For example, when complying with a request to mark down the race of his students on a class roster for research purposes, a White teacher remarked, "Did you ever notice those teachers who say, 'I never notice what they are?'"

Although there was less unanimity on the issue of whether students noticed the race of others than of whether teachers did, a substantial proportion of Wexler's faculty asserted that the students rarely noticed race. This point of view is exemplified by the following excerpt from an interview with an African American science teacher:

MS. MONROE: You know, I hear the things the students usually fight about. As I said before, it's stupid things like someone taking a pencil. It's not because [the other person] is Black or White. . . . At this age level . . . I don't think it's Black or White.

INTERVIEWER: There's something I'm wondering about. It is hard to believe, given the way our society is, that you can just bring kids together and they won't be very much aware.

MS. MONROE: They just go about their daily things and don't . . . I don't think they think about it really. . . . I see them interacting with one another on an adult basis. . . . They are not really aware of color . . . or race or whatever.

INTERVIEWER: You really don't see that as a factor . . . in their relationships?

MS. MONROE: No.

Although the faculty at Wexler saw themselves, and to a lesser extent their students, as oblivious to the race of others, a wide variety of data suggest that this view was not accurate. Most removed from the specific situation at Wexler, but nonetheless pertinent, is a substantial body of data from research on stereotyping and person perception. This work suggests that individuals tend to use preexisting categories in perceiving and responding to others (Brewer & Brown, 1998; Brown, 1995; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). More specifically, research suggests that individuals spontaneously use the physical appearance of other people as a basis for categorizing them by race. Further, this categorization has an impact on how individuals are perceived and on how others respond to them (Devine, 1989; Dovidio et al., 1997; Duncan, 1976; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995; Katz, Wackenhut, & Hass, 1986; Katz, 1976; Malpass & Kravitz, 1969; Sagar & Schofield, 1980; Taylor, Fiske, Etcoff, & Ruderman, 1978).

The teachers and students at Wexler were to some extent self-selected members of an interracial institution and thus might conceivably be less prone to use race as a category for processing information about others than would the college student populations used in most studies on person perception cited above. However, given the importance of race as a social category in many aspects of life in the United States, it seems highly unlikely that the prevailing tendency at Wexler was for individuals not even to notice each other's race.

Interviews with students made it clear that many of them were very conscious of their race or of the race of other students, which is hardly surprising given the fact that interracial schooling was a new and somewhat threatening experience for many of them. The following excerpt from an interview in which the interviewer had not herself previously mentioned race suggests just how salient racial categories were to the children.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me who some of your friends are?

BEVERLY [AFRICAN AMERICAN]: Well, Stacey and Lydia and Amy, even though she's White.

Similarly, students' awareness of racial group membership is seen in an excerpt from field notes taken in a seventh-grade class with a higher-than-average proportion of African American students because the teachers had decided to put many lower-achieving children in a class by themselves.

Howard, a White male, leaned over to me (a White female observer) and said, "You know, it just wasn't fair the way they set up this class. There are sixteen Black kids and only nine White kids. I can't learn in here." I said, "Why is that?" Howard replied, "They copy and they pick on you. It just isn't fair."

Race as a Taboo Topic

Before discussing why the view that they and their students tended not even to notice race gained considerable popularity among Wexler's teachers in spite of everyday indications that this was often not the case, this section discusses two other phenomena closely related to the development of the colorblind perspective. The first was the development of a norm strong enough to be labeled a virtual taboo against the use of the words *white* and *black* in a context in which they referred to racial group membership. Thus, for example, in almost 200 hours of observations in classrooms, hallways, and teachers' meetings during Wexler's first year, fewer than twenty-five direct references to race were made by school staff or students (Schofield, 1989). Any use of the words *black* and *white* in a context in which they referred to an individual or group was classified as a reference to race, as were racial epithets and words and phrases used almost exclusively within one group to express solidarity (e.g., "Hey, Brother") or the like.

