Allowing employees equal access and opportunities and leveling the playing field for individuals from different backgrounds can be a concern for many organizations. Whether organizational leaders are focused on creating a meritocratic work environment because they think it is morally right or whether they are avoiding negative consequences of unfairness such as lower employee motivation (e.g., Lawler & O’Gara, 1967), increased organizational distrust (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001), and backlash in the form of theft and litigation (Greenberg, 1990), many leaders will adopt formal diversity policies to guide decisions in hiring, retention, promotion, and compensation.

Diversity policies differ in the extent to which they acknowledge group differences. Color-blind racial policies emphasize an overarching organizational identity and ignore differences in race, culture, and ethnicity (Stevens,
Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). An organization might adopt color-blind racial policies based on an ideology that either denies that racial differences exist (color evasion) or, relatedly, denies that racial inequality exists (power evasion; Neville, Awad, Brooks, Flores, & Bluemel, 2013). Scholars have also used the terms gender-blind and sex-blind to refer to the analogous concept of blindness with regard to gender, and we draw on the research in this area as well. We recognize that there are significant differences between gender and race, but there are also some shared experiences stemming from being a member of a disadvantaged group. We focus on these shared experiences. Thus, we use the term color-blind organization to refer to one that attempts not to recognize any differences in identity such as gender, culture, age, or disability.

Multicultural policies, in contrast, acknowledge and celebrate group differences as valuable assets and encourage individuals to learn about and accept differences among groups (Gutiérrez & Unzueta, 2010). Multicultural initiatives include activities such as having mentoring groups, seminars, fairs, and workshops for underrepresented minorities (Stevens et al., 2008). Because multicultural policies approach diversity from a different lens—one that acknowledges differences among groups and the potential for differential treatment—multicultural organizations face a different set of challenges than do color-blind organizations.

Organizations adopting a color-blind approach to race hope to eliminate bias by ignoring group differences and treating all members of the organization the same. That is, they attempt to judge all members by the same standard. What these organizations often fail to recognize, however, is that organizational standards for desirable and rewarded behavior are often based on dominant group norms and that these norms set the standards for employee actions, perceptions, and judgments.

Women and minorities may be implicitly or explicitly expected to assimilate to these norms to advance in the organization. For instance, networking is crucial for career advancement (Wolff & Moser, 2009). However, traditional networking behaviors may be based on dominant group (i.e., White male) norms. Female employees may be expected to adopt behaviors that may not come naturally to women, such as bonding over “beers and sports.” Similarly, minority employees may be expected to drop their cultural customs and learn American norms of politeness, such as friendly hugs or boastful self-promotion, which may create some discomfort. Because women and minorities are expected to assimilate, the playing field is not equal for all individuals in racially color-blind workplaces.

Color-blind organizations also fail to recognize that not only are these expected behaviors based on dominant group norms but evaluation standards are as well. Research has found that individuals who fit a prototype (e.g.,
business leader) are evaluated more favorably for the same behaviors and outcomes than those who do not fit the prototype. For instance, leadership categorization theory finds that people who possess prototypical characteristics of a leader are appraised more favorably than individuals who do not possess prototypical characteristics of a leader (Lord & Maher, 1991). “Being White” is considered a prototypical characteristic of business leaders, and White leaders are evaluated more favorably than racial minority leaders for the same behaviors and outcomes (Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008). Similarly, people are more likely to think of a man than a woman when they think of a successful leader (Schein, 1973). This tendency to think of men as being more prototypical leaders may be due to the stereotype of men as agentic and mastery-oriented versus interpersonal and communally oriented (Abele, 2003). In fact, the same behavior that is status-enhancing for men, such as showing disapproval and anger, is status-diminishing for women (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008). Thus, women and minorities who do not fit the prototype based on dominant group norms in the workplace may find themselves at a disadvantage when being evaluated. Moreover, these biases in judgment occur automatically, outside of awareness or intention, making them difficult to identify and correct.

Not only are biased judgments difficult to identify, but biased behaviors are as well. Harmful behaviors such as microaggressions (Sue, 2010) are often enacted through subtle behaviors and are ambiguous in their intent to harm (Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002). Microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271) targeting a person or group. Examples of microaggression may be mistaking a person of color for a service worker, implying that people of color are servants (Sue et al., 2007). The subtlety of these behaviors makes it difficult to identify definitively whether this treatment is the result of prejudice based on group membership (Crocker & Major, 1989).

