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On the Perils of Misplaced Assumptions: Appreciating the Need for Diversity Science

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The ability to support, or refute lay intuition regarding human nature is one of the calling cards of psychological—and, in particular, social psychological—research. As Victoria Plaut’s (this issue) target article demonstrates, diversity is a topic about which many such lay assumptions are problematic, if not wholly misplaced. The need for a diversity science becomes all the more pressing in light of this frequent divergence between how people typically think about diversity-related issues and how cognition and behavior actually play out in diverse contexts. In this commentary, we focus on four such questionable assumptions and their implications for theory and practice.

Racism and The “Bad Apple” Model

As Plaut (this issue) convincingly details, the prevailing view of racism in modern society is that of a problem largely attributable to specific individuals predisposed towards prejudice. Of course, this “bad apple” assumption is hardly unique to matters of race or bias. Lay conceptions of apathetic bystanders are also overly individualistic, focusing on conclusions regarding unhelpful or indifferent personality type at the expense of the impact of context; so, too, are public explanations for generally distasteful or immoral behavior more likely to blame a subset of responsible (and reprehensible) individuals as opposed to pondering institutional factors that may have made such acts more likely among most actors.

When it comes to racism, one of the many problems with the “bad apple” view is that it almost inevitably corresponds to a “not me” mentality, which shifts responsibility for efforts to ameliorate inequity away from the self (and, for that matter, calls into question the necessity of such efforts in the first place). Instead, our societal discourse on the issue of race seems to have settled into a familiar and futile rut: We steer clear of the topic until a high-profile incident raises allegations of dispositional racism followed by immediate and vociferous denials. Debate then shifts to evaluating the evidence provided by the accused to presumably prove his or her fair-minded character: the touting of good intention, past philanthropy, or even simply having a few Black friends. In the end, these dispositional debates prove to be unwinnable, based as they are on subjective construals of internal processes. And, thus, no progress is made.

Notably, Plaut (this issue) levies her charge of an unrealistically individualistic approach to racism against researchers as well as laypeople. And she does so compellingly and in balanced fashion, arguing not that we as a field should forsake the study of individual-level processes like stereotyping and prejudice, but rather that such investigations paint an incomplete picture of our social reality when they fail to consider surrounding cultural and status frameworks. In this manner, one of the most important aspects of Plaut’s call-to-arms for a sociocultural approach to diversity science is her emphasis of balance.

For example, we acknowledge that previous research has identified limitations of interventions “that locate the source of racism in individual processes of stereotyping and prejudice” (Plaut, this issue, p. 83; see Adams, Edkins, Lacka, Pickett, & Cheryan, 2008). We propose, though, that such findings do not rule out the potential usefulness of these antibias lessons, but rather suggest that these lessons are often not implemented well. Teaching about our tendencies toward stereotyping and prejudice will fail to further efforts to ameliorate bias if done via the “bad apple” model or in a manner that does not integrate said processes with the sociocultural realities in which they occur. But our personal experience with consciousness-raising workshops indicates that learning about the ubiquitous nature of categorization, ingroup preference, and automatic bias can be a powerful tool against “not me” thinking, especially when combined with analysis of the sociocultural messages that both shape and reflect the content of these biases.

There is obvious intuitive appeal to the bad apple view of racism. It renders the challenging issue of group-based disparity more straightforward, suggesting that all that must be done to combat racism (or any other form of bias) is to identify and minimize the influence of those individuals harboring aberrational ideology. It is also a reassuring view of racism, allowing us to nimbly exempt ourselves from the problematic group in question. As Plaut illustrates, however, it is an oversimplified conceptualization of inequity that, in reality, causes more problems than it purports to solve.
Race and the On/Off Switch

Another assumption about race—again provocatively examined by Plaut (this issue), this time in her analysis of “formal race” and “race as a magic word”—is the notion that social category membership impacts perception and judgment only when we allow it to. This is the mentality that leads many White Americans to try to navigate interracial interactions by claiming to be literally colorblind (discussed further in the next section). It is a mindset that helps explain why Whites infrequently ponder their own racial identity or how their category membership shapes the responses of those around them. And it is an assumption that can be seen in research from our own lab that examines the impact of racial diversity in the legal domain.