The extremely infrequent reference to race was all the more surprising when one considers that our observations included a wide variety of formal and informal situations, ranging from workshops funded by the Emergency School Assistance Act, federal legislation that provided funds to desegregating schools to help them handle special problems that might arise as a result of desegregation, to informal student interactions on the playgrounds and in the hallways.

Students' awareness of the taboo is shown clearly in the following field notes, which recount a conversation with a White social worker whose work at Wexler on the extracurricular program was funded by a local foundation concerned with race relations. Perhaps not surprisingly under these circumstances, she showed much less reluctance than did most staff to deal in a straightforward manner with the issue of race.

Ms. Fowler said that a short while ago she had heard from Martin [Black] that another child had done something wrong. The offense was serious enough so that she wanted to track down this individual. She asked Martin to describe the child who had committed the offense. Martin said, "He has black hair and he's fairly tall." He didn't give the race of the other person even though he went on to give a fairly complete description otherwise. Finally, Ms. Fowler asked, "Is he Black or White?" Martin replied, "Is it all right for me to say?" Ms. Fowler said that it was all right. . . . Martin then said, "Well, the boy was White."

Students were well aware that making references to race displeased many of their teachers and might also offend peers.

INTERVIEWER: You know, the other day I was walking around the school and heard a sixth-grade student describing a student from the seventh grade to a teacher who needed to find this student in order to return something she had lost. The sixth grader said the seventh grader was tall and thin. She described what the girl had been wearing and said her hair was dark, but she didn't say whether the girl was Black or White. . . . Why do you think she didn't mention that?

SYLVIA [AFRICAN AMERICAN]: The teacher might have got mad if she said whether she was White or Black.

INTERVIEWER: Do some teachers get mad about things like that?

SYLVIA: Some do . . . they holler. . . .

INTERVIEWER: Now, when you talk to kids who are Black, do you ever mention that someone is White or Black?

SYLVIA: No.

INTERVIEWER: What about when you're talking with kids who are White?

SYLVIA: Nope.

INTERVIEWER: You never mention race? Why not?

SYLVIA: They might think I'm prejudiced.

Social Life as a Web of Purely Interpersonal Relations

Consistent with the view that race is not, or at least should not be, a salient aspect of other individuals and with the practice of not speaking about race were tendencies to conceptualize social life as a web of interpersonal rather than intergroup relations and to assume that interpersonal relations are not much influenced by group membership. As one teacher put it:

Peer-group identity here in middle school . . . has nothing to do with race. There's a strong tendency to group that exists independent of . . . racial boundaries. . . . We started in September with these students letting them know we weren't going to fool around with that. . . . You're a student and we don't care what color you are.

This tendency to minimize the potential importance of intergroup processes was illustrated clearly during an inservice training session, the stated purpose of which was to help teachers deal effectively with the racially heterogeneous student body. The facilitator, a White clinical psychologist employed by a local foundation, began by making some general statements about the importance of understanding cultural differences between students. Although the facilitator kept trying to nudge and finally to push the group to discuss ways in which the racially-mixed nature of the student body influenced peer relations, appropriate curricular materials, and the like, the group ended up discussing issues such as the problems caused by individual children who acted out aggressively in the classroom, the difficulty that overweight children have in gaining peer acceptance, and the fact that children with disabilities were sometimes taunted by their classmates.

Contrasting sharply with the teachers' tendency to insist that they and their student reacted to each other exclusively as individuals and to deemphasize the importance of intergroup as opposed to interpersonal processes was the students' willingness to discuss with interviewers the important role race played in Wexler's social life.

INTERVIEWER: I have noticed . . . that [in the cafeteria] very often White kids sit with White kids and Black kids sit with Black kids. Why do you think that this is

MARY [WHITE]: 'Cause the White kids have White friends and the Black kids have Black friends. . . . I don't think integration is working. . . . Blacks still associate with Blacks and Whites still associate with Whites. . . .

INTERVIEWER: Can you think of any White kids that have quite a few Black friends or of any Black kids who have quite a few White friends?

MARY: Not really.