Color-blind approaches fail to correct for subtle, unintentional, and automatic biases that harm members of disadvantaged groups. In fact, research has found that greater racial bias is associated with color-blind approaches than multicultural approaches (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). Moreover, minority members distrust a color-blind approach to race because they perceive them to be exclusionary (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlmann, & Crosby, 2008). In this chapter, we (a) explore the challenges of addressing discrimination in racially color-blind workplaces, (b) discuss the identity management strategies that minorities can use to help cope with discrimination, and (c) identify the challenges, benefits, and costs associated with using identity management strategies.
CHALLENGES IN ADDRESSING DISCRIMINATION IN COLOR-BLIND WORKPLACES

Color-blind racial policies are meant to eliminate discrimination, but they do not (Neville et al., 2013). Ironically, these policies actually make it harder for the person suffering from biased treatment to discuss it with employers. These policies create an erroneous narrative in which employers can tell themselves that by treating everybody the same way, they have eliminated bias in their organization. This narrative makes it difficult for minority employees to bring attention to actual experiences of discrimination and to get the employer to recognize that bias exists in the organization.

There are several reasons minority employees may have a more difficult time in color-blind organizations than in multicultural organizations in getting their concerns addressed. First, individuals who bring attention to disparate treatment or outcomes based on group identity find that their claims are often met with denial. Organizational leaders might reason that if race is not recognized, then it is not possible for anybody be treated differently because of his or her race. A common line in response to a claim of racism might be, “I don’t see race. Therefore, how can I treat you differently because of your race?” This denial places an additional burden on the employee. Rather than simply discussing discrimination, he or she must first educate the organization about the nature of prejudice and how these subtle processes disadvantage women and employees of color.

Second, by denying group identities, the color-blind racial policies also hinder constructive discussion about politically sensitive issues such as race or gender (American Psychological Association, Presidential Task Force on Preventing Discrimination and Promoting Diversity, 2012). For instance, when confronted with issues surrounding race, many White Americans adopt a color-blind approach in which they do not acknowledge race because they perceive that race is a taboo topic (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008). Scholars attribute the reluctance to discuss politically controversial issues such as racism among White Americans to anxiety about appearing prejudiced (Apfelbaum et al., 2008; Sue, Rivera, Capodilupo, Lin, & Torino, 2010) and discomfort at the potential of learning about one’s own implicit biases and guilt at learning how people of color have been treated in the United States (Sue et al., 2007).

By discouraging deep discussion about social identity issues and discouraging employees from bringing up experiences of bias, color-blind policies contribute to the perpetuation of the illusion that prejudice does not exist within the organization. One of the consequences of this illusion is that organizations adopting color-blind policies neglect their legal responsibility to address discrimination and unjustly shift the burden on targets to navigate and manage their experiences.
By discussing coping strategies that minority employees may adopt, we do not mean to imply that the burden of dealing with prejudice should rest on the shoulders of the targets. There are many things that color-blind workplaces can do to improve the environment for minority employees. If organizations are open to the possibility that discrimination exists, they can implement measures such as establishing safe channels of communication for individuals to report bias and educating managers and human resource professionals about the nature of prejudice.

IDENTITY MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

To cope with disparate treatment, minority employees can use identity management strategies in the workplace. Individuals can manage their identities by changing (a) their identification with a particular group (i.e., identity switching) or (b) the stereotypes associated with the identities (i.e., identity redefinition; Shih, Young, & Bucher, 2013). Identity switching changes the emphasis among an individual’s multiple social identities while keeping the stereotypes associated with those identities constant. Identity redefinition keeps the identity constant but attempts to change the stereotypes.

Identity Switching

One type of identity management that individuals may use to mitigate many negative consequences of prejudiced treatment is to switch among their different social identities. In identity switching, individuals place different emphases on their various distinct identities, depending on how beneficial each identity is in a particular situation (Pittinsky, Shih, & Ambady, 1999). Identity switching consists of two component processes: deemphasizing a negatively valued identity and emphasizing or replacing a negative identity with a positively regarded identity.

Deemphasizing a Negatively Valued Identity

To switch one’s identity, one must first deemphasize a negatively valued target identity. Minority employees can deemphasize a disadvantageous identity by using different methods, including concealing the identity, using “disidentifiers” (i.e., identity cues), and keeping the identity in the background (i.e., discretion). For instance, gay men conceal their sexual orientation by not talking about their personal lives at work when they feel that revealing their sexual orientation could expose them to unfair treatment there (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005).
Recategorizing With a Positively Valued Identity

The second component process in the identity switching strategy, identity recategorization, is to replace the negatively valued identity with a more positively valued one. For instance, an Asian female scientist might emphasize her Asian identity by choosing to highlight her last name an e-mail username because the Asian identity is stereotypically associated with mathematic and scientific aptitude (Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999; Shih, Pittinsky, & Trahan, 2006). An African American Harvard student might emphasize his racial identity in a basketball game because the African American identity is stereotypically associated with being athletic, whereas the Harvard identity is not.

