

Seeing race and seeming racist? Whites go out of their way to avoid talking about race

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White people – including children as young as 10 -- may avoid talking about race so as not to appear prejudiced, according to new research. But that approach often backfires as blacks tend to view this "colorblind" approach as evidence of prejudice, especially when race is clearly relevant.

These results are from two separate sets of experiments led by researchers from Tufts University and Harvard Business School. Their findings are reported in the October issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and the September issue of *Developmental Psychology*. Both journals are published by the American Psychological Association.

"Efforts to talk about race are fraught with the potential for misunderstandings," said the studies' lead author, Evan Apfelbaum, a PhD candidate at Tufts University. "One way that whites try to appear unbiased is to avoid talking about race altogether, a tendency we refer to as strategic colorblindness."

In one study, 101 white undergraduate students were paired with either a white or black female partner who pretended to be another participant. The pairs were presented with 30 photographs of faces that varied in race, gender and background color. Each white participant's objective was to guess which of the photographs the partner was holding by asking as few yes-or-no questions as possible.

Even though asking about the race of the person in the photograph was a sound strategy for completing the task, white participants were far less likely to do so with a black versus a white partner. Moreover, when the black partner was the first one to have a turn asking questions, whether she mentioned race had a dramatic effect. White participants whose black partner asked about race mentioned race on their own turn 95 percent of the time. When the black partner never asked about race, white participants only did so 10 percent of the time.

"There was clear evidence the white participants' behavior was influenced by the precedent set by their partner, but especially when that partner was black," said Samuel Sommers, assistant professor at Tufts and co-author of both papers. "Whites are strategically avoiding the topic of race because they're worried that they'll look bad if they admit they notice it in other people."

The researchers also wanted to see how outsiders interpreted such interactions. In another experiment, 74 black and white college students evaluated videos of whites engaging in the photo task. The results showed that whites' effort to appear colorblind backfired. Black observers rated whites' avoidance of asking about race as being evidence of prejudice. What's more, when the researchers showed silent video clips of whites from the study to another group of individuals, those whites who avoided asking about race were judged as less friendly, just on the basis of their nonverbal behavior.

"The findings suggest that when race is clearly relevant, whites who think that it is a wise social strategy to avoid talking about race should think again," said Apfelbaum.

Even children appear to adopt this strategically colorblind approach. In another set of experiments, 101 white children between the ages of 8 and 11 were asked to perform a similar photo task. The children were told

that asking as few yes-or-no questions as possible would mean they would get a higher score on the task.

The results showed that the older children, ages 10 and 11, avoided asking about race more than the younger children, even though this led them to perform less efficiently than their younger counterparts on the task. In a control version where all the faces in the photos were white, the older children outperformed the younger children, as expected. "This result is fascinating because it shows that children as young as 10 feel the need to try to avoid appearing prejudiced, even if doing so leads them to perform poorly on a basic cognitive test," said Kristin Pauker, a PhD candidate at Tufts and co-author of this study.

The authors associated with both studies said their findings offer several important implications. "Our findings don't suggest that individuals who avoid talking about race are racists," Apfelbaum explained. "On the contrary, most are well-intentioned people who earnestly believe that colorblindness is the culturally sensitive way to interact. But, as we've shown, bending over backward to avoid even mentioning race sometimes creates more interpersonal problems than it solves."

Source: American Psychological Association

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