5-2012

# Color Blindness and Perceptions of Ambiguous Racial Confrontation

Linda Zou
*College of William and Mary*

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from
The College of William and Mary

by

Linda Zou

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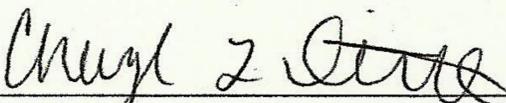
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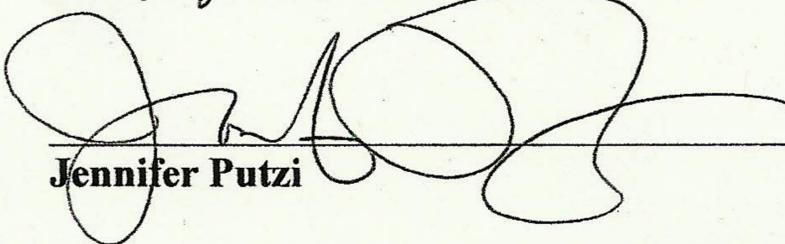
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**April 27, 2012**

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**Abstract**

Due to its emphasis on diminishing race and avoiding racial discourse, color blind racial ideology has repeatedly been suggested to have negative consequences for modern day race relations. The current research examined the influence of color blindness, as well as the level of ambiguity of a prejudiced remark, on perceptions of a target confrontation. One hundred thirteen White participants read and responded to a scene depicting a White character committing a racial verbal microaggression of variable ambiguity, after which a target character confronted the comment. Results showed that the target confronter was perceived more negatively and her confrontation was less supported by participants with high color blindness, measured by Neville and colleagues' (2001) Color Blind Racial Attitudes Scale. Furthermore, participants with high color blindness tended to rate the White commenter less negatively than those with low color blindness. In addition, participants were affected by the microaggression's ambiguity regardless of color blindness, with a higher level of ambiguity predicting more negative perceptions of the Black confronter and the confrontation. Implications for how color blindness, as an accepted norm among White Americans that is endorsed across legal and educational settings, and insensitivity to ambiguous prejudice can facilitate Whites' complicity in racial inequality are discussed.

**Color Blindness and Perceptions of Ambiguous Racial Confrontation**

In the decades since the Civil Rights Movement, the degree to which racism exists in the United States appears to have lessened. That is, opinion surveys have documented substantial changes in the racial attitudes of White Americans that suggest anti-Black sentiment is steadily declining (Wittenbrink, Judd, & Park, 1997). Dovidio and Gaertner (2000) found that participants in 1998-1999 reported lower levels of prejudice than did participants from ten years before. Other studies show a similar overall decrease in the negative stereotypes associated with Blacks (Madon et al., 2001). However, there is a discrepancy between these self-reported levels of prejudice and the results from experimental studies that illustrate that Whites still show automatic negative stereotypes about Blacks and hold negative implicit attitudes towards individuals of different racial groups (Devine, 1989; Kawakami, Dion, & Dovidio, 1999; Wittenbrink et al., 1997), indicating that decreases in levels of self-reported prejudice may be due to changing societal norms of equality (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Researchers have concluded that rather than decreasing, racism may have merely changed in form and gone underground (Dovidio, 2001). That is, a new racism has surfaced in the United States, supplanting the old-fashioned racism that is commonly characterized by Jim Crow, blatant discriminatory acts, and beliefs in White supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2004). Although less overt, the harmful effects of this new, subtler racism are still pervasive in American culture.

**Subtle Forms of Racism**

As traditional expressions of racism have become legally and socially condemned (Dovidio, 2001), a major aspect of new racism is that it is more likely to be expressed when it can be denied to others and to the perpetrators themselves (Sue, 2010). Consequently, due to the "ambiguous and nebulous" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 272) nature of expressions of new racism, it is

characteristically difficult to pinpoint, acknowledge, or confront. Concepts such as modern

racism (McConahay, 1986), symbolic racism (Sears & Henry, 2003), and aversive racism

(Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000) have all been used to approach and understand this shift from old-

fashioned, visible racism to the subtle and indirect prejudice that is typical of post-1960s race

relations (Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2001). In the case of modern racism, which has

received the most empirical attention (Neville et al., 2001), people high in modern racism hold

four main beliefs as summarized by McConahay (1986): (1) racism against Blacks is in the past;

(2) Blacks are too pushy and demanding about their rights; (3) Blacks use unfair tactics to gain

access into places where they are not wanted; and as a result, (4) the advances that Blacks have

made are undeserved. Those who endorse views consistent with modern racism tend not to

engage in overt discrimination, but instead discriminate in more ambiguous situations wherein

the behavior can be rationalized and explained, such as in a hiring context when an authority

figure is able to provide a business-related justification (Brief, Dietz, Cohen, Pugh, & Vaslow,

2000; Ziegert & Hanges, 2005), or in a legal context when a juror is not provided with exact

instructions regarding how to evaluate a Black defendant (Pfeifer & Ogloff, 1991). Additionally,

those who hold modern racist beliefs do not endorse extreme discriminatory policies such as

segregation, but instead tend to consistently oppose policies such as affirmative action (Awad,

Cokley, & Ravitch, 2004) and others aimed at repairing race-based social injustices (Blatz &

Ross, 2009; Rabinowitz, Sears, Sidanius, & Krosnick, 2009).