In a mock jury study using community participants recruited during the course of actual jury duty, Sommers (2006) compared the decision-making processes of racially homogeneous (in this study, all-White) groups and heterogeneous (majority White/minority Black) groups. Each mock jury in the study watched and deliberated on the same assault trial of a Black defendant. Among various performance advantages observed in the racially diverse groups was an increased willingness to talk about controversial race-related issues during deliberations.

Bear in mind that diverse juries did not always relish the discussion of potentially polarizing topics such as racial profiling or racial inequity. Jurors often disagreed with one another during these conversations—at times, vehemently. But they were at least willing to address these issues when they arose, resisting the temptation to immediately brush race under the rug in the name of social ease and group morale. Surely, this willingness to tackle difficult issues is a characteristic we would wish for real juries.

But all-White groups in the study handled race very differently. On every single homogeneous jury in which the issue came up, at least one (and often more than one) individual immediately tried to steer the discussion back in a more comfortable, race-neutral direction. Members of all-White groups were surprised—and sometimes even angry—that a fellow mock juror would inject race into what otherwise had been a spirited but cordial back-and-forth on race-neutral evidentiary matters.

Consistent with other findings that expectation and mindset change when we learn that we are part of a diverse group (Antonio et al., 2004; Phillips, Northcraft, & Neale, 2006; Sommers, Warp, & Mahoney, 2008), these White mock jurors were caught off-guard by the discussion of race in a homogeneous setting. Sure, in a diverse group, one might expect race to come up. But in an all-White group, mock jurors had assumed that they were safe from such an uncomfortable conversation—that unlike in other, diverse settings, the race switch here was turned to “off.” And so the mention of racial issues led to nonverbal and verbal responses epitomizing the sentiment of “Et tu, White juror?”

Plaut (this issue) details the problems with the assumption that race matters only when we allow it to. For one, empirical data make it quite clear that we notice race quickly and its impact can be automatic. And the practical implications of the transient view of race include overconfidence in the ease with which inequality can be rooted out, ingroups’ exaggerated sense of their own egalitarianism, and outgroup frustration at having their concerns dismissed out of hand or deemed inappropriately inflammatory. Study after study makes it clear that race does matter, even when we do not want it to and even in life-and-death domains like the legal system. Contrary to the belief expressed in some quarters, data clearly indicate that eliminating racial disparity is not as easy as simply doing away with racial labels.

Navigating Diversity Through Strategic Colorblindness

Growing out of this idea that race can be “turned off” is the assumption that the best way to emerge unscathed from the potentially thorny landscape of interracial interaction is to claim not to even notice group difference to begin with. As Plaut (this issue) observes, there are many ways in which colorblindness is—in practice—not all that it is held up to be in the abstract, including the finding that exposure to a colorblind ideology often leads to more rather than less racial bias (e.g., Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). In our lab we have identified yet another downside to colorblindness, namely, that strategic efforts to make a positive impression through avoiding race often produce the opposite, negative social outcome.

Bending over backwards to assert that you do not notice racial difference renders communication less efficient, nonverbal behaviors less friendly, and executive or cognitive capacity more depleted (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006). Why? For starters, it is disingenuous to suggest that we do not perceive race when empirical study indicates that we do so within milliseconds (e.g., Ito & Urdland, 2003). Moreover, entering interracial interactions with the primary goal of preventing negative outcomes has been found to be a less adaptive social and cognitive strategy than adopting the goal of promoting positive outcomes (e.g., Trawalter & Richeson, 2006).

The extant literature offers a straightforward conclusion: Many of the strategies that laypeople assume will convey social benefits in diverse settings are ineffectual or even counterproductive. Avoiding talking about race makes a negative impression in many
circumstances. Adopting a prevention orientation actually leads to increased cognitive depletion after an interracial interaction. Efforts to suppress stereotypical thoughts can produce rebound effects in the long term. And so on.

