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The End of Tolerance: Engaging Cultural Differences

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Colorblindness as a Barrier to Inclusion: Assimilation and Nonimmigrant Minorities

THE ASSIMILATION of millions of immigrants from strikingly different worlds into one society is a story that defines America. In the shadow of this American story is another: the struggle to include millions of nonimmigrant minorities—African-Americans, American Indians, Latinos—within the mainstream of society. The first story is a celebration of diversity that reveals America as a haven for religious, cultural, and political difference. The second story tells of an ongoing struggle with difference, in this case a difference not of religion or cultural values but a difference in social, racial, and ethnic status. It is a story that turns on how to bring the powerful American ideal of equality and equal opportunity together with the reality of difference in psychological and social experience that derives from the differential status in society.

In trying to understand this struggle over inclusion, our analysis begins with a known but perhaps underappreciated fact: the societal settings that are central to a group's movement into mainstream American life, settings such as school and the workplace, are experienced differently by America's nonimmigrant

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grant minorities than by majority group members. Of course these groups will share similarities of experience in these settings. But group identity makes for important experiential differences. Minority group members will know, for example, that their group has long experienced discrimination in the setting; they may worry that negative stereotypes about their group will influence how they are treated and evaluated there. And, in reaction to these concerns, they may come to feel alienated in the setting. Such group differences in how these public settings are experienced, we suggest, may play an underappreciated role in the shadow story of America's struggle with inclusion.

But underappreciation does not mean that as a society we do not acknowledge historical and ongoing inequalities between these minorities and the American mainstream in educational access, wealth, even freedom of movement. We are a society with a great capacity for self-examination. Yet for some reason we have been reluctant to see that these group differences in lived experience and perspective might be relevant to the goal of achieving inclusion in important public settings like school and the workplace. Here, where our understanding of group differences in lived experience should inform our efforts to achieve inclusion, there is a disconnect. Why?

We will argue that an irony is at work, that one of the chief causes of this disconnect is less the prejudices of American society than one of its best principles: the desire to remedy group prejudice by not seeing group difference, an essentially progressive norm of the post-Civil Rights era in American life. The core of this idea, given legal force by the Fourteenth Amendment, is that people are equal, that differences between people in race and ethnicity should not affect opportunity in society, that it is desirable to be "colorblind," and that—despite some variation in life circumstance—people can succeed in this society roughly in proportion to their efforts and talents. This can be thought of as the race-neutral or colorblind model of how to form a community of people with diverse backgrounds. It does recognize that the life circumstances of all groups are not actually equal, that our local worlds are still substantially organized by race and ethnicity, and that resources, standing,

and respect are powerfully associated with these factors. But this model rests on the faith that *not seeing* difference is the surest route to reducing these inequalities and improving inclusion. But in recent years, in both public discussion and social science research, there is a growing sense that this model has important limits.¹ In fact, it may make it difficult for our public institutions to see group differences in lived experience and to appreciate their role in inclusion; it may constitute a cultural injunction not to see group difference.

We propose an alternative model of inclusion, one that preserves the American commitment to equality of opportunity but which, in the effort to achieve it, acknowledges group differences in status and lived experience. This model strives to reduce the threat that can be attached to a group's identity in critical public settings like the school and the workplace. We call it *identity safety*. Its goal is to acknowledge differences attached to group identity and to create a setting that is accepting of differences as non-limiting and as a basis of respect. Following Lawrence Thomas we use the term "downward social constitution" to refer to the experience of being in a setting where, based on a given group identity, one is exposed to a potentially limiting and devaluing concert of representations, historical narratives, possible judgments, treatments, interactions, expectations, and affective reactions.² Identity safety refers to the effort to rid a setting of this potential for group-linked "downward constitution." We assume that identity safety is a prerequisite of full inclusion. In this sense, then, people's difference—the identity on which this "downward constitution" is based—must be addressed. Otherwise, our reasoning goes, one's sense of being threatened in the setting will linger, becoming its own barrier to full inclusion.

In this essay we are educing a sociocultural-psychological perspective on assimilation, which expands the scope of analysis provided by the typical ideological-legal perspective. The ideological-legal perspective emphasizes individual fairness and equal treatment. The sociocultural-psychological perspective adds to these considerations the ways in which individual experience, particularly identity, is constituted by the content and

dynamics of one's interpersonal and social environments. Like the ideological-legal view, it is rooted in the protection of individuals from discrimination and in efforts to realize the broad claims of equal liberty for all people.³ The sociocultural-psychological perspective suggests that fair and equal treatment and legal respect require protection of individual identities from those pervasive systems of representations, expectations, and social interactions that—in the important public settings of school, workplace, and community—may systematically limit and undermine individual potential and the opportunity for inclusion and success.