 Research increasingly shows that subtle prejudiced behavior may be just as harmful to

minorities as blatant acts of prejudice (Dovidio, 2001). The term *racial microaggressions* is used

to describe contemporary forms of racism in their everyday occurrence, expressed through "daily

verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that

communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue, 2007, p. 273). These commonplace experiences of racial inequality, of which ambiguity is a main characteristic, have as significant an impact on racial anger, frustration, and self-esteem as do experiences of traditional racism (Sue, 2007). Existing theory has proposed that minorities have adapted to become equipped to deal with blatant prejudice (Miller & Kaiser, 2001), so that while overt racism may be more offensive at first, "the clear intentionality makes it easier to understand and ignore" (Bennett, Merritt, Edwards, & Sollers, 2004, p. 972). Interpreting ambiguous prejudice, on the other hand, may require greater cognitive processing, which leads to impaired performance on cognitive tasks as well as feelings of distress in the target (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007). Qualitative studies have demonstrated the persistent negative impact of subtle racism and racial microaggressions on college students of color (Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Bennett and colleagues (2004) found that, among Black participants who were presented with either blatantly racist or ambiguously racist content, participants presented with ambiguously racist content who also reported high levels of perceived racism had the most negative affective reactions. Whites, conversely, tend to experience greater impairment in the face of blatant prejudice, which suggests that they are less sensitive to subtle levels of prejudice (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007).

The effects of subtle prejudice extend beyond the immediate interaction between the perpetrator and target. The mechanics of new racism allow for the avoidance of direct racial discourse while simultaneously safeguarding the privileges that one racial group has over others (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). These consequences have psychosocial costs for Whites as well, among which are guilt and shame, the irrational fear of other races, distorted beliefs about race and racism, and limited exposure to racial and cultural diversity (Spanierman, Poteat, Beer, &

Armstrong, 2006). Although the effects of microaggressions on individuals have begun to be examined, given the importance of these ambiguous behaviors in new racism, more research is needed. In particular, research should further explore Whites' perceptions of subtle forms of prejudice, as Whites tend to be the main perpetrators (Dovidio, 2001).

**Color Blind Ideology**

Among the wave of post-Civil Rights racial belief systems is color blind ideology, which describes a specific set of beliefs that is central in contemporary racial dynamics (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). People who endorse color blindness believe that "race should not and does not matter" (Neville et al., 2001, p. 60). On the surface, this attitude appears admirable and progressive; however, in its effort to move beyond race, it overlooks the fact that individuals often process information about race automatically (e.g., Devine, 1989), and that race regularly shapes people's experiences. To state that race does not matter only denies, distorts, and minimizes existing racism, while reinforcing the racial status quo (Neville, Spanierman, & Doan, 2006).

Color blindness contains three dimensions as defined by Neville and colleagues (2001): the unawareness or denial of racial privilege, institutional racism, and pervasive racial discrimination. Color blindness comes predominantly from a White experience of the world, as the privilege of being White allows Whites to genuinely state that race is not relevant in their lives (Simpson, 2008). Color blindness is conceptually distinct from both old and new racism, as it does not necessarily indicate negative attitudes towards minorities (Neville et al., 2001). However, accepting color blindness's inaccurate view of race relations fosters inaction, which consequently preserves, rather than challenges, racial inequality and the structural component of racism (Awad et al., 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Neville et al., 2001).

Thus a color blind ideology is considered to be the product of a racist social structure. In individuals, support for color blind ideology has been positively correlated with modern racism and other measures of racial prejudice (Awad et al., 2004; Neville et al., 2001). Empirical research has repeatedly demonstrated a negative correlation between the endorsement of color blind ideology and support for affirmative action (Awad et al., 2004; Oh et al., 2010). Students who score high in color blindness are more likely to perceive their general and racial-ethnic campus climate to be more positive and accepting than students who score low in color blindness (Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008), thereby displaying an ignorance of racial privilege and racial conflict.

The existing body of research, though limited, also suggests that individuals with high levels of color blindness are more likely to accept, and even support problematic racial behavior, such as participation in racial-themed party practices (Tynes & Markoe, 2010) or the use of inappropriate Native-American mascots (Steinfeldt & Wong, 2010). Color blindness can be harmful in social interactions as well, as strategic attempts to appear unprejudiced may sometimes backfire (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006). For instance, in situations where race is salient, the cognitive effort required to avoid race can affect the capacity to exert inhibitory control. This may lead to decreased nonverbal friendliness and negative perceptions by Black observers, who see White participants' color blind behavior in a situation where race is relevant to actually indicate greater racial prejudice (Apfelbaum et al., 2008). Taken together, the literature demonstrates that color blindness, although noble on the surface, has significant negative consequences for interracial interactions and the perpetuation of racism, regardless of intent.

**The Confrontation of Prejudice**

An important strategy for reducing prejudice and dealing with the negative consequences of prejudicial behavior is confrontation. Confrontation is defined as "verbally or nonverbally expressing one's dissatisfaction with prejudicial and discriminatory treatment to the person who is responsible for the remark or behavior" (Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, & Hill, 2006, p. 67). A major benefit of confrontation is that it raises people's awareness of their biases (Ashburn-Nardo, Morris, & Goodwin, 2008). Confrontation produces self-directed negative affect, guilt and discomfort within the perpetrator (Czopp & Monteith, 2003), which is important for successful behavior inhibition and self-regulation (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008). Research shows that confrontation can also be effective in changing behavior, as participants who were confronted for making a prejudicial remark were less likely to make prejudicial remarks during a subsequent task (Czopp, Monteith, & Mark, 2006). Confrontation can be valuable to the confronter as well. Women who confront a sexist remark can experience a more positive self-image (Swim and Hyers, 1999), while women who believe they should but ultimately do not confront sexist treatment may experience negative self-directed affect (Shelton et al., 2006).