The tendency for students to group themselves by race in a variety of settings was very marked. For example, on a fairly typical day at the end of the school's second year of operation 119 White and 90 African American students attended the seventh-grade lunch period. Of these more than 200 children, only 6 sat next to someone of the other race (Schofield & Sagar, 1977).

Of course, it is possible that race itself was not a factor in producing such interaction patterns, but something correlated with race such as socioeconomic status, academic achievement, or the opportunity for previous contact with each other. Such factors did appear to reinforce the tendency to prefer intragroup interactions and were often cited by teachers as the actual cause of the visually apparent tendency of students to cluster with those of the own race. Yet the results of an experiment conducted at Wexler demonstrate that race itself was a real factor in peer relations. In this study, eighty male sixth graders were presented with carefully drawn pictures of a number of ambiguously aggressive types of peer interactions that were quite common at Wexler, such as poking another student with a pencil. For each type of interaction, some students were shown pictures in which both students were African American, others saw pictures in which both students were White, and others saw mixed-race dyads with the Black student shown as either the initiator of the behavior or the student to whom it was directed.

The results suggested that the race of the person initiating the behavior influenced how mean and threatening the behavior was interpreted as being (Sagar & Schofield, 1980) (see Table 11.1). Such a finding is, of course, inconsistent with the notion that students take r

Table II.1 Mean Ratings of Both White and Black Actors' Ambiguously Aggressive Behaviors by White and Black Subjects

Subject Group	Actor Race	Rating Scale: Mean/Threatening
White	White	8.28
	Black	8.99
Black	White	7.38
	Black	8.40

Note. Means are based on sums of paired 7-point scales indicating how well the given adjective described the behaviors, from 1 (not at all) to 7 (exactly). $N = 40$ in each group. Each subject rated two White and two Black actors (e.g., the perpetrator of the ambiguously aggressive act) and two White and Black targets. The 4×4 nature of the Latin square required treating the race permutations as four levels of a single factor. Significant F values on this factor provided justification for testing actor race, target race, and interaction effects with simple contrasts, using the error variance estimate generated by the ANOVA. The significant main effect of race permutations on the summed mean/threatening scales, $F(3,192) = 3.02, p < .05$, was found to reflect, as predicted, a tendency for subjects to rate the behaviors by Black actors more mean/threatening than identical behaviors by White actors, $t(144) = 2.90, p < .01$. Means are not broken down by target race because no statistically significant main effects or interactions were found for this variable.

Source: From Sagar, H. A., and Schofield, J. W. (1980). Racial and Behavioral Cues in Black and White Children's Perceptions of Ambiguously Aggressive Acts. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39(4) 590-598. Copyright 1980 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted with permission.

notice of others' race. It is also incompatible with the idea that intergroup processes have no influence on students' reactions to their peers because the data suggest that the perception of an individual's behavior is influenced by the group membership of the person performing it.

THE FUNCTIONS AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE COLORBLIND PERSPECTIVE AND ITS COROLLARIES

Regardless of the fact that the colorblind perspective and its corollaries were not completely accurate views of the social processes occurring at Wexler, they appeared to influence the development of the social fabric at Wexler in ways that had a number of important consequences, some positive and some negative. The following discussion of the functions of this set of beliefs suggests why the colorblind perspective was attractive to teachers and how it affected both the education and social experiences of Wexler's students.

Reducing the Potential for Overt Conflict

One concern that typifies many desegregated schools, and that is often especially salient in newly desegregated situations, is a desire to avoid dissension and conflict that are or could

appear to be race related (Sagar & Schofield, 1984). The adoption of colorblind policies is often seen as useful in achieving this goal, because if such policies are implemented fully, they can help protect the institution and people in positions of responsibility in it from charge of discrimination. This is not to say that such policies lead to equal outcomes for members of all groups. Indeed, when there are initial group differences on criteria relevant to success in a given institution, such policies are likely to lead to differential outcomes, a situation that some people would characterize as institutional racism (Jones, 1997). However, as noted earlier, the colorblind perspective is consistent with notions of fairness that have long held sway in the United States and thus that can be relatively easily defended. Policies that give obvious preference to either minority or majority group members are much more likely to spark controversy and conflict.