An identity cannot be achieved or maintained by one's self, alone. Identity is a social product and a social process that is interdependent with one's ongoing interactions. It is through engagement with and recognition by others that an individual becomes a person and identities are conferred. Settings that are characterized by broad patterns of ethnic, racial, or cultural "downward social constitution" will interfere with a person's ability to develop an effective identity as a student, as an employee, as a citizen.

COLORBLINDNESS IN THE CLASSROOM: MAINSTREAM AND MINORITY PERSPECTIVES

To illuminate some of the tacit social psychological barriers to inclusion, we offer the following fictional episode between a white teacher and black parents in a parent-teacher conference about the couple's third-grade son, Bennett Wilson. After discussing Bennett's performance, the parents raise concerns with the teacher, Mrs. Dalton, about the overall racial climate of the classroom and the school.

Teacher (Mrs. Dalton): "I appreciate your concerns, Mr. and Mrs. Wilson, but the guiding ethic of this school and of my classroom is one of colorblindness. We believe that all of our children are equal; we strive every day to treat them the same."

Mrs. Wilson: "I accept your good intentions and your personal concern. But we noticed that there are no black children in the top third-grade reading group."

Teacher: "That's true, and I am concerned. But I just don't have any black students who read at the pace of that group. They are a very bright group. To be fair, and to hold to the same standards for all students, the reading group assignments have worked out this way at this point."

Mr. Wilson: "Bennett has another worry. He's afraid he'll be sent to the principal's office, like a lot of the black kids. He also says that the white kids come from a different part of town and that it's harder to be friends with them and do things together."

Teacher: "Even if these things are true, they don't have anything to do with race. I try to treat everyone the same regardless of their race or background. And the principal of this school holds the same value. I hope you don't think this school is racist."

Mr. Wilson: "I don't know. It's just that the black kids seem to be seen as troublemakers. They get disciplined an awful lot and they get harsher punishments. They never get into the gifted and advanced classes. This is hard to ignore."

Teacher: "Please don't be oversensitive. We work really hard not to discriminate on race. We don't see differences based on skin color. We work to make this a place where race does not matter."

Mrs. Wilson: "But Bennett seems to feel like black kids don't get the benefit of the doubt, like race does matter here."

Here are people trying to bridge the American racial divide to form an effective schoolroom community that meets the needs of both the individuals involved and the larger society. The challenge they face is that while they are all talking about the same classroom and school, minority students may experience this setting quite differently than will those in the majority. The pictures on the wall are the same for the two groups, as are the teachers, the students, many of the goals, the rules, the lesson plans, and so forth. But this single school setting can be a very different life context for members of different ethnic groups. Let us examine these perspectives—that of the teacher and that of the minority students—in more detail.

The mainstream perspective of the teacher. The teacher, and those students who share her racial and social class background, are part of a social category of people whose sense of belonging in the classroom is taken for granted. As members of the dominant group in society, their belonging in the central

institutions of society like school is implicit—not likely to rise to the level of a conscious idea. They are relatively free to pursue the manifest goals of the classroom without worry that their group identity will cause them to be devalued there. For the teacher, then, the functions and goals of the classroom can be taken, more or less, at face value.

Moreover, in responding to the social diversity in her classroom, the teacher can draw on the broad American value that stresses the equality of all Americans, and be comforted by the principle that it is important to treat people from all groups the same way. This is a cultural ideal, which in her teaching and maintaining order she tries to achieve. In fact, the mere existence of diversity in her classroom may lead the teacher to adhere to this ideal even more. Thus, because her own experience is not likely to alert her to group differences in the experience of society's settings, and because she is committed to the cultural ideal of treating all people the same way, she may not readily see that Bennett and his family are likely to experience this same classroom in a very different way.

The minority perspective of the Wilson family. For Bennett, and other minority students, the experience of the teacher's classroom might be quite distinct from that of the socially dominant culture. Of course there are many commonalities of experience—shared learning goals, shared future ambitions, and a shared recognition of the importance of education to progress in society. But there are also likely to be differences, differences that have implications for achievement in the setting. For black students, in addition to whatever else it is, the classroom is a site of contact with the American mainstream. Reflecting the long history of their group's experience in American society, as well as the ongoing nature of that experience, these students can feel at risk of devaluation in this setting. For them, this classroom is a setting that contains an element of threat—what we call an identity threat.