Unfortunately, the perceived consequences of confrontation, such as being disliked, dismissed, or retaliated against, can often prevent people from confronting prejudice (Shelton & Stewart, 2004). These concerns appear to be warranted, as confrontation can elicit negative affect directed at the confronter, especially when the confrontation style is hostile (Czopp et al., 2006). Additionally, a growing body of literature shows that targets who confront sexism or racism are often perceived negatively (Dodd, Giuliano, Boutell, & Moran, 2001; Czopp et al., 2003; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). Targets who confront tend to be seen as overreacting, rude, and complaining (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). They elicit feelings of irritation and antagonism from more prejudiced individuals (Czopp & Monteith, 2003). In a key

study by Dodd and colleagues (2001), although female participants liked and respected women who confronted a blatantly sexist remark more than women who did not confront, male participants disliked women who confronted significantly more than women who did not confront. Rasinski and Czopp (2010) found that although White speakers who confronted a racist comment were perceived positively by witnesses and increased witnesses' awareness about the prejudicial nature of the comment, Black confronters were perceived as rude and increased witnesses' agreement with the racist comment. Further research is needed to explore how evaluations of a target confronter, as well as of the person being confronted, may vary depending on individual beliefs and attitudes.

**The Current Research**

Social psychological research has demonstrated a shift in racial attitudes over the last several decades, resulting in more covert expressions of prejudice. This new racism often manifests through microaggressions and other subtle behaviors that may be just as harmful to minorities as blatant acts of prejudice (Dovidio, 2001; Bennett et al., 2004; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007). Color blind ideology is a distinct set of racial beliefs associated with these new forms of racism, and has major consequences for the preservation of racial inequalities, as it allows people to avoid acknowledging the realities of racism (Neville et al., 2001). The evasion of race and racial discourse has already been found to potentially impact interracial interactions (Norton et al., 2006). In the current study, we were interested in investigating whether this particular racial ideology could be a factor in perceptions of those who engage in prejudice confrontation, a specific type of interaction that has significant consequences for racial minorities (Shelton & Stewart, 2004). The purpose of this research therefore was to examine whether color blindness would predict Whites' perceptions of a racial confrontation. Specifically, we examined

perceptions of the target confronter as well as of the White commenter, as studies have suggested that Whites who support color blind ideology may be less bothered by certain prejudicial behavior and those who perpetrate it (Tynes & Markoe, 2010; Steinfeldt & Wong, 2010). An additional goal of the current study was to examine how the ambiguity of the prejudiced comment affects perceptions of confrontation. There has been limited experimental research explicitly testing the effects of ambiguous versus blatant cues of prejudice, and even less in relation to perceptions of prejudice confrontation. However, some extant literature indicates that the ambiguity of a prejudicial situation or statement can affect the way it is subsequently perceived and responded to, with Whites being more reactive to blatant prejudice than ambiguous prejudice (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007). Because of this disparity, we believed that level of ambiguity would be an important factor in how Whites evaluate a situation in which the prejudice of a remark is called into attention. Therefore, we wished to examine whether the microaggression's ambiguity would predict White participants' perceptions of the resulting racial confrontation and the two characters involved.

In order to accomplish these two goals, a study was conducted in which White participants read a vignette that depicted a White character committing a verbal microaggression towards a Black target, after which the target confronted the commenter about the remark. The microaggression varied in ambiguity depending upon the experimental condition. Participants then responded to questionnaire items evaluating their perceptions of the confrontation itself and the general personality traits of the two characters. We predicted that color blindness would moderate perceptions of the confronter and the commenter. Specifically, it was expected that participants who supported a color blind ideology would perceive the confronter more negatively and the White commenter more positively than those who did not support a color blind ideology.

As little previous research has examined perceptions of targets' confrontation as a function of ambiguity, we did not have specific hypotheses but rather considered two possibilities. First, it is possible that color blindness and ambiguity could interact, in that participants with high color blindness would be more influenced by the scene's ambiguity, while participants with low color blindness, being more sensitive to racism, would respond similarly to both the high and low ambiguity scenes. This pattern of results would be consistent with past findings that show personal racial biases interacting with ambiguity to predict more prejudiced behavior when situations are unclear (Pfeifer & Ogloff, 1991; Sue, 2010), as well as with the general concept of color blindness as an ideology centered on not wanting to talk about race (Simpson, 2008), which may be difficult to maintain in the face of blatant prejudice, but easier when the prejudice is ambiguous and dismissible. Alternatively, it is possible that the scene's ambiguity would be an important enough factor to affect participants' perceptions regardless of their racial ideologies, so that all participants given the high ambiguity scene would respond more negatively to the target confronter as compared to participants who had been exposed to the low ambiguity scene. This pattern of results would support the literature addressing Whites' overall poor recognition of ambiguous levels of prejudice (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007), which may be a pervasive enough factor to overshadow the influence of individual racial ideologies.

**Pilot Studies**

Two pilot tests were conducted in order to create an appropriate vignette depicting a target confronting a White commenter about a racial microaggression that varied in ambiguity. For the first pilot test, 13 (5 male) White participants, sampled from the same population as the current study, read 19 short dialogue scenes, each containing a verbal microaggression committed against or in the presence of a racial minority. Each of the microaggressive remarks

was derived from Sue and colleagues' (2007) research on microaggressions or from personal

anecdotal experiences of people of color shared on the website www.microaggressions.com. On

a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*), participants rated the extent to which they found each

remark racist, and the extent to which they found each remark ambiguous. Of the nineteen

scenes, one was discarded due to a typing error, two were discarded for being overtly political,

and another was discarded after participants failed to perceive the featured remark as even

somewhat racist. From the remaining fifteen scenes, four were selected for a second pilot test

(see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). Selection was based on the relatively high

ambiguity ratings of the scenes' respective remarks, as well as the high variability in participant

responses, which was taken to also be indicative of the remarks' ambiguity.