An example from Wexler illustrates how the operation of the colorblind perspective helps to minimize overt conflict in situations in which the outcomes for Blacks and Whites as a whole are extremely different. The suspension rate for African American students at Wexler was roughly four times that for White students. The strong correlation between race and socioeconomic background at Wexler made it predictable that the African American student behavior would be less consistent than that of White students with the basically middle-class norms prevailing in the school. However, the colorblind perspective appeared instrumental in helping to keep Wexler's discipline policies from becoming a focus of contention. To my knowledge, the disparity in suspension rates was never treated as a serious issue that needed attention. When researchers asked faculty and administrators about it, some, perhaps not altogether candidly, denied having noticed it. Others argued that it was not a problem in the sense that individual students were generally treated fairly. In fact, teachers often emphasized strongly the effort they made to treat discipline problems with White and African American students in exactly the same way.

On the relatively rare occasions when charges of discrimination were raised by students unhappy with the way a teacher had dealt with them, teachers tended to discount the complaints by reiterating their commitment to the colorblind perspective:

MS. WILSON [WHITE]: I try not to let myself listen to it [the charge of discrimination]. Maybe once in a while I ask myself, "Well, why would he make that statement?" But I know in my mind that I do not discriminate on the basis of race. . . . And I will not have someone create an issue like that when I know I have done my best not to create it.

Only an occasional teacher, more often than not African American, suggested that the colorblind perspective actually worked to help create the disparity in suspension rates; this issue is addressed later in this chapter. Be that as it may, the colorblind perspective clearly fostered an atmosphere that minimized the chances that the disparity itself was likely to become the focus of either overt discontent or constructive action.

Minimizing of Discomfort or Embarrassment

Many of the faculty and students at Wexler had little prior experience in desegregated schools. Also, most of them lived in neighborhoods that were either heavily White or heavily African American. Thus, for many, there was an initial sense of awkwardness and anxiety, like that

intergroup anxiety Stephan and Stephan (1985) discuss. Under such circumstances, avoiding mention of race and contending that it rarely influenced relations between individuals seemed to minimize the potential for awkward or embarrassing social situations. This is related to the aforementioned conflict-avoidance function of these beliefs, but it can be distinguished conceptually because feelings of awkwardness and embarrassment can but do not always lead to conflict. In fact, the colorblind perspective and the related norms against mention of race seemed to help maintain the veneer of politeness that Clement, Eisenhart, and Harding (1979) have argued is part of the etiquette of race relations in some desegregated situations.

One way to illustrate the ways in which the colorblind perspective and the associated beliefs and norms helped smooth social relations between Blacks and Whites is to compare the situation at Wexler to another sort of interaction that is often rather strained, at least initially—interaction between individuals who have visible disabilities and those who do not. In a fascinating analysis of this latter situation, Davis (1961) argues that the emotion aroused in the person without disabilities by the sight of a person with disabilities creates tension and an uncertainty about what is appropriate behavior; this tension interferes with normal interaction patterns. There is a tendency for the disability to become the focus of attention and to foster ambiguity about appropriate behavior. Davis argues that the initial reaction to this situation is often a fictional denial of the disability and of its potential effect on the relationship, that is, a tendency to pretend to ignore the existence of the disability, which at least temporarily relieves the interactants of the necessity of dealing with its implications.

Analogously, one can think of the racial group membership of individuals in a biracial interaction, be they Black or White, as a sort of visually apparent disability. Like a disability, one's group membership may provoke an affective response in other people that predisposes them to avoidance or at least raises questions about appropriate behavior. Of course, just as some individuals will feel more awkward than will others when interacting with a person with a disability, so some individuals will more likely be more affected by interacting with someone of the other race. However, to the extent that either person is perceived as a potential threat to a smooth, relaxed, and pleasant interaction, one way of handling that threat is to pretend to be unaware of the attribute that creates it.

