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Title

“Everyone is equal”: Colour-blind attitudes in welfare practices with migrants

Abstract

In this presentation I will present a paper that explores the relationship between colour-blind attitudes and self-reported perceptions of encounters between majority and immigrant populations in Sweden. I build on existing studies showing that colour-blindness often functions as a strategy to appear unbiased while holding prejudicial attitudes. Using original survey data of welfare workers in two Swedish welfare organisations, I assess the relationship between colour-blindness and the perception of difficulty working with migrants among the welfare workers in these organisations. Results from structural equation models show that those with greater levels of colour-blindness are simultaneously more likely to report negative attitudes toward immigrants and less likely to report difficulty in working with migrants. I propose that self-reported colour-blindness among welfare workers is part of an effort to appear unbiased and in line with the normative principles of the state to perform non-racism, but this does not mean that those who are colour-blind do not hold anti-immigration attitudes.

Discussant

Haley McAvay (INED)

NB : ce compte-rendu de séminaire a été rédigé à partir des notes manuscrites, nécessairement imparfaites, prises par Juliette Galonnier lors de la séance. Il est possible que des erreurs ou des approximations s’y soient glissées.

NB: these seminar proceedings derive from the hand-written notes taken by Juliette Galonnier during the session. Imprecisions and mistakes may have slipped into the text.

Notes taken by Juliette Galonnier

Carolin Schütze

The paper I am presenting today was written in collaboration with Mosi Adesina Ifatunji from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It focuses on Swedish welfare professionals' attitudes towards migrants and the concept of colorblindness. To explain what colorblindness means, I usually refer to this phrase by Martin Luther King: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." This embodies the idea that a colorblind society would lead to equality. Yet, because racism has not been destroyed, colorblindness now needs to be approached with a more critical point of view.

The idea behind colorblindness is that if we treat individuals by avoiding racial categories, racism will decrease and we will have less inequality. But the downside of this argument is that ignoring race might also obscure inequality and obscure the fact that racial and ethnic categorization still occurs in our minds: we do notice race.

This paper was written in response to a call for a special issue calling for more nuanced scholarship on colorblind attitudes, by looking at new settings and offering new insights on how colorblind ideology works. The Swedish welfare state is a good case in point to study this because it is characterized by strong colorblind attitudes towards clients.

In Sweden, people often talk about "Swedish exceptionalism" which derives from the idea that Sweden has a very strong welfare state that provides services to everyone, including migrants and that promotes the ideal that everyone is equal.

Yet, in this paper, we examine how welfare workers' colorblind attitudes can also be associated with anti-immigration attitudes.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva in *Racism without racists* defines colorblindness as popular thinking marked by the minimization or denial of race. It hinges upon the idea that race no longer matters. Colorblindness is strongly linked to the idea of post-raciality as well.

Why do people endorse colorblindness? In a 2016 article, Babbitt et al. unpack the various reasons for endorsing colorblindness:

- one is good faith: some people genuinely believe that colorblindness will advance racial harmony and equality
- one is a will to maintain the status quo by ignoring racial inequality
- one is a strategy to appear unbiased. This is particularly strong in Sweden where non-racism is a pervasive social norm.
- minorities might also endorse colorblindness to avoid conflict

The literature on colorblindness we use in this paper comes mostly from the US: Bonilla-Silva (2006), Forman and Lewis (2015), Neville et al. (2000). A colorblind racial attitude scale was developed by Neville et al. in 2000. In Europe, the studies are much more limited: Bonnet

(2014), Osanami Törngren (2018), Bursley (2011) but they mostly focus on colorblind logic in policies and laws.

The US literature shows that there is a relation between colorblind attitudes and prejudice: people who report to be colorblind often have negative attitudes towards minorities. Colorblindness is only here to support one's self-image, to come across as a "good person". There is a social desirability attached to the colorblind norm.

Welfare workers are professionals: they are supposed to uphold Swedish law. They abide by organizational rules and professional norms. We are interested in seeing whether they report more difficulties in working with migrants and how that is correlated with colorblind attitudes and anti-immigration attitudes.

Here are our hypotheses for this paper:

Anti-immigration attitudes

Colorblind attitudes

Work with migrants more difficult

H1: colorblind attitudes are positively correlated with anti-immigration attitudes

H2: antiimmigration attitudes are positively correlated with people reporting that they experience more difficulties working with migrants

H3: colorblind attitudes are negatively correlated with people reporting that they experience more difficulties working with migrants

H1 focuses mostly on personal opinions and H3 on professional opinions.

We performed a web survey in 2 Swedish welfare institutions:

- an unemployment agency
- a social insurance agency

The survey included 36 questions and we had 1319 respondents. Our analysis is based on a structural equation model, which is a family of related procedures.