For the second pilot test, the four selected scenes were modified to contain unambiguous

versions of the original microaggressions, producing eight scenes in total. One group of

participants ($n = 21$) responded to two of the low ambiguity scenes and two of the high

ambiguity scenes, once again rating how racist and ambiguous they perceived the highlighted

remark to be. A second group ($n = 11$) responded to the remaining four scenes. The final scene

that was chosen for the following studies earned significantly different racism ratings between

participants who read the low ambiguity version ($M = 6.27$, $SD = 1.01$) and participants who read

the high ambiguity version ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.45$); $t(30) = 2.60$, $p = .015$.

**Method**

**Participants**

One hundred thirteen (43 male) White undergraduate students from the College of

William and Mary participated in the study. Ages ranged from 17 to 28 ($M = 18.77$, $SD = 1.45$).

Participants were given partial course credit for their Introduction to Psychology course in

exchange for participation. All procedures were approved by the William and Mary human ethics committee, and informed consent was signed by each participant.

Participants were recruited from Introduction to Psychology courses based on their score on the CoBRAS scale (described below) that was administered during a mass testing session. Participants were recruited from the top and bottom third of the CoBRAS score distribution of 349 undergraduate students ($M = 68.91$, $SD = 14.56$). Participants with the lowest reported CoBRAS scores ($n = 57$) comprised one experimental group, with scores ranging from 30 to 64 ($M = 53.12$, $SD = 6.74$). Participants with the highest reported CoBRAS scores ($n = 56$) comprised the second experimental group, with scores ranging from 74 to 111 ($M = 87.14$, $SD = 9.62$).

**Measures**

*CoBRAS.* The Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (Neville et al., 2001) was used to measure color blind ideology (see Appendix 1). The CoBRAS is a self-report scale that assesses color blind racial attitudes based on three dimensions: awareness of racial privilege (e.g., "White people in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin"), institutional discrimination (e.g., "Social policies, such as affirmative action, discriminate unfairly against white people"), and blatant racial issues (e.g. "Social problems in the U.S. are rare, isolated situations"). The CoBRAS consists of 20 items, each of which is rated on a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate a greater level of support for color blind racial ideology. The CoBRAS was administered to Introduction to Psychology students through mass testing during the beginning of the semester, rather than during the study itself, to prevent participants from deducing the study's true purpose. Students were then

recruited to participate based on their CoBRAS scores, to ensure that the study's participants represented individuals who held strong or weak color-blind ideology.

**Materials and Procedure**

A 2 (CoBRAS Score: High or Low) x 2 (Ambiguity: High or Low) between-subjects design was employed to examine whether perceptions of a target confronter and the White commenter would vary with color-blindness orientation and the ambiguity of the comment.

Prior to arriving, each participant was systematically assigned to either the high or low ambiguity condition. Assignment was semi-random, in that care was taken to ensure that each experimental group would have a comparable number of individuals who scored high and low on the CoBRAS. Participants arrived in groups of four and were seated at individual computers with privacy screens. They were then given instructions stating that they would be completing an online survey about perceptions of conflicts that occurred commonly among college students. Participants were asked to read and evaluate three scenes, each involving a conflict between two individuals that ended with one character (i.e. the confronter) confronting the other (i.e. the commenter). The first two scenes were included to obscure the study's specific interest in racial confrontation. The first depicted a pair of female college students discussing a third friend's habit of flaunting her money, and the second depicted two male college students arguing over a misogynistic insult.

The third scene, which was the scene of interest, depicted a target's confrontation of a verbal racial microaggression of either high or low ambiguity. The scene, chosen based on the results of prior pilot tests detailed above, was described to participants as follows:

> *Heather is driving her friend, Fatima, to the salon to get a haircut.*

Heather: I think I need a haircut too. My bangs are getting out of control.

Fatima: You should do it. Maybe you could try something new and go really short. Get one of those pixie cuts.

Heather: Oh my god, can you imagine? I would look like a twelve year old boy.

*At a stoplight, Heather reaches over to touch Fatima's hair.*

The situation was introduced as such for participants in all conditions. The ambiguity of the microaggressive comment was manipulated as follows:

*High Ambiguity Condition*

Heather: I feel bad for you. Your hair will always feel like a bad perm.

*Low Ambiguity Condition*

Heather: I feel so bad for you people. Your hair will always feel like a bad perm.

After either of these comments, the following confrontation was presented:

Fatima: Wow, that was really offensive. The subject of natural black hair

is still super political, you know that right? Seriously, go easy on the

racism there.


After each of the three scenes, participants completed a questionnaire evaluating their

perceptions of the confrontation itself as well as the two characters. All three scenes' respective

questionnaires were identical.

First, participants were asked, on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*): "Was it

difficult to determine the level of offensiveness of [Character A]'s underlined statement?"

Participants' responses served as a manipulation check of the microaggressive remark's differing

ambiguity level across the two scene conditions.

A 4-item scale assessed participants' perceptions of the characters in the specific context

of the confrontation. On a 7-point scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*), participants

answered the following items in regards to both the confronter and the commenter: 'How

reasonable was [Character A/B] being in the situation?' 'How appropriate was [Character A/B]'s

underlined statement/response?' 'To what extent did [Character A/B] contribute to the conflict?'

'To what extent did you sympathize with [Character A/B]?' The creation of these items was

informed by Czopp and Monteith (2003), and other existing literature describing the way

people's support of a confronter is often contingent on how legitimate and warranted they

consider the confrontation itself to be (Garcia, Schmitt, Branscombe, & Ellemers, 2010).

A 7-item scale measured participants' negative perceptions of the character. Participants

indicated to what extent they found each character hypersensitive, irritating, emotional,

complaining, abrasive, rude, and argumentative. Next, an 8-item scale measured participants'

positive perceptions of the characters. Participants indicated to what extent they found each character likable, friendly, honest, easy to get along with, intelligent, respectable, considerate, and moral. All items were rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked, "What led to your evaluations of [Character A/B]?" and were given the opportunity to provide a free-form response.