Identity Regeneration

Redefining the target identity is a second identity management strategy target individuals can use. Individuals can redefine their identities through two processes: (a) stereotype reassociation (i.e., changing the stereotypes associated with an identity) and (b) stereotype regeneration (i.e., changing the meaning of the stereotypes associated with the identity).

In stereotype reassociation, individuals may disassociate their identities from negative stereotypes and strengthen their association with positive stereotypes. Older workers may counteract ageism by emphasizing positive traits associated with older workers such as loyalty and having more experience (Berger, 2009). African American students might emphasize their intelligence and resilience.

In stereotype regeneration, individuals might also redefine the traits or behaviors associated with a negatively stereotyped identity. For instance, funeral directors can redefine their identity from being someone who does dirty or taboo work (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007) by thinking of themselves as specialists who help people deal with grief rather than individuals who profit from others' losses (Thompson, 1991).

The ability for a person to implement these two types of strategies and the effectiveness of these two strategies for minority employees may depend on the diversity policies adopted in the organization.

IDENTITY MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES
IN COLOR-BLIND ORGANIZATIONS

Organizations that take a color-blind approach to race focus on an overarching shared identity, such as emphasizing the organizational identity, a task identity, or a superordinate identity (e.g., being a human being) over other group identities (Stevens et al., 2008). As a consequence, characteristics
closely associated with individual group identities (e.g., different cultural norms or languages spoken) are deemphasized. In other words, color-blind organizations externally define an identity for their members (e.g., “you are all human beings,” “you are all members of our organization”) and discourage recognition of different social identities among their members. The goal of this approach is to treat all individuals equally (Plaut, 2002).

However, by forcing an identity on and deemphasizing differences among their members, organizations adopting a color-blind approach make it difficult for targets to negotiate among their different social identities. Because different identities are not recognized, employees in workplaces using a color-blind approach may find it difficult, if not impossible, to implement identity switching strategies.

Some might argue that identity switching might be more likely to occur in color-blind workplaces because they highlight cues that are already associated with the advantaged identity. However, by adopting a color-blind racial policy, the organization is forcing the individual to de-emphasize his or her individual identities and to highlight his or her overarching shared identity, and thus such behavior is not self-initiated by the individual. This forced identification makes it difficult for the individual to switch to other beneficial identities that may not be shared. Because cues associated with unshared identities are not recognized and are even discouraged, the individual may not derive any benefits from highlighting unshared identities. As a consequence, minority employees in color-blind organizations may need to rely more heavily on identity redefinition strategies.

Color-blind organizations may be more receptive to identity redefinition strategies than multicultural organizations. Researchers have found that while stereotypical minority members are viewed more positively in multicultural contexts, counterstereotypical minority members are viewed positively in color-blind contexts (Gutiérrez & Unzueta, 2010). Thus, organizations adopting color-blind racial policies may be more receptive to counterstereotypical minority members because it reinforces their implicit belief that group differences are irrelevant and do not reflect any important aspects of a person.

At the same time, minority employees may also be constrained in how they use identity regeneration strategies in color-blind workplaces. Social identities are not explicitly recognized, and thus employees cannot try to redefine their identities through blatant, explicit arguments (e.g., boldly declaring a stereotype to be false). Explicitly calling attention to social identities that are not shared may not be well received. Thus, only implicit methods used to redefine disadvantaged identities (e.g., subtle use of identity cues) may be effective.

In addition, the frequency and intensity of identity regeneration efforts cannot be too high. Individuals, who highlight unshared identities too much,
even through subtle cues, may find that their attempts can backfire. Highlighting unshared identities more than shared ones might alienate coworkers and lead them to question targets’ commitment and identification to the organization. However, engaging in identity regeneration efforts with too little intensity would make these efforts ineffective.

**BENEFITS**

There are several benefits to the individual and the organization in using identity management strategies. The use of identity management strategies can help individuals control how they experience discrimination in the organization.

**Protecting Self-Esteem**

One set of benefits for the individual is that identity regeneration can help to protect his or her self-esteem from the identity threats. According to self-affirmation theory, after receiving negative feedback, people can protect their self-esteem by downplaying their failures and emphasizing their successes in other domains (Steele, 1988). Redefining an identity by downplaying negative stereotypes and emphasizing positive one can also help highly identified target individuals to protect their self-esteem.

**Raising Esteem for the Identity Group**

Redefining the identity can also help raise esteem for the identity group in the eyes of others in the organization. By redefining the negatively viewed group in terms of its advantages and skills, the highly identified individual both downplays the negative aspects of the group and alerts others to the strengths of the group. This can lead to better psychological outcomes (Steele, 1988).