Although Davis (1961) argues that initial interactions between people with disabilities and other people are characterized by a fictional denial of the disability, he also suggests that with time this fiction is discarded because, being based on an obvious falsehood, it is inherently unstable and in the long run dysfunctional. Similarly, I argue that although the colorblind perspective and the accompanying taboo may have made the initial adjustment to Wexler easier, in the long run they tended to inhibit the development of positive relations between African American and White students. These students were vividly aware of differences and of tensions between them that were related to their group membership. Yet such issues could not be dealt with in a straightforward manner in the colorblind climate. Thus, anger sometimes festered and stereotypes built when fuller discussion of the situation might have made it easier for individuals to see each other's perspectives.

This is not to suggest that schools have the responsibility to function as giant T-groups or as therapeutic institutions. Rather, it is to say that the refusal of many of Wexler's faculty to recognize the fundamental role that race played in peer relationships meant that they played a less constructive role than they might have in guiding students through a new and sometimes threatening experience. Jervis (1996) observed a similar phenomenon with similar

results in her study of a multiethnic middle school. Furthermore, the norms discouraging discussion of race not only undercut potentially constructive teacher-students interactions related to this topic; they discouraged student discussion of this topic with peers as well. This clearly minimized the potential for conflict. But it also minimized the potentially constructive impact of such discussions, suggested by research demonstrating that discussion of race between more and less prejudiced students can actually reduce prejudice in the former without increasing it in the latter (Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Aboud & Fenwick, 1999).

Increasing Teachers' Freedom of Action

The colorblind perspective and its corollaries undoubtedly gained some of their appeal because they tended to simplify life for Wexler's staff and to increase their freedom of action. An example can illustrate both points. After being asked by one member of the research team about the outcome of a closely contested student council election, a White teacher disclosed that she had purposely miscounted votes so that a "responsible child" (a White boy) was declared the winner rather than the "unstable child" (an African American girl) who had actually received a few more votes. The teacher seemed ambivalent about and somewhat embarrassed by her action, but the focus of her concern was her subversion of the democratic process. She reported that she had looked at the two children as individuals and decided that one was a more desirable student council representative than the other. As far as I could tell from an extended discussion with her, she did not consciously consider the race of the students involved. Further, she did not appear to consider the fact that her action had changed the racial composition of the student council.

The failure to consider such issues clearly simplified the decision-making process because there was one less item, and an affect-laden one at that, to be factored into it. Related to this, such a colorblind approach increased teachers' freedom of action because actions that sometimes appeared acceptable if one were to think about them in a colorblind way often appeared much less acceptable from a perspective that was not colorblind. Indeed, the colorblind perspective and its corollaries fostered an environment that research suggests is conducive to discriminatory behavior, at least on the part of certain types of individuals. First work by Snyder, Kleck, Strenta, and Mentzer (1979) demonstrates that people are more likely to act in accordance with feelings they prefer not to reveal when they can appear to be acting on some other basis than when no other obvious explanation for their behavior is available. Specifically, they found that individuals avoided people with physical disabilities when such avoidance could easily be attributed to preference for a certain kind of movie.

However, when the situation did not provide this sort of rationale for avoidance behavior, the tendency to avoid people with physical disabilities disappeared. Thus, by analogy one might expect that an environment that minimizes the importance of race and even forbids overt consideration or discussion of the topic would free individuals whose basic tendency is to discriminate (a normatively unacceptable orientation at Wexler) to do so. The vast majority of Wexler's faculty espoused basically egalitarian racial attitudes and would quite rightly be insulted by the idea that they would intentionally discriminate against their African American students. Yet the work of Gaertner and Dovidio (1981, 1986) demonstrates that one need not be an old-fashioned racist to discriminate against African Americans when the conditions are conducive to doing so.