## Results

Data from all 113 participants were used. Multiple 2 (Ambiguity: High, Low) x 2 (CoBRAS Score: High, Low) between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted in order to examine the effect of the independent variables on participants' perceptions of a racial confrontation and the confrontation's actors.

### Manipulation Check

A manipulation check was conducted to ensure that the microaggressions' ambiguity varied between the conditions. An independent samples t-test showed that participants indeed rated the remark in the low ambiguity condition ($M = 1.93$, $SD = 1.47$) as more difficult to gauge than that in the high ambiguity condition ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.97$) condition; $t(111) = 3.22$, $p = .002$.

### Perceptions of the Target Confronter

To assess participants' perceptions of the target confronter in the specific context of the confrontation, four separate two-way ANOVAs were conducted. First, participant responses to the question "How reasonable was [the target confronter] being in this situation?" were found to vary significantly as a function of both Ambiguity, $F(1,109) = 10.19$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .088$, and CoBRAS Score, $F(1,109) = 8.21$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .072$. Participants tended to judge the target as being less reasonable when they were responding to the high ambiguity scene as compared to the

low ambiguity scene, or when they had a high CoBRAS score as compared to a low score (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations). No significant Ambiguity x CoBRAS Score interaction was found.

Participant responses to the question "How appropriate was [the target confronter]'s response to [the White commenter]?" also varied significantly as a function of both Ambiguity, $F(1,112) = 19.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .151$, and CoBRAS Score, $F(1,112) = 10.97$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .091$. Participants tended to judge the target's confrontation as being less appropriate when they were responding to the high ambiguity scene, or when they were in the high CoBRAS score group (see Table 2). No significant Ambiguity x CoBRAS Score interaction was found.

Participant responses to the question "To what extent did [the target confronter] contribute to the conflict?" varied significantly as a function of Ambiguity, $F(1,111) = 14.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .116$, and marginally significantly as a function of CoBRAS Score, $F(1,111) = 3.58$, $p = .061$, $\eta^2 = .032$. Participants perceived the confronter as a larger contributor to the conflict when they were responding to the high ambiguity scene, or when they were in the high CoBRAS score group (see Table 2). No significant Ambiguity x CoBRAS Score interaction was found.

Finally, participant responses to the question "To what extent did you sympathize with [the target confronter]?" varied significantly as a function of both Ambiguity, $F(1,110) = 17.10$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .138$, and CoBRAS Score, $F(1,110) = 6.15$, $p = .015$, $\eta^2 = .054$. Participants were less likely to sympathize with the confronter when they were responding to the high ambiguity scene, or when they were in the high CoBRAS score group (see Table 2). No significant Ambiguity x CoBRAS Score interaction was found.

Perceptions of the target confronter's negative traits were examined next. Participant ratings of the confronter's hypersensitivity, emotionality, complaining, and argumentativeness

were analyzed individually, as these traits have been specifically emphasized in the existing literature regarding perceptions of target confrontation (Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Czopp & Monteith, 2003). Four separate two-way ANOVAs showed a main effect of Ambiguity on participants' perceptions of the extent to which the target confronter was hypersensitive, $F(1,111) = 9.75$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .083$; emotional, $F(1,111) = 7.25$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .063$; complaining, $F(1,111) = 12.57$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .104$; and argumentative, $F(1,111) = 13.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .111$. Specifically, participants who read the low ambiguity scene tended to perceive the confronter as more hypersensitive, emotional, complaining, and argumentative than did participants who read the high ambiguity racist scene (see Table 2). A significant main effect of CoBRAS Score was also present. Compared to participants with relatively low colorblindness scores, participants who scored higher in colorblindness tended to perceive the confronter as more hypersensitive, $F(1,111) = 12.39$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .103$; emotional, $F(1,111) = 7.25$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = .063$; complaining, $F(1,111) = 5.67$, $p = .019$, $\eta^2 = .05$; and argumentative, $F(1,111) = 11.97$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .10$ (see Table 2). No significant Ambiguity x CoBRAS Score interaction was found for any of the four traits.

The remaining three negative traits (irritating, rude, abrasive) were found to have high internal consistency ($\alpha = .91$), and thus were assessed as a single variable. Participants' general negative perceptions of the target confronter were found to vary significantly as a function of both Ambiguity, $F(1, 111) = 19.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .153$, and CoBRAS Score, $F(1, 111) = 13.15$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .109$. Participants tended to view the confronter more negatively if they had read the high ambiguity scene, or if they were in the high CoBRAS score group (see Table 2). No significant Ambiguity x CoBRAS Score interaction was found.

In assessing participants' positive perceptions of the confronter, eight traits (likable, friendly, honest, easy to get along with, intelligent, considerate, respectable, moral) were combined into a single variable ($\alpha = .94$). Participants' positive ratings of the target confronter were found to vary significantly as a function of both Ambiguity, $F(1, 110) = 5.51$, $p = .021$, $\eta^2 = .049$, and CoBRAS Score, $F(1, 110) = 6.62$, $p = .011$, $\eta^2 = .058$. Participants tended to perceive the confronter less positively if they had read the high ambiguity scene, or if they were in the high CoBRAS score group (see Table 2). No significant Ambiguity x CoBRAS Score interaction was found.

**Perceptions of the White Commenter**

Once again, four separate two-way ANOVAs were conducted to assess participants' perceptions of the White commenter in the context of the specific situation. Participant responses to the question "How reasonable was [the commenter] being in this situation?" varied significantly as a function of both Ambiguity, $F(1,111) = 3.98$, $p = .048$, $\eta^2 = .036$, and CoBRAS Score, $F(1,111) = 4.57$, $p = .035$, $\eta^2 = .041$. Participants tended to judge the commenter as being more reasonable if they read the high ambiguity scene, or if they were in the high CoBRAS score group (see Table 3 for means and standard deviations). No significant Ambiguity x CoBRAS Score interaction was found.