**Improving Performance Outcomes**

Redefining an identity could also potentially help performance outcomes for the target. Research has found that changing the stereotypes associated with an identity could improve performance on negotiation tasks. Kray, Galinsky, and Thompson (2002) found that women are generally not stereotyped to be strong negotiators and underperform on negotiation tasks relative to men. However, when the stereotype associated with women and negotiation was changed and women were taught to think of women as skilled negotiators, they would outperform men on negotiation tasks. Thus,
changing the negative stereotypes to positive stereotypes can have positive performance outcomes.

**Increasing Comfort in Intergroup Interactions**

The use of identity management strategies may also provide some benefits to individuals in terms of guiding and increasing comfort levels in interpersonal interactions. Identity cues may provide interaction partners with clues as to which script they can use when interacting with somebody from another group. For instance, research on interracial interactions find that White participants often feel discomfort in interacting with Black interaction partners. Some of this discomfort comes from not knowing how to behave and the potential of unintentionally appearing prejudiced or offending their partner. However, research has found that providing White participants with behavioral scripts to guide them in the interracial interaction reduced anxiety in such interactions (Avery, Richeson, Hebl, & Ambady, 2009).

Reducing anxiety in intergroup interactions can also benefit performance. Research on intergroup interactions has found that White individuals interacting with Black partners monitor their behaviors to appear unprejudiced (Vorauer & Kumhyr, 2001). This monitoring in turn depletes mental resources and lowers performance on cognitive tasks (Richeson & Shelton, 2007).

However, it is important to note that the use of identity management strategies can only smooth out interactions that occur at the superficial level. Because color-blind racial policies hinder substantive discussions about group identity issues, identity management strategies cannot improve deeper and more meaningful relationships and interactions.

**COSTS**

Although there are benefits to using identity management strategies, there are also several costs to the individual for using these strategies. Thus, minority individuals need to make trade-offs when they use identity management strategies. Following are some of those potential costs.

**Backlash Effects**

Although counterstereotypical targets are liked more than stereotypical targets in color-blind racial contexts (Gutiérrez & Unzueta, 2010), this difference may depend on whether the stereotypes are descriptive or prescriptive. *Descriptive* stereotypes describe how members “are” (e.g., African Americans are athletic), and *prescriptive* stereotypes describe how members of a group...
“should be” (e.g., women should be warm and nurturing). Disconfirming descriptive stereotypes may lead to greater liking, but disconfirming prescriptive stereotypes may lead to lower liking (i.e., backlash effects). Thus, an employee engaging in identity redefinition efforts by emphasizing that she possesses counterstereotypical traits may suffer backlash from being a counterstereotypical group member (Phelan & Rudman, 2010).

**Missing Important Feedback**

Another negative consequence of identity redefinition is that it may allow targets to ignore important information. By constantly deemphasizing negative information and focusing on positive information, individuals face the danger of missing important feedback.

**Double Bind**

Another potential pitfall associated with using identity regeneration is the double bind. Employees who are able to redefine the disadvantaged identity at the individual level and replace stereotypes associated with incompetence with more competent stereotypes may be penalized in other dimensions, such as warmth. Professional women who are highly successful need to behave in assertive, agentic, and self-promotional ways to be able to succeed. However, although these women may be perceived as more competent, they also pay a penalty for this perception in terms of being perceived as less likeable (Rudman & Glick, 2001).

**Alienation From the Group**

There may be long-term harmful consequences associated with identity redefinition. One potential consequence of consistent efforts to redefine one’s social identity group is disidentification with the group. As individuals try to redefine the negative stereotypes associated with their identities, they may choose to avoid activities or locations that are stereotype consistent. This avoidance may also deprive targets of the positive effects related to social identification, such as access to social support networks. Losing access to social support networks would deprive the individual of important resources such as emotional support.

**Costs to the Organization**

Organizations may also bear some costs when employees use identity management strategies. When employees try to redefine their unshared distinct
social identities to more closely resemble shared identities, one of the most obvious costs to organizations is the loss of diversity in perspectives, and such diversity is key to avoidance of decision-making biases that lead to suboptimal decision processes and outcomes in organizations, such as groupthink or the overconfidence bias.

CONCLUSION

Although companies may adopt color-blind approaches to race to eliminate discrimination, doing so can, ironically, make life harder for employees who belong to minority groups. Minority employees can use two types of identity management strategies to manage discrimination: identity switching and identity regeneration. However, the use of these strategies comes with costs, which must be weighed against the benefits.

REFERENCES