Specifically, Gaertner and Dovidio (1981, 1986) argue that a great many liberal Whites are highly motivated to maintain an image of themselves as egalitarian individuals who neither discriminate against others on the basis of race nor are prejudiced. However, the desire to maintain such an image is coupled with some negative affect and with certain beliefs that predispose them to react negatively to African Americans. This predisposition is expressed primarily in circumstances that do not threaten an egalitarian self-concept. One important relevant circumstance is the availability of non-race-related rationales for the behavior in question (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). It is precisely this aspect of the situation that is influenced by the colorblind perspective and its corollaries. To the extent that they help remove awareness of race from conscious consideration, they make other explanations for one's behavior relatively more salient. Thus, they free the aversive racist to act in a discriminatory fashion. Further, to the extent that the taboo at Wexler inhibited individuals from challenging the behavior of other people as racist in outcome or intent, it removed a potential barrier to racist behavior because it minimized the probability that such behavior would pose a threat to a liberal self-concept.

Ignoring the Reality of Cultural Differences between Students

Although the colorblind perspective and its corollaries served some useful purposes, they also had several unrecognized negative effects, as indicated. One important negative consequence of this mind-set was a predisposition to ignore or deny the possibility of cultural differences between White and Black children that influenced how they functioned in school. For example, the differential suspension rate for African American and White children may have stemmed partially from differences between these students in what Triandis and his colleagues (Triandis, 1994; Triandis, Vassiliou, Vassiliou, Tanaka, & Shanmugam, 1972) call their "subjective culture." Specifically, data from the Sagar and Schofield (1980) experiment described earlier suggested that African American boys saw certain types of ambiguously aggressive acts as less mean and threatening and as more playful and friendly than did their White peers. These behaviors were ones that sometimes began conflicts between students that resulted in suspensions. Awareness of the differential meaning of such behaviors to White and African American students might at least have suggested ways of trying to reduce the disproportionate suspension of Black students.

Other research suggests that Black-White differences in culture relevant to education are not limited to this one area (Hill, 1971; Irvine, 1990; Jones, 1986, 1997; Lee & Slaughter-Defoe, 2001). For example, Kochman (1981) has argued convincingly that Black and White students use widely differing styles in classroom discussion and that misunderstanding the cultural context from which students come can lead peers and teachers to misinterpret involvement for belligerence. Heath's (1982) research suggests that the types of questions teachers typically pose in elementary school classrooms are quite similar to those asked in White middle-class homes but differ substantially from those typically addressed to young children in poor African American homes. Thus, there is reason to think that in assuming a completely colorblind perspective teachers may rule out awareness and use of information that would be helpful in deciding how best to structure materials in ways that work well for the range of students they teach as well as in interpreting many aspects of their students' behavior.

Failing to Respond to and Capitalize on Diversity

There were numerous less subtle ways in which the colorblind perspective and the accompanying deemphasis on the biracial nature of the school worked to the disadvantage of Wexler's students—and more often to the disadvantage of African American than of White students. One of the more obvious of these concerned the extent to which efforts were made to use instructional materials and pedagogical approaches that were likely to reflect the interests and life experiences of Wexler's African American students, an approach that has been called "using culturally responsive pedagogy" (Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Irvine, 1991; Nieto, 2004; Ramsey, 1987). Wexler operated as part of a school system that made some effort to use multicultural texts. In addition, some teachers, a disproportionate number of whom were African American, took special care to relate class work to the concerns and interests likely to be found in their Black students as well as their White ones.

The prevailing tendency, however, was to abjure responsibility for making sure instructional materials reflected the diversity of the student body. Interviews with teachers suggested that many saw no reason to try to locate or develop instructional materials that reflected African Americans' participation in and contributions to our society. For example, one math teacher who used a book in which all individuals in the illustrations were White contended that "math is math" and that an interview question about the use of biracial or multicultural materials was irrelevant to his subject matter. Perhaps more surprisingly, similar claims were made by other teachers, including some who taught reading, language arts, and social studies.