Participant responses to the question "How appropriate was [the commenter]'s statement?" varied marginally significantly as a function of CoBRAS Score, $F(1,109) = 3.84$, $p = .053$, $\eta^2 = .035$. Participants tended to judge the commenter's statement as being more appropriate when they were in the high CoBRAS score group (see Table 3). No significant main effect of Ambiguity or Ambiguity x CoBRAS Score interaction was found.

Participant responses to the question "To what extent did [the commenter] contribute to the conflict?" varied significantly as a function of both Ambiguity, $F(1,111) = 6.28$, $p = .014$, $\eta^2 = .054$, and CoBRAS Score, $F(1,112) = 5.46$, $p = .021$, $\eta^2 = .048$. Participants were less likely to perceive the commenter as contributing to the conflict when they were responding to the high ambiguity scene, or when they were in the high CoBRAS score group (see Table 3). No significant Ambiguity x CoBRAS Score interaction was found.

Participant responses to the question "To what extent did you sympathize with [the commenter]?" varied significantly as a function of CoBRAS Score, $F(1,112) = 11.92$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = .099$. Participants were more likely to sympathize with the commenter when they were in the high CoBRAS score group (see Table 3). No significant main effect of Ambiguity or Ambiguity x CoBRAS Score interaction was found.

To evaluate participants' negative perceptions of the commenter, three traits (irritating, rude, abrasive) were assessed as a single variable ($\alpha = .84$). The four traits that were specific to the confronter (hypersensitive, emotional, complaining, argumentative) were not examined in relation to the commenter. Participants' responses were found to vary marginally significantly as a function of CoBRAS Score, $F(1, 111) = 3.56$, $p = .062$, $\eta^2 = .032$. Participants tended to perceive the commenter less negatively if they were in the high CoBRAS score group (see Table 3). No significant Ambiguity main effect or Ambiguity x CoBRAS Score interaction was found.

Eight traits (likable, friendly, honest, easy to get along with, intelligent, considerate, respectable, moral) were examined as a single variable ($\alpha = .90$) in order to assess participants' overall positive perceptions of the commenter. Participants' responses were found to vary significantly as a function of CoBRAS Score, $F(1, 109) = 8.34$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .073$. Participants tended to perceive the commenter more positively they were in the high CoBRAS score group

(see Table 3). No significant Ambiguity main effect or Ambiguity x CoBRAS Score interaction was found.

## Discussion

To our knowledge, the current research is the first to link color blindness to Whites' perceptions of the individuals involved in a confrontation of a prejudiced comment. It is also among the few that helps to illuminate the role of the ambiguity of a prejudiced comment in the way that people of color who confront are perceived by Whites in racial situations. As predicted, participants who aligned more strongly with color blind ideology tended to perceive the target confronter less positively and more negatively, viewing her to be more hypersensitive, complaining, emotional, and argumentative than did participants with weaker color blind ideology. Participants high in color blindness also tended to be comparatively less supportive of the target's confrontation, perceiving it to be more unreasonable and inappropriate.

Our findings support the extant research that links racial color blindness with the acceptance and perpetuation of racial structures and prejudiced behavior (Awad et al., 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Neville et al., 2001; Tynes & Markoe, 2010). Stronger color blindness appears to be a factor in Whites' minimization of target confronters and their concerns, which may be based on a false sense of racial egalitarianism that enables them to diminish the role of race in racist events and interactions. To them, efforts to call attention to racism may be as disagreeable as racism itself. Our findings also provide further evidence of the consequences that targets face when they confront prejudice. Color blindness, and potentially other racial ideologies, may contribute to Whites' negative reactions to and perceptions of a target confrontation. The threat of these negative reactions is what often inhibits people of color from speaking out against prejudice in fear of being dismissed, disliked, and further antagonized

(Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008). Indeed, the current research adds to previous work demonstrating that the targets of prejudicial remarks who confront are perceived as rude and as complainers (Dodd et al., 2001; Czopp et al., 2003; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). Our results suggest that these perceptions may be especially negative among individuals supporting a color blind ideology.

Participants' CoBRAS scores also had an influence, albeit less consistent, on their perceptions of the White commenter. Participants who were high in color blindness tended to rate the commenter more positively and marginally less negatively, despite the commenter's racist remark. Though not many studies have focused on Whites' perceptions of those who perpetrate racist comments, our results are consistent with the general notion that greater color blindness predicts less bothered reactions to problematic racialized behavior (Tynes & Markoe, 2010). These findings are worrisome, as they reaffirm that color blindness, in its efforts to look past race and racism, may actually allow racism to continue (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Furthermore, while research has shown that being confronted by non-targets can have a negative impact on how commenters are perceived by witnesses (Dickter, Kittel, & Gyurovski, 2012), our results reaffirm that target confronters face greater social risks, and that their confrontation may even have a counter-productive effect on witnesses' perceptions of the original commenter, especially when the witnesses have pre-existing racial biases (Rasinski & Czopp, 2010).