Identity threat. For nondominant groups, there is a sense of threat to group identity arising from multiple sources tied to a long history of racial and group discrimination that has shaped the structure of American society. The fact that considerable

discrimination continues, the fact that race and ethnicity organize society in ways that sustain group inequalities, makes it difficult for members of nonimmigrant minority groups to dismiss the threat of devaluation based on group identity. So, too, there is the one-way nature of assimilation in America. Members of a minority group, like Bennett and his parents, must assimilate to the culture, standards, styles of the societal or classroom mainstream, while the mainstream—the teacher and majority students—are not required to take an interest in, or value any of the distinguishing characteristics of, the corresponding features of minority groups. There is also the related factor that the styles, histories, and appearances that are projected as markers of success in mainstream settings are predominantly those of the majority group and culture. Functioning together, these features of the school and classroom offer Bennett and his family conditional terms of inclusion: you can succeed here, but you will have to do so in the face of the possibility of discrimination, a value scheme that disadvantages the characteristics of your group relative to those of the majority group, and a group-based social organization that can insulate you from mainstream opportunities. In short, the Wilsons are likely to come into this school setting with a long-established concern: that it will not provide Bennett with the same opportunity structure it provides to majority students.

Different experiences, different psychologies. Accordingly, this classroom is likely to hold for the Wilsons, and minority students more generally, an experience quite different, and psychological implications quite distinct, from the experience of the majority students and the teacher. It alerts them to their group identity, making it a relevant lens through which to see and judge their experience in the setting. It makes an easy trust of the setting difficult. Having a sense of trust in what schooling has to offer minority students is difficult when there are discrepancies between how the "diversity goals" of the setting are represented and how they seem to be implemented. They cannot reasonably ignore the possibility that because of their group identity—whether it is an identity chosen and affirmed or just ascribed to them by others—they may be devalued in the

setting, treated according to a stereotype, or have their prospects neglected. As a consequence the Wilsons can feel that in this setting it is particularly important to be concerned about their group identity—the identity that places them under threat—asserting its positive features and defending its claims to equal treatment. If Bennett were an American Indian or a Latino, the details of the situation would vary, but many similar concerns about identity safety would also be present.

The need for identity safety. This analysis of the Wilsons' situation has a clear implication: for this classroom to provide truly equal opportunity for both majority and minority students, the teacher and school must model the school experience so that it assures identity safety to minority students like Bennett. The school setting must foster a clear commitment to the principle that no one's group identity will be a source of his or her "downward constitution," at least not in the classroom setting. And because a sense of identity threat is likely to be a default assumption of minority families entering the situation, the school should take a proactive approach toward communicating this commitment.

At first suggestion, some teachers might be disinclined to accept the legitimacy of minority students' sense of identity threat and mistrust. In many cases, they can rightfully feel that they have done little to provoke it. They can note their efforts to implement the American ideal of equal treatment for everybody. And following on this idea, they can believe that the problem of mistrust stems from the minority students' oversensitivity. A genuine racial divide can ensue.

MODELS OF COMMUNITY AS CULTURAL MODELS

As Mrs. Dalton interacts with Bennett, a number of interrelated associations, ideas, images, attitudes, expectations, schemas, and response tendencies tied to his ethnic group identity are likely to be continually accessible to her. These representations are a function of the teacher's participation in a color-stratified world. The question is how these elements will lend meaning to her situation. Invoking the widely held notion that race is a

difference that should not matter, the teacher is attempting to be colorblind. She is striving to be fair and to display her commitment to fairness in her actions with the claim that race is irrelevant in her classroom and in her school. Indeed, this teacher may well be a very accepting person who would score as nonprejudiced on measures of individual racism and prejudice. Yet her commitment to a model of community that says difference does not matter works against the recognition of difference in experience that in many ways defines minority group status. And, however inadvertently, she works against trust and inclusion.

The teacher could, however, use a different model to make sense of the representations and actions that accompany her interactions with Bennett. She could try to organize the situation according to an identity-safety model of community, a model in which the teacher actively resists the tendency to stereotype, to limit, and to "downwardly constitute" Bennett on the basis of his ethnic group identity.

Defining models. Models of community, like the colorblind model, are overarching cultural models that, during a given historical period, organize how Americans form community from peoples of diverse backgrounds. In developing our model-of-community idea, we are building on the concepts of social representations and cultural models.⁴ A cultural model is a collection of shared understandings and practices. According to Bradd Shore, these models do several significant kinds of work: "Models make possible our orientation to the world and to each other. Models allow conceptualization, making it possible for us to remember, to think and even to feel. Models enable communication of these thoughts, memories, and feelings to others."⁵ It is in this sense that we use the term "model," regarding models of community as collectively held, elaborated, communicated, and diffused interpretive frameworks that at one and the same time are forms of knowledge and social practices.⁶ These cultural models are powerful precisely because they are typically taken for granted, transparent. When some life context is organized according to a cultural model, like the specifics of Bennett Wilson's third-grade classroom, it often appears as natural, necessary, and inevitable.