The colorblind perspective and its corollaries not only made it more likely that individual faculty members would ignore the challenge of trying to present all students with materials that related in motivating ways to their own experiences, but they actually led to a constriction of the education provided to students. For example, in a lesson on the social organization of ancient Rome, one social studies teacher discussed at length the various classes in Roman society, including the patricians and plebeians, but avoided all reference to slaves. Another teacher included George Washington Carver on a list of great Americans from whom students could pick individuals to learn about but specifically decided not to mention that Carver was African American for fear of raising racial issues. In the best of all worlds, there would be no need to make such mention because children would have no preconceptions that famous people are generally White. However, in a school in which one White child was surprised to learn from a member of our research team that Martin Luther King, Jr., was African American, not White, it would seem reasonable to argue that highlighting the accomplishments of African Americans and making sure that students do not assume famous figures are White are reasonable practices.

Such constriction based on a desire to avoid racial problems is not unique at Wexler. For example, Scherer and Slawski (1979) report that a desegregated high school they studied eliminated the lunch hour and study halls to minimize the sort of loosely supervised contact between students that seemed to be likely to lead to conflict. However, the nature of the constriction at Wexler was influenced by the colorblind perspective and its corollaries. At Wexler, the tendency was to ignore or avoid certain topics. Such a tendency, while undeniably a low-risk one, failed to take advantage of the diversity of experiences and perspectives of Wexler's students as a resource for the educational process. Furthermore, in some cases, it literally distorted the education all students received as teachers attempted to avoid potentially controversial facts or issues

CONCLUSIONS

Since Supreme Court Justice Harlan first spoke of a colorblind society as a goal to be striven for more than 100 years ago, the colorblind approach has often been held up as a needed antidote to the virulent racism in our society that traditionally consigned certain individuals to subordinate positions on the basis of their color and their color alone. However, this chapter takes the position that the colorblind perspective is not without some dangers. It may ease initial tensions and minimize the frequency of overt conflict. Nonetheless, it can also foster such phenomena as the taboo against ever mentioning race or connected issues and the refusal to recognize and deal with the existence of intergroup tensions. Thus, it fosters an environment in which aversive racists, who are basically well intentioned, are prone to act in a discriminatory manner. In addition, it can foster lack of recognition of problems that might be dealt with constructively if they were acknowledged. Further, the colorblind perspective makes it unlikely that the opportunities inherent in a pluralistic institution will be fully realized and that the challenge facing such an institution of providing all its students with an engaging and effective education will be met.

Although the colorblind approach clearly has many disadvantages, this finding does not lead to the conclusion that it is best to constantly call students' attention to group membership. There are several reasons to be wary of an unrelenting emphasis on group membership, and especially on group differences. First, there is substantial evidence that liking of others is enhanced by the perception of similarity (Berscheid & Reis, 1998), so a constant emphasis on difference is likely to be unproductive. Second, an emerging body of research about a phenomenon called stereotype threat also suggests that it may be unwise to make race constantly salient. For example, researchers studying this phenomenon have found that merely raising the issue of race by having students indicate their group membership before completing a task can lead to markedly decreased performance by African American students on tasks relevant to existing negative stereotypes about their ability (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Further, a large body of social psychological research mentioned earlier in this chapter has demonstrated that categorization of individuals into in-groups and out-groups tends to promote stereotyping and biased behavior.

What, then, is likely to be the most effective stance for schools to take? A full answer to this question would be an entire chapter in itself. However, I would suggest that at least three things are highly desirable. First, the education system needs to make a concerted effort to be responsive to our society's diversity in planning curriculum, in making staffing choices, and in thinking about how best to serve students. This seems likely to help make schools institutions that students from different backgrounds can feel engaged with and connected to, in addition to providing them with the breadth of information and perspectives necessary to function effectively in our increasingly diverse society. Second, schools need to help students and teachers see that groups are composed of individuals with their own unique characteristics who may be both similar to and different from those in both their in-group and in out-groups, which should help undercut the tendency to stereotype and to see group membership as defining an individual's characteristics. Finally, schools should provide students with opportunities to build meaningful shared identities as members of the school, the community, and the nation that complement and supplement, rather than replace or undermine, their identities as members of specific social groups.