It is important to study the ways in which various racial ideologies can influence Whites' perceptions of racial confrontations, as racial attitudes have bearing on both spontaneous and deliberate social behavior (e.g. Apfelbaum et al., 2008; Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, & Howard, 1997; McConnell & Leibold, 2001; Stepanikova, Triplett, & Simpson, 2011). Color blindness is of particular significance as it is regularly socialized as a norm among White Americans and endorsed across a range of domains, from legal to educational settings (Lewis et

al., 2000; Pollock, 2004; Sue, 2004). For instance, Proposition 209, introduced in California in 1996, sought to outlaw not only affirmative action but also race-based educational programs, believing that the consideration of race in decision-making at all was a form of racism (Pollock, 2004). The current study provides preliminary evidence that endorsing color blind concepts can have potentially negative consequences in situations involving prejudicial behavior, and thus suggests that steps should be taken to promote a less color blind and more multicultural approach to interracial relations. Research has indicated that color blindness can be reduced through education. Self-reported color blind ideology among undergraduates was shown to be sensitive to a diversity training course (Neville et al., 2000), and master's-level students demonstrated greater awareness of societal racism and attitudinal changes away from color blindness after a targeted multicultural intervention (Steinfeldt & Wong, 2010). Even the use of brief primes manipulating participants' perspectives regarding interethnic relations has yielded optimistic implications, as students primed with a multicultural perspective as opposed to a color blind perspective later showed greater positive regard for other groups (Wolsko, Park, Judd & Wittenbrink, 2000), less racial bias (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004), and more positive behavior towards an out-group member (Vorauer, Gagnon, & Sasaki, 2009). Given the preliminary evidence supporting the effectiveness of education in countering color blindness and promoting a multicultural perspective, a stronger understanding of color blindness and its consequences for interracial interactions would aid in the development of training programs that work towards informing people about the realities of racial tensions and privilege.

As expected, the ambiguity of the confrontation scene was also a significant factor in White participants' perceptions of the target confronter, though not in their perceptions of the White commenter. When the microaggressive remark was more ambiguous in nature,

participants perceived the confronter more negatively and less positively, and were less supportive of the confrontation. Psychology research has taken care to explore the relevance of ambiguity in people of color's experiences with prejudiced behavior (Bennett et al., 2004; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007; Solorzano et al., 2000). However, far less literature explores the way that ambiguity also affects Whites and the ways in which they may respond to, permit, and perform prejudiced behavior themselves. There is troubling preliminary evidence that Whites lack the ability to register ambiguous forms of prejudice (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007). As evidenced by our current findings, this insensitivity to ambiguous prejudice may prevent Whites from recognizing when a microaggression is being committed and should be challenged, and may instead lead them to perceive a target confronter as overreacting and being quick to take offense. Given that Whites are also the main perpetrators of racism in the United States (Dovidio, 2001), ambiguous situations can easily enable Whites to act on their prejudices (Brief et al., 2000), or deny a person of color's claims that racism has occurred (Sue et al., 2007). Furthermore, the lack of any interactions between scene ambiguity and CoBRAS score shows that participant's perceptions were influenced by ambiguity regardless of their individual levels of color blindness. This may be because Whites in general, no matter how well-intentioned or sensitive to racism, do not have to personally cope with experiences of microaggressive behavior on a regular basis, and thus continue to have a hard time understanding instances of more ambiguous prejudice, or the point of view of a target confronting a statement that they as Whites could have easily ignored.

As with color blindness, our findings on ambiguity provide additional confirmation of the social costs that people of color face when they confront prejudice (Shelton & Stewart, 2004). Taken together, the results remind us of the long, unfortunate history of people of color being

unable to express their racial worldviews or their personal experiences with prejudice without being told by Whites that they are being overly sensitive, or that their assertions have no proof (Sue et al., 2008). As demonstrated by the current study, this trend is still the case, especially when the expression of prejudice is more ambiguous and easy to explain away. Therefore, while researchers have suggested developing methods to help people of color better cope with ambiguous prejudice (e.g. Salvatore & Shelton, 2007), it is also necessary to address Whites' complicity, and increase awareness and condemnation of ambiguous forms of prejudice so as to prevent them from being committed in the first place. Indeed, Whites may be particularly effective in their own confrontation of prejudicial behavior. Research has suggested that not only are non-targets who confront prejudicial remarks viewed as overreacting less than targets who confront the same comment (Czopp & Monteith, 2003), but non-targets are also viewed more positively when they confront an offensive comment compared to when they do not (Dickter et al., 2012). Because confrontation from a non-target is just as effective as that of a target in preventing future prejudicial behavior in the commenter (Czopp et al., 2006), as well as more effective than a target's confrontation at increasing bystanders' awareness of the bias of a prejudicial comment (Rasinski & Czopp, 2010), Whites who confront racist comments can be important instruments of change, all the while enduring fewer negative consequences than individuals of color.

The current research possessed several limitations. Both characters in the vignette were women, and the confrontation revolved around the subject of natural black hair, which may be a particularly gendered issue. We did not test for the effect of gender on perceptions, as the study's disproportionately larger female content would not have allowed for comparable experimental group sizes. However, because gender has been shown to be a potential factor in confronting

behavior (Dickter, Cavanagh, Kittel, & Gyurovski, 2012), as well as in general attentiveness to social injustices (Quails, Cox, & Schehr, 1992), it is important to continue studying the complex intersections of gender and race.

Another major limitation was in our decisions regarding how to measure color blindness. First, we chose to represent color blindness dichotomously, with a high scoring group and a low scoring group, rather than on a continuous scale. Although we do not believe this choice affected the significance of the results, it may have prevented us from finding or observing subtler result trends. Secondly, the CoBRAS scale devised by Neville and colleagues (2001), though commonly used, has been criticized for conceptualizing color blindness as being motivated mainly by dominant group interests; thus the CoBRAS may have too much overlap with scales of racial prejudice and modern racism to be a reliable measure of color blindness as a separate concept (Mazzocco, Cooper, & Flint, 2011).

Future research should further examine the impact of color blindness and different racial ideologies on Whites' perceptions of racial conflicts and confrontations, as well the effectiveness of ideological primes on those perceptions. Researchers should also investigate the way Whites' perceptions may map onto their behaviors in confrontation situations, so that the costs of confronting often faced by people of color can be more effectively addressed in sensitivity training or interventions. Finally, as prejudicial ambiguity has been repeatedly shown to impact race relations, researchers and educators must explore methods of sensitizing Whites to the ways in which subtle, elusive expressions of racism are still harmful and unacceptable.