ONE-WAY ASSIMILATION: AMERICA'S
"FUNDAMENTAL" MODEL OF COMMUNITY

In America, the colorblind/one-way assimilation model described succinctly by the teacher to the Wilson family is what might be called the "fundamental" model of community. This is the model that currently seems the best fit with America's philosophical and ideological principles, and is the model enshrined and fostered by the legal system. It is the model that, at least as an ideal, is now proudly extended to all Americans by pedagogy and by the dominant voices in cultural and media messages. We are suggesting, however, that the ideological and legal stance of colorblindness, because it denies the socially constituted differences that are associated with race, differences increasingly well supported by social science research, can work to perpetuate and institutionalize the very racial and ethnic divisions between people that it seeks to overcome.

In the time since the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the cracks in this fundamental model have begun to show. Although the model, with its stress on equality and justice, has become the reigning cultural ideal, few social scientists would argue that it has become, even at the end of the century, a reality. America is still a substantially segregated society.⁷ While the full consequences of this growing diversity remain to be seen, some outcomes are already dramatically apparent. As indicated by socioeconomic status, health, housing, and education, non-immigrant minority groups are not thriving. The poverty rate of Latinos, and of Native and African-Americans, remains critically higher than that of non-Hispanic whites.⁸ The mean net worth of whites, for example, is \$95,667, four times the \$23,818 mean net worth of African-Americans.⁹ Moreover, rates of infant mortality, of living in substandard housing, and of crime and victimization are all much higher among Native and African-Americans and Latinos than among whites.¹⁰

Second, the assumptions of the fundamental model about the nature of difference and inclusion have come under considerable contest. Alternative models of community that are not colorblind and not assimilationist—several forms of multiculturalism, and even separatism—have sprung to the fore-

ground of public discourse. In some quarters, certainly universities, public schools, and even workplaces, "models wars" have ensued. At the center of these "wars" lie questions about how to understand group difference while developing a community that, as Deborah Prentice and Dale Miller put it, can "... recognize and appreciate ethnic and cultural differences without reifying divisive group boundaries."¹⁰

History and terms of the model. As it emerged in the 1950s, and particularly in the 1954 *Brown v. Board* desegregation decision of the Supreme Court, the great advantage of the one-way assimilation/colorblind model was that it sought to overcome segregation and the separate-but-equal model that had dominated American race relations from the beginning of the century. It was not a new model. Assimilation was always the official model of inclusion in the case of America's European immigrant groups. But in the 1950s, and again bolstered by the 1964 Civil Rights Act, it was extended to include African-Americans and other disenfranchised groups, thus becoming, at least as a governing ideal, America's fundamental model of community.

In the colorblind model, group differences are seen to be largely superficial, certainly not substantial enough to warrant a claim on public policy or social organization. This was, after all, a model in counterpoint to the separate-but-equal model that had reified racial difference to the point of apartheid. And this model, at least at the official level, offers straightforward terms of inclusion: if individuals assimilate to the cultural mainstream, they will be included in the American community regardless of color and will be moved along; if individuals do not assimilate, inclusion will be impossible. In this bargain, incorporation into American society is conceptualized, for the most part, as a one-way process. Currently within the United States, most educational and workplace settings are engaging and promoting this one-way assimilation/colorblind model of community. Certainly, differences are to be observed among people; yet these differences, the assumption holds, are the result of other factors (e.g., talent, merit), not race or ethnicity. To acknowledge differences among people that may be associated

with their group identity is understood to be the same as stereotyping or homogenizing them; it denies them their individuality. At the same time there is a persistent concern with the need to appreciate and understand group difference.

A pervasive and contradictory view. The broad incorporation of the colorblind model of community was recently documented in a study of current American thought about difference and diversity. Victoria Plaut and Hazel Markus sampled the cultural environment, conducting what Thurstone referred to some seventy years ago as a "trawl of public opinion."¹² They conducted focus groups, surveys, and content analyses of media, and found that the most frequently expressed response to differences and diversity in schools and workplaces was that differences among people are superficial and mostly irrelevant.

When probed, this common understanding reveals itself to be complex and self-contradictory. It holds that ethnic and racial variety is pleasing and important, both to the various groups themselves and to society as a whole—so important, in fact, that it can and should be celebrated. This idea, however, is usually coupled with the notion that despite the important diversity to be found in ethnic foods, costumes, customs, and festivals, in the most important respects "people are really all the same." The view is that the differences typically coded by race and ethnicity, although sometimes potentially significant and worthy of appreciation, do not and should not affect how society functions.

The paradoxical pairing of the idea that society should celebrate difference with the idea that this difference doesn't really matter is not accidental. This perspective on difference is an all-American effort to reconcile diversity with equality. As Richard Shweder has observed, the reasoning is that since people are equal, they must be similar.¹³ Any diversity claimed is just a matter of superficial difference that can—and, in fact, should—be ignored. The notion that "at the end of the day, people are people" is a pleasant and comforting thought and, when supported by general propositions like "everyone likes to be treated with respect," is hard to resist.

