

RECONSIDERING BEING “Colorblind”

To overcome racism, we must first
take race into account.

—Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun



Common Phrases That Reinforce the “Good-Bad” Racism Binary

- “I was taught to treat everyone the same, so I’m not a racist.”
- “I see people as individuals.”
- “I don’t care if you are green, blue, or polka dotted.”
- “Racism is in the past.”
- “I work in a diverse environment, so I’m not racist.”
- “I don’t see color; I just see people.”

Impacts of Racially Colorblind Ideology

- Invalidates the identity of people of color.
- Invalidates People of Color’s experiences with racism.
- Labels discussing or addressing race as something negative.
- Hinders honest conversations about implicit and unintentional bias.
- Maintains the status quo, making change harder to accomplish.



After the Civil Rights Movement, most Americans understood that racism was “bad,” but few developed a complex understanding about how it pervades our social structure. This has led to many white people taking on a racially “colorblind” mentality, thereby denying that they participate in or benefit from racist systems. In order to understand those systems and their impact on the lives of People of Color, **white allies must learn to abandon this denial** in order to create social change.

If inclusion is our goal, we must have conversations about race in our congregations, camps, and classrooms. Racially colorblind ideology can be an obstacle of which we may not even be aware, as it is based on a false binary between people who are racist (“bad people”) and those who are not (“good people”).

Many equate racism with white nationalist and extremist groups with overt and active racist behaviors and ideologies. Therefore, **it becomes easy to ignore pervasive racism** in our institutions that is subtle, institutionalized, subconscious, and accepted as normal.

When a statement or belief is called out as being racist, many people become defensive, making it difficult to address racism in our institutions and preconceived ideas. In order to make real change, we must be **truly open** to hearing and understanding People of Color’s experiences.

Many also believe that small children are too young to talk or learn about race and that they are inherently socially colorblind. However, studies have shown that children begin to understand racial differences **as young as three or four years old**, and that a three-year-old child of color already understands that white skin is socially preferable to dark skin. Refusing to talk to children about race and racism allows problematic ideas they derive from their environments to go unchallenged, making it easier for these ideologies to manifest throughout their lives.

While overt and active racism is considered unacceptable in today's culture, many well-meaning people are vulnerable to reinforcing subtle racism. In order to form deeper connections with each other, we need to learn how to cultivate healthier cross-racial relationships. Institutional racism has created a high degree of social and geographical segregation that continues to this day, so many people are not aware of what is appropriate and inappropriate across cultures.

Microaggressions unintentionally exist in many of our interactions. Learning about them can help us be more intentional in our interactions and realize the negative impact that our words can have, **even if our intention is positive or neutral**. Whether verbal or physical, microaggressions can make People of Color feel alienated, unwelcome, and/or unsafe. For example, some of the most common microaggressions that Jews of Color experience when entering Jewish spaces focus on why the speaker thinks they may not belong there or that they accidentally came to the wrong place.

Instead of feeling guilty about what we do not know, it is important to **continue learning and developing new methods** of interaction that will help build better relationships across lines of difference.

MICROAGGRESSIVE COMMENTS & QUESTIONS JEWS OF COLOR OFTEN EXPERIENCE

- So, how are you Jewish?
- Where are you from? No, where are you really from?
- You don't look Jewish.
- What are you?
- I don't really see you as [recipient's race/culture]/you're not really [recipient's race/culture].
- Can I touch your hair? (or touching someone without asking)
- Your voice sounds "white."
- I'm surprised you know so much about Judaism/Torah.
- Do you work here? (or other ways of assuming that a Jew of Color is a staff person rather than a member or guest)
- Who are you here with? (i.e., Why are you here?)

MICROAGGRESSIVE EXPERIENCES JEWS OF COLOR OFTEN FACE IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

- Being asked to speak on behalf of all Jews of Color.
- Being disproportionately and aggressively questioned by security at synagogue entrances.
- Walking into a space and feeling unsafe as the only person of color.

Microaggressions are the constant and continuing reality of slights, insults, invalidations, and indignities visited upon marginalized groups by well-intentioned, moral, and decent family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, students, teachers, clerks, waiters and waitresses, employers, health care professionals, and educators.

—Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*