As blatant, straightforward prejudice continues to decrease, microaggressions and other ambiguous forms of prejudice become increasingly important to study, as they are by nature pervasive but difficult to address. The findings from our study, taken together with the existing

literature, should provide further incentive for researchers to investigate the way ambiguity and 'post-racial' ideologies such as color blindness may allow people of color's concerns to be written off as unwarranted overreactions. These findings suggest that Whites, who are both the main perpetrators of racism and the most effective confronters of prejudice, should be specifically educated to recognize ambiguous forms of prejudice and the social realities of race, so that they may contribute to the improvement of interracial relations rather than the preservation of inequality.

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**Appendix**

Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS) Items

1. Everyone who works hard, no matter what race they are, has an equal chance to become rich.

*2. Race plays a major role in the type of social services (such as type of health care or day care) that people receive in the U.S.

3. It is important that people begin to think of themselves as American and not African American, Mexican American or Italian American.

*4. Due to racial discrimination, programs such as affirmative action are necessary to help create equality.

*5. Racism is a major problem in the U.S.

*6. Race is very important in determining who is successful and who is not.

7. Racism may have been a problem in the past, it is not an important problem today.

*8. Racial and ethnic minorities do not have the same opportunities as white people in the U.S.

9. White people in the U.S. are discriminated against because of the color of their skin.

10. Talking about racial issues causes unnecessary tension.

*11. It is important for political leaders to talk about racism to help work through or solve society's problems.

*12. White people in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin.

13. Immigrants should try to fit into the culture and values of the U.S.

14. English should be the only official language in the U.S.

*15. White people are more to blame for racial discrimination than racial and ethnic minorities.

16. Social policies, such as affirmative action, discriminate unfairly against white people.

*17. It is important for public schools to teach about the history and contributions of racial and ethnic minorities.

18. Racial and ethnic minorities in the U.S. have certain advantages because of the color of their skin.

19. Racial problems in the U.S. are rare, isolated situations.

*20. Race plays an important role in who gets sent to prison.

_____

* Starred items were reverse coded.

Table 1

*Pilot Test 1 Means and Standard Deviations of the Four Selected Scenes*

| | Racism Rating | Ambiguity Rating |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | (n=13) | (n=13) |
| Scene Number | M (SD) | M (SD) |
| 5 | 4.15 (1.77) | 2.85 (1.99) |
| 11 * | 4.77 (2.17) | 3.08 (2.060 |
| 12 | 5.46 (1.81) | 2.08 (1.71) |
| 19 | 4.00 (1.96) | 3.61 (2.10) |

*This scene was eventually used for Studies 1 and 2.

Table 2

*Perceptions of the Target Confronter as a Function of Scene Ambiguity and CoBRAS Score*

| | Scene Ambiguity | | CoBRAS Score | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Low | High | Low | High |
| | (n=57) | (n=56) | (n=57) | (n=56) |
| Item | M (SD) | M (SD) | M (SD) | M (SD) |
| Reasonable | 5.42 (0.24) | 4.33 (0.24) | 5.36 (0.24) | 4.39 (0.24) |
| Appropriate response | 5.80 (0.23) | 4.36 (0.23) | 5.63 (0.23) | 4.54 (0.23) |
| Contributing the conflict | 2.81 (0.23) | 4.03 (0.23) | 3.11 (0.23) | 3.72 (0.23) |
| Sympathetic | 5.65 (0.22) | 4.36 (0.22) | 5.39 (0.22) | 4.67 (0.22) |
| Hypersensitive | 3.48 (0.26) | 4.61 (0.26) | 3.41 (0.26) | 4.68 (0.26) |
| Emotional | 3.54 (0.23) | 4.41 (0.23) | 3.54 (0.23) | 4.41 (0.23) |
| Complaining | 2.39 (0.24) | 3.59 (0.24) | 2.59 (0.24) | 3.39 (0.24) |
| Argumentative | 2.86 (0.23) | 4.05 (0.23) | 2.89 (0.23) | 4.02 (0.23) |
| Negative | 6.20 (0.58) | 9.80 (0.58) | 6.52 (0.58) | 9.48 (0.58) |
| Positive | 40.41 (1.25) | 36.29 (1.24) | 40.61 (1.24) | 36.09 (1.25) |

*Note*. Each pair of means is significantly different between conditions at the $p < 0.1$ level.

Table 3

*Perceptions of the White Commenter as a Function of Scene Ambiguity and CoBRAS Score*

|  | Scene Ambiguity | | CoBRAS Score | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | Low | High | Low | High |
|  | (n=57) | (n=56) | (n=57) | (n=56) |
| Item | M (SD) | M (SD) | M (SD) | M (SD) |
| Reasonable | 2.11$^a$ (0.18) | 2.61$^a$ (0.18) | 2.09$^b$ (0.18) | 2.63$^b$ (0.18) |
| Appropriate response | 1.66 (0.15) | 1.78 (0.15) | 1.51$^c$ (0.15) | 1.93$^c$ (0.15) |
| Contributing the conflict | 6.28$^d$ (0.15) | 5.75$^d$ (0.15) | 6.26$^e$ (0.15) | 5.77$^e$ (0.15) |
| Sympathetic | 2.02 (0.18) | 2.32 (0.19) | 1.72$^f$ (0.18) | 2.63$^f$ (0.19) |
| Negative | 16.00 (0.54) | 15.95 (0.54) | 16.70$^g$ (0.54) | 15.25$^g$ (0.55) |
| Positive | 22.26 (1.00) | 23.78 (1.02) | 20.96$^h$ (1.000 | 25.07$^h$ (1.02) |

*Note*. Means that are significantly different from each other ($p < 0.1$) are designated with

matching superscript letters.