Built into the foundation of the one-way assimilation/colorblind model is a thoroughly modern assumption, one that is still

at the core of many perspectives on race, ethnicity, and culture in the social sciences. This assumption holds that race, ethnicity, and culture are relatively superficial features of personhood that are overlaid on the "basic" person, and that it is possible to ignore them in the quest for a general and universal personhood. As avowed by one of Plaut and Markus's respondents, a white manager of a very large diverse group of employees in a bank, "I see people for who they really are. When you shed the superficial stuff like color, you can get at the real person."¹⁴

Plaut and Markus also examined the content of current magazine advertising both as a way of charting the prevailing cultural ideas about differences and diversity and as an indication of whether any change in the conceptual universe is underway.¹⁵ In an analysis of multiple issues of twenty-five popular magazines they found that companies represent their intention to be inclusive by using two common themes: appreciating difference (e.g., "Actually, the good news is great minds don't think alike"—an ad for Goldman Sachs) and being colorblind ("the color of your skin is less important than the color of your imagination. . . . And afterwards, you are no longer quite yourself; you are large, in the knowledge that the only race that really matters is the human one"—an ad for Merrill Lynch). Similarly, in surveys of student opinion conducted on several campuses, Plaut and Markus found a pronounced tension in how to think about diversity—"difference is good but since it separates people, it must be relatively unimportant."¹⁶ They noted, however, some significant differences between majority and minority attitudes and representations of difference and diversity—differences that parallel the divide between the teacher's contention that race doesn't matter and the Wilsons' worry that it actually does. White students, for example, endorsed statements like the following significantly more strongly than did minority students:

- 1) People are similar to me;
- 2) Too much diversity is harmful so we should emphasize the ways we are similar; and
- 3) People from minority groups must assimilate.

In contrast, minority undergraduate students endorsed statements like the following significantly more strongly than did white students:

- 1) I feel comfortable around others from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds;
- 2) It's important to have multiple perspectives on campus; and
- 3) To incorporate diverse perspectives, the university should change.

These survey findings reflect two main underlying tensions between white and minority responses, not unlike the tension between the Wilsons and their son's teacher. First, white students tend to focus relatively more on similarity and sameness, whereas minority students see differences between cultural and ethnic groups. Second, while white students support a one-way assimilation/colorblind model of diversity, minority students seem to support a mutual-accommodation model of diversity. These attitude differences appear to reflect the different perspectives and experiences of students who, because of their ethnic group identification, occupy a majority or a minority position in society. Overall, these studies of how Americans are thinking about difference are consistent with the contention that current understandings about how to create and maintain diverse communities seem to lag far behind the fact of American diversity.

COLORBLINDNESS FROM A SOCIOCULTURAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In a country ideologically committed to the ideal of equality, the notion that powerful inequalities shape life experiences differentially has considerable difficulty talking hold. The idea that there are differences in individual behavior associated with status and power is rarely noted.¹⁷ In contrast to the legal-ideological perspective on difference, a psychological perspective that assumes a sociocultural and historical framework begins with the assumption that lives are socially and culturally

patterned. While the legal-ideological perspective begins with the idea that people are separate and autonomous individuals and that relations with others are subsequently forged, the sociocultural begins with the idea that human existence is inherently relational. Accordingly, people will necessarily engage the world in culture-specific ways that reflect their positioning within it; no one can live outside the context of others. The small, everyday interactions like those between the teacher and the Wilson family reflect their participants' positioning in the social world and their interpretations of it, and they simultaneously maintain and through their actions foster these culture-specific local realities. People cannot by the very nature of social life be "free" of, or apart from, each other's concerns, understandings, or actions. So it matters what these understandings and actions are.

The social nature of existence. The idea of the social nature of the individual is a hallmark of the social sciences and has been central in its analysis of behavior. The social psychologist George Herbert Mead theorized that attending to and incorporating the views of others is an ongoing, moment-by-moment process that lies at the heart of thinking itself: "... it cannot be said that the individuals come first and the community later, for the individuals arise in the very process itself—there has to be a social process going on in order that there may be individuals."¹⁸ Within anthropology, the same idea has been affirmed by Clifford Geertz in an often quoted passage: "Becoming human is becoming individual, and one becomes individual under the guidance of cultural patterns and historically created systems of meanings in terms of which we give form, order, point, and direction to our lives."¹⁹ More recently, the philosopher Charles Taylor has again argued for the socially patterned nature of individuality and draws particular attention to the role of social hierarchy in this experience. He writes, "My self-definition is understood as an answer to the question Who I am. And this question finds its original sense in the interchange of speakers. I define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social status and functions."²⁰