We used three questions to measure colorblind attitudes:

- "Swedes have certain advantages in society because of their ethnicity" (a No answer to this question indicates colorblindness)
- "Everyone who works hard, no matter what ethnic background they have has an equal chance to succeed in life" (a Yes answer indicates colorblindness)
- "The color of the skin affects people's possibilities in Swedish society" (a No answer indicates colorblindness)

Question 2 hints at abstract liberalism and power evasion (everyone has the same chances to succeed). Question 1 and 3 focus rather on color evasion.

We used five questions to measure anti-immigrant attitudes taken from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP).

Our dependent variable is : “do you find it more difficult to handle/provide support for clients with a foreign background?”

- No
- Yes

If yes, why?

People could then tick up to 3 responses to explain why they thought it was more difficult. The results were the following

Language 95%

Culture 43%

Education 37%

Health 20%

Gender 4%

Ethnicity 3%

Age 3%

Our control variables were: gender, age, foreign background, workplace, work years and the social desirability scale (whether people want to stress their positive qualities).

Our first model focused on the relationship between colorblind attitudes and the probability to work with migrants: we found that those who report more colorblind attitudes are less likely to report difficulties with migrants.

Overall, all our hypotheses were confirmed.

Those that are more colorblind also report more anti-immigration attitudes. And those who report more anti-immigration attitudes also report more difficulties working with migrants.

Therefore, colorblindness and anti-immigration attitudes tend to co-occur.

This is counter-intuitive but we must remember that we focus only on discourses here: welfare workers might be willing to conform to their professional norms by endorsing colorblind attitudes.

Some interpretations and implications: colorblind attitudes are used to appear unbiased while holding prejudiced attitudes. In the US, research (Jackson, Wilde and Goff, 2016; Nelson 2016) has shown that efforts to suppress prejudiced attitudes through colorblind attitudes might not result in equal outcomes.

This paper is therefore an early attempt to better understand the relationship between colorblindness and anti-immigration attitudes.

Future research ideas: how to understand colorblindness in Europe? Conceptually, what are the differences with the US? What different types of measurement can we use to best appraise colorblind attitudes?

Haley McAvay, discussant

Thank you for this presentation. The paper is already solid and well-developed so I will simply provide feedback for future research. One of the central issues raised by this article is: how to measure these key variables? And, what is colorblindness?

Colorblindness seems to be many things:

- it can be a macro-philosophy or narrative that some countries might have
- it can be a cognitive process that happens at the individual level

The effects of colorblindness are ambiguous and change across contexts, which might explain some of the counterintuitive effects we notice here. There may also be differences in the US and Europe, depending on political orientation, etc.

What are the mechanisms behind colorblindness? The literature in social psychology can be useful here.

- one common attitude is “system justification”, i.e. the propensity of people to defend the status quo (“everyone has a fair shot in life”). Studies have shown that social desirability is linked to higher life satisfaction outcomes: people who defend the status quo tend to be happier. Interestingly, the items studies used to measure system justification are close to the ones you use to measure colorblindness.
- the other aspect of interest is to study to what extent people accept/naturalize social hierarchies and consider that it is OK to have inequality.

Would it be possible to design a questionnaire that would enable you to tease out system justification vs. acceptance of inequality? Because right now, what you have may be more related to justifying the status quo, which makes the interpretation more difficult.

The other aspect of your research is that people use colorblindness to cover up bias, to appear non-racist. Again, there is important work in social psychology on the “motivation to control prejudice”. Some people are highly “motivated” to hide their prejudice while others are less so. And those who are highly motivated actually do show less discriminatory actions.

The dependent variable you used “difficulty with working with migrants” is also questionable. It might be picking up on a lot of things: it could be reflecting anti-immigrant attitudes but it can also reflect the actual working conditions of welfare with immigrants. It could be people feeling frustrated with not having the means to provide the right level of assistance. Some qualitative research may help you tease out the good interpretation in this regard.

Finally, why do people hold negative attitudes towards immigrants? The literature explores two main reasons:

- contact
- threat

Contact is linked to how much people are interacting with immigrants on a daily basis. This may vary from one district to another depending on the demographics of each region in Sweden. If there is some way to control for the location, it may be interesting.

Your sample is also very female, which is not surprising given that we are focusing on a welfare worker population. There also a lot of people who are foreign-born: does this have an impact?

are there interaction effects here? do colorblind attitudes differ between male/female and native/foreign-born workers?

Answers by Carolin Schütze

Qualitative research is indeed much needed to complete this study.

Concerning contact theory, we do have questions on how many migrant clients respondents work with during the day.

We still need to think about a variable that would enable us to differentiate between colorblindness and system justification.