Once again, our misplaced intuitions and assumptions about interacting in diverse contexts only further underscore Plaut’s (this issue) call for a balanced, empirically based diversity science. It is the height of irony (and problematic implication) that recent empirical based diversity science. It is the height of irony (and problematic implication) that recent findings demonstrate that the less opportunity White individuals are afforded to adhere to default social strategies in interracial interactions, the better these interactions often go:

- Giving Whites in interracial dyads a script to follow attenuates the postinteraction depletion of executive capacity observed in other studies (Richeson & Trawalter, 2005).
- Cognitively taxing White participants before interracial interaction reduces subsequent capacity for self-regulation, producing more genuine and enjoyable conversations (Apfelbaum & Sommers, 2009).
- Instructing interracial pairs to focus on task performance rather than making a good impression liberates them from their typical social concerns, leading to more positive individual and collaborative outcomes for Blacks as well as Whites (Babbitt & Sommers, 2010).

These data suggest that intuition regarding diversity can be our own worst enemy. Misplaced assumptions concerning how best to manage social exchanges in diverse settings predict strained interactions, negative nonverbal signals, decreased group productivity, and even an increased likelihood of being perceived as prejudiced. Few arguments in favor of a rigorous diversity science are as persuasive as the notion that the intuitive approach to interracial interaction often backfires.

**The One-Size-Fits-All View of Diversity**

To the extent that we—laypeople and psychologists alike—reflect on diversity-related issues, we often do so in prototypical terms. Usually, this means a myopic focus on the Black/White dichotomy. As Plaut (this issue) argues, the increasingly multicultural nature of contemporary societies and organizations necessitates a corresponding expansion of scope among researchers who study diversity. We agree. But it is also worth noting that even within the Black/White dichotomy, our empirical focus on diversity usually remains too narrow.

When measuring Whites’ reactions to Blacks, for example, researchers often choose to include only Black men as targets, explaining that it is easier to obtain effects this way: Black men elicit stereotypes more readily than do Black women, and are seen as more threatening by Whites (e.g., Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009; also see Goff, Thomas, & Jackson, 2008). This approach to research design is understandable, but its downside is just as clear: We learn nothing about how Black women are perceived. Whereas it is certainly possible that studies with Black female targets would simply identify a muted version of the typical reaction to Black men, perceivers might very well respond in a qualitatively different manner to Black women.

Furthermore, it may be that researchers traditionally find stronger effects with Black male targets because their studies are designed to measure effects specific to Black men in the first place. For instance, in one study using only Black male targets, researchers examined the bidirectionality of associations between Black Americans and certain stereotypically concepts (Eberhardt, Goff, Purdie, & Davies, 2004). If the researchers had used Black female targets, they might not have found the same effects because the stereotypical concepts they chose, crime and basketball, are more closely associated with Black men than Black women.

As Goff et al. (2008) argued, most commonly held stereotypes of Blacks apply more so to men than women. Indeed, when respondents are asked to list stereotypes of Black women, they provide different responses than when asked for stereotypes of Black men or of Black people in general (Weitz & Gordan, 1993). When asked to imagine a Black person, 87% of research participants picture a man—a significantly higher rate than when asked to think about a White person, or a non-race-specified individual (Thomas & Goff, 2010). This tendency to think of men when thinking about Blacks has been documented more extensively in other disciplines (e.g., hooks, 1981; Hull, Scott, & Smith, 1982) but has only recently begun to gain attention in social psychological circles (e.g., Goff et al., 2008; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008).

Such associations between Blackness and maleness suggest that when many Whites reflect on racial diversity, they do so by thinking only about Black men. This tendency has implications for Whites’ enthusiasm for interracial encounters and support for policies like affirmative action. It is also inconsistent with the reality of diversity in America: More Black women than Black men are currently enrolled in undergraduate and graduate programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) and employed in the contemporary workforce (U.S. Department of Labor, 2009). Although Whites may think about Black men when they think about interracial interaction, the Black individuals they are most likely to encounter in the classroom and workplace are women.
In short, Plaut (this issue) is right to point out the disproportionate focus of researchers on what she refers to as the Black/White binary, but even within this dichotomy, the extant literature is myopic in scope. Combined with laypeople’s often erroneous assumptions regarding race and racial diversity, such narrow empirical focus among psychologists provides all the more impetus for a balanced, empirically based form of diversity science. We propose that few driving forces behind impactful social psychological investigation are as powerful as this need to illuminate and reconcile gaps between intuition, research focus, and real-life human tendency.

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