One of the main frameworks for examining how location in social space creates and maintains social experience is that of mutual constitution.²¹ The first tenet of this framework suggests that psychological tendencies are shaped in the process of engaging with others and with the meanings and practices of the communities in which one participates. The second is that these psychological tendencies and individual actions foster and maintain, but can sometimes change, these particular structural realities. For example, to the extent that Bennett experiences being left out or being picked on, he may withdraw and not raise his hand to read. The teacher may then receive “behavioral confirmation” of her view that Bennett does not read well enough or show enough motivation to be in the top group.²² But if the teacher were to try to encourage Bennett, despite his lack of “appropriate” or “enthusiastic” behavior, she might begin to afford a different social and psychological experience for Bennett, one in which he could feel valued and included. This effort to cross a structural divide could change Bennett’s interpretation of what the teacher thinks about him and eventually provide a different psychological experience for Bennett, one in which he might identify with and succeed in school.

The ways in which social locations, situations, and practices regulate, express, and transform the human psyche and shape psychological experience are the subject matter of social and cultural psychology. Research in these areas is progressively revealing that despite the ideology of individualism and the manifold political and legal practices that privilege the individual, people are not just autonomous individuals solely under their own production and orchestration. They are also centers of dynamic interpersonal relationships, and these relationships are significant in determining who they are, who they try to be, and how they behave. Although popular discourse and research in the social sciences and humanities often cast identity as an individual choice, increasingly it is evident that identity is indeed a group project.²³ Identity depends to some large degree on how others see and identify you. We are, as Mead recognized, caught in, and in fact made possible and held together by, each other’s nets of meanings, interpretations and actions.²⁴ If the nets involve a preponderance of representations, beliefs,

expectations, and actions relevant to one’s ethnic group that are negative, marginalizing, essentializing, or limiting, they will be impossible to ignore or reject.

Ironically, to the extent that these nets are positive and supportive and foster culturally valued ability, skill, and potential, as they do for many people in majority groups, they are likely to be unnoticed. As a result, learning, growth, and advancement are most often experienced as the result of individual effort. The ways in which individual behavior and development are scaffolded by a vast network of positive representations and supportive interpersonal relationships is usually invisible.

The social nature of learning. In the exchange between the Wilson family and the teacher, the Wilsons know that the group they are most likely to be identified with stands in a subordinate relationship to the teacher’s group. Regardless of the teacher’s claims, what the Wilson family knows is that her views, understandings, and expectations cannot be easily separated from those that are broadly communicated and institutionalized within society toward their ethnic group, despite her intentions toward fairness and colorblindness. This is not a failing of the teacher to reason independently or to free herself from the shackles of custom and social pressure. Rather, it is a straightforward reflection of the fact that thoughts, feelings, and actions are given structure and form by those meanings, schemas, scripts, and practices that are continuously available and widely distributed in the community at large. Thought and action outside these interpretive frameworks requires the development and dissemination of alternative systems of meanings and practices with respect to “downwardly constituted” ethnic groups.

Thus, Bennett, and other students like him, find themselves in school settings where they are being constituted by relationships, classroom practices, and learning opportunities that do not reflect them as valued members of the class. The experience of being a young student in this situation—in which he is being “downwardly constituted” by those who are entrusted with his development as a person and a student—has a powerful influence on Bennett’s ability to identify with and freely approach the task of learning. He is in the process described by Mead as

“attending to and incorporating the views of others.” When these views are limiting, they can be a substantial barrier to learning.

Specific dramatic evidence for the powerful consequences of the views of others on individual performance is rapidly accumulating and has been recently reviewed in a number of places.²⁵ In one example, Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson designed a series of experiments to test whether the stereotype threat that black students might experience when taking a difficult standardized test could significantly depress their performance on the test.²⁶ They asked highly qualified black and white college students at an elite university to take a test made up of items from the advanced Graduate Record Examination in literature. Most of the students were college sophomores, which meant the test was challenging for their abilities; it was this feature that Steele and Aronson reasoned would make the testing situation a different experience for the black participants and for the white participants. For black students, difficulty with the test could make the stereotype of their group relevant to the interpretation of their performance. They know they are especially likely to be seen as having limited ability because of the prevailing representation of their ethnic group. Groups not stereotyped in this way will not experience this extra intimidation. The worry on the part of African-American students is that their performance might cause them to be seen stereotypically, or might inadvertently confirm the stereotype that they do not belong in the walks of life, in the jobs and careers, in which they are heavily invested.