Questions from the audience

Patrick Simon

H1 is a counter-intuitive hypothesis. Why would you infer that colorblindness reinforces anti-immigrant attitudes?

=> Answer: This hypothesis is based on literature from the US that demonstrates this correlation.

Patrick Simon

I understand that colorblindness can be the following: “everyone is equal so if immigrants fare bad in society, it is because of them only”. So there may indeed be some echo between colorblindness and negative attitudes towards immigration. There are similar results in Lawrence Bobo’s study on attitudes towards affirmative action. The question I still have is: who is not colorblind in Sweden? Do we have descriptive statistics about who does not endorse colorblindness as a social norm? In most European countries, the percentage of people who do not profess colorblindness may be extremely low.

=> Answer: I can provide the descriptive statistics but the paper is mostly focusing on relationships. I agree that “how far is colorblindness a mainstream attitude?” is a question that is important to answer.

Ognjen Obucina

I am not sure that “colorblind attitudes” is the right word to describe what you are measuring. We have to keep in mind the Swedish national narrative here. The “conscience of humanity” and “everyone is equal” motto are the forerunners of all progressive ideas in Sweden. It may even be considered unpatriotic to give answers that are not in line with this philosophy.

Axelle Magnier

Why replace “whites” by “Swedes” in your first question to measure colorblindness?

=> Answer: In order to gain access to the field, I collaborated with a union so I had to make the study sound as Swedish as possible. Most Swedish people associate “Swede” with “white” so we thought it was a good enough proxy. Also, by using “white” you are already in a non-colorblind approach, which means that people would have to admit their race just by answering the question.

Stéphanie Condon

I have a question about the response rate: who refused to participate in the study and who accepted? Who are these welfare workers? Are they all Swedish/white? We need this information to really study the relationship: who is in it? what are we measuring? whose attitudes towards whom?

Christine Inglis

We also need to be reminded that social workers come with a professional ideology, that can be reinforced by a national ideology. But if they try to find work for people who do not speak the language fluently or who do not have education, they might report difficulties, which is only natural. What is the definition of colorblindness? Social workers who are realistic about their work might report difficulties without being prejudiced. I am also curious to hear about your relationships with the union.

=> Answer: One union refused immediately the survey when they saw the topic: they did not want to expose their workers to such type of questions.

Axelle Magnier

Who are the social workers in this study? In France, in unemployment agencies most officers are not trained in social work at all. What diploma do they have? Also, how can we differentiate between colorblindness and republican beliefs? Finally, non-respondents may also be people who believe so much in colorblindness that they refuse to participate in any study related to ethnicity.

=> Answer: In the two institutions we studied, most people are not social workers. They are unemployment officers or insurance officers. They do not have a strong social work identity. They are mostly bureaucrats. Unfortunately, we do not have information about non-respondents.

Patrick Simon

How do we import measurements of colorblindness from the US to Europe? We might use the same scales or we might design new ones. We also need to pay attention to institutional colorblindness: the values of the institution itself might lead one to be colorblind. This can lead to a diversity of attitudes: some may actually believe in it; some may be more pragmatic; some may be more critical and use racially-coded strategies, etc. It could be useful to break the sample down into two or three categories depending on the way they are colorblind.

Julie Lee Merseth

One of the things that is tricky here is translating this narrative that comes from the US to a non-US context. Colorblindness in the US is deeply politically contested and not linked to ideas of equality. It has a deeply conservative ideology underlying it in the US. That is why the US literature predicts a link with anti-immigrant attitudes. But if you present colorblindness as something linked to equality, then the effects are counter-intuitive. The colorblind project in the US was deeply political in the first place. If you are thinking about egalitarianism, then it is different. The interesting question is also: are workers endorsing the ideology or are they just using it as a strategy? It may also be important to disentangle race, ethnicity and nativism in the Swedish context. It might be useful to unpack anti-immigrant attitudes and race per se. Finally, we do not know whether saying it is more difficult to work with migrants actually impacts the actual actions of welfare workers. We might need to think about a more action-oriented research design to tease out these different things.

=> Answer: absolutely, in the limits section of the paper, we stress that our results do not imply action, but simply focus on discourses. We are aware that our dependent variable is still very limited. Concerning the differences in the concept of colorblindness in the US (where the concept comes from) and in Sweden, we need to explore this further, by incorporating religion for instance.

Angéline Escafré-Dublet

Colorblindness is a very conservative view in the US. How does it actually translate in Swedish language? Also, did you contemplate the possibility of directly asking people: “what does colorblindness mean to you?” Questions about values and understanding of concepts may be very interesting here.

=> Answer: In Swedish, the word is “färgblind”, but it is confusing because it most commonly refers to someone who does not differentiate the color red and green for instance. Most people might not understand the word in relation to race and racism.