In a series of studies, Steele and Aronson found that when the threat of being stereotyped as less intellectually able than white students was present—that is, when the test was represented as “diagnostic” of ability, so that frustration with it could be taken as confirming the racial stereotype—black students did much worse than white students even when skill differences between the two groups were controlled. But when the threat of being stereotyped was removed by representing the test as a lab measure of problem solving that was not diagnostic of individual differences in ability, black students performed just as well as qualified white students—on the same test. Simply

giving the students the instruction before the test that it was not a measure of their general intellectual ability removed the possibility of invoking the stereotype of lower intellectual ability for the black students. These studies demonstrate that something other than ability is involved in producing gaps in performance. Clearly, small changes in the environment can change the meaning of the situation in ways that benefit learning and achievement.

CULTURAL CHANGE IN THE CLASSROOM: FROM COLORBLINDNESS TO IDENTITY SAFETY

The perspective of social constitution suggests that cultural change involves the specific actions and interpretations of individuals who create and maintain, but who also can modify, sociocultural realities. Accordingly, to improve intergroup relations and individual outcomes, it should be possible within a given niche, say a school, to change some subset of the prevailing meanings and practices and thereby change the prevailing model of community to improve intergroup relations and individual outcomes. The key is to recognize that race and ethnicity are undeniable social realities that are constitutive of the person and that create differences among people. These differences are by no means essential or immutable; they change as the nature of the social situation changes. They matter, however, because people live their lives in these terms and require recognition of them, and because people respond to one another through the meanings associated with race and ethnicity. Through a concerted action in a given niche, it is possible to move from a colorblind model of community to an identity-safety model of community; to move away from practices of one-way assimilation and toward practices of accommodation that acknowledge the real differences in experience historically imposed by low status and marginality on the nonimmigrant minorities and, increasingly, on new immigrants in American society.²⁷

To bridge this divide between mainstream experiences and minority-group experiences and to more closely approach the ideal of equal opportunity, we argue that school and classroom settings should not endeavor to be colorblind. Instead, they

should strive for a climate in which group difference—the difference in the local worlds experienced by minority and non-minority students in the setting—is commonly recognized by all in the setting and used in achieving a respectful understanding and valuing of all students. Practices that do this convey to minority students that their group identity will be not be used to “downwardly constitute” them—see them as problematic members of the setting—but will instead be used to incorporate them and their perspectives into the setting and to foster their achievement there. For the most part, these interventions will be sensitive to group identity and its consequences—but will also attend to the details of individual social circumstances.

At this point, one might ask: “Why not just affirm the minority students’ talents and their valued membership in the class without recognizing their group identity?” Our answer is that this might work well in the short run, on single occasions. But over time, when minority students’ group identity is not addressed in the midst of a larger society that makes a great deal of meaning from it, these students may doubt whether they are really safe from identity threat. They may wonder at what point their belonging to their group might make them vulnerable to devaluation.

There are other strategies for dealing with diversity in the classroom that, at first glance, would seem to help create identity safety, but, in fact, work against this goal. Were the teacher in our example to read our arguments she might be tempted to “celebrate diversity” by, for example, displaying in her classroom positive particulars of minority culture, such as pictures of minority heroes, festivals, artwork, and the like. Her intentions here would be good, but the effectiveness of this strategy has everything to do with implementation. Unless these particulars are represented as being of central value for all students, and unless these “celebrative displays” are embedded in a general classroom climate in which the intellectual potential of minority students is taken seriously, such “celebrations” may be mistrusted by minority students and simply ignored by majority students. In fact, if these “celebrative displays” are not coupled with other practices that assure identity safety—for example, challenging work designed to move students to

high levels of achievement—they may backfire, deepening minority students’ sense of identity threat and leading majority students to underappreciate the value of the artistic, political, and intellectual contributions made by those from the minority culture.

Another important challenge to forming community from diversity in the classroom is the question of how to handle the need for skill remediation. Our teacher, for example, believed that she had no minority students who could read at the level of the top reading group. In any third-grade class there will be variation in children’s levels of reading skills, especially at the beginning of the school year. In some communities there will be even greater variation in skills, and this variation may be linked to students’ race or social status. In these communities, minority students may enter the classroom with weaker skills than the majority students, reflecting a variety of prior educational inequities.

What should our third-grade teacher do? Perhaps the first thing to do is to examine this diagnosis very carefully. It fits so closely with prevailing stereotypes that one might constructively hold it under enough suspicion to reexamine it carefully. For example, before making an educational decision like placing students in stratified reading groups, it would be important for the teacher to use multiple sources of assessment to determine her students’ current level of achievement in reading. Still, the teacher may find differences in achievement between the black and white students. Then what?

The guiding principle is that the effort to remediate skills in the setting must not suggest, even indirectly, that the distribution of skills among the groups somehow reflects a limiting group difference. This is the risk of group remediation strategies that allow a confounding of group identity with skill remediation, especially for groups whose abilities are already negatively stereotyped in the larger society. Ability tracking in elementary and secondary schools often sees minority students being disproportionately placed in lower tracks, tracks presumably suited to more limited abilities. Some minority programs at the college level also have the feature of targeting remediation efforts almost exclusively at the minority student population.

Such practices, it is quite likely, make the negative group stereotype highly salient in the broader school setting, greatly exacerbating the sense of identity and stereotype threat minority students experience.

Practices that promote identity safety. To promote identity safety, the school and our teacher must take a group difference that is often negatively represented in the larger society and model it in the local world of the school and classroom as a non-limiting difference that is a basis for respecting a person—rather than a basis for “downwardly constituting” a person as less smart, less deserving, less culturally appropriate, and less valuable to the school community. This idea can be best illustrated, perhaps, by describing some practices that our teacher might have used in her classroom. Had these practices been in place, they might have preempted the Wilsons’ concerns.

In the context of showing that she recognizes the positive features of minority students’ group identity (by, for example, representing it in classroom displays, books that are read, and music that is studied, and in other curriculum areas) the teacher can express through her actions and words the highest expectations for *all* students’ learning—expressly for minority students. She can focus on the idea that every student comes to school to learn—and that with work, regardless of their current level of skills and understanding, all students can steadily progress to the highest levels. This practice seeds the local environment with the idea that minority-group identity is no barrier to learning. Challenging work, coupled with access to academic help, promotes learning in students from any social group. This challenging work conveys the idea that they are able, and, with work and practice, will catch up. The opportunity to do hard work in the context of high expectations for success may also go a long way toward achieving a sense of identity safety among minority students.

The teacher can “mainstream” positive features of minority-group culture and identity. That is, in presenting this material—in classroom displays, curriculum materials, and learning tasks—she can stress its value to all students, not just to those of the relevant minority group. Conveying the general value of the many cultures represented in the classroom helps to construct

the group identity of the minority students in this local environment in positive terms that diminish their sense of identity threat.

The teacher can avoid groupings that confound group identity with skill levels. Having advanced reading groups with no minority students in them is certainly not a good idea from the standpoint of minority student identity safety, and it is not the only way to foster progress among the good readers. But if such a grouping does seem unavoidable, efforts should be made to ensure that the groupings are only temporary. Countervailing groupings should be created in the classroom around other intellectual activities that do not confound minority status with academic skills. When students work in groups cooperatively on challenging tasks, they will be exposed to various perspectives and intellectual contributions. By focusing on cooperative learning instead of competition, students will develop their trust and respect of one another.

Finally, respect and caring for each of the students should be evident in every interaction between the teacher and students. Of course, teachers should help students treat one another with respect and fairness. For example, when students are in conflict, teachers can approach the situation as a learning opportunity. They can refrain from blaming, forgo acting as judge and jury, and avoid inadvertently targeting minority students for punishment. Instead, in her respectful and caring relationship with each student, the teacher can convey the worth of all students and help them learn to get along.

CONCLUSION

We have argued here that the failure to include millions of nonimmigrant minorities successfully in the mainstream of society stems in some large part from a pervasive “downward social constitution” of these groups by the majority culture, not from individual racism. This tacit and very often unintended set of processes results in many African-Americans, American Indians, and Latinos being persistently devalued and having their prospects and opportunities limited or neglected. This general devaluation and continuing threat to identity occurs at both the

collective level (in terms of public representations and institutionalized policies and practices) and at the individual level (in terms of attitudes, expectations, relationships, and actions). The ideological-legal stance of colorblindness functions as a barrier to assimilation and integration because it argues for ignoring differences in race and ethnicity, working against the recognition of these powerful societal dynamics and the real differences in psychological experience such dynamics afford.

Accordingly, we argue that the colorblind model broadly affirmed in American society might be replaced in many contexts with an identity-safety model. The identity-safety model of community acknowledges the "downward social constitution" produced by minority status and promotes the development of practices that work to break this cycle. An identity-safety model recognizes that others' views and evaluations of an individual are powerful and world-shaping, even if ignored or contested by the individual. Central to a short-circuiting of "downward social constitution" are practices that promote inclusion and a sense that one's group identity will not be a source of devaluation. This approach to assimilation requires mutual accommodation by the mainstream and minority cultures. Proactive efforts to work against exclusion are critical to ensure a sense of belonging and trust among all members of society. So, for example, in her relationship with Bennett, Mrs. Dalton is responsible for the ways in which her views of him shape Bennett's identity. More broadly, we have suggested that the processes that reflect and drive disparities between people might be better understood, predicted, and managed by a focus on the cultural models of community that drive them rather than by a focus on individual attitudes, prejudices, and actions.

Many essays in this issue ask, in essence: how free should the free exercise of culture be? How tolerant must we be of the cultural practices of others that are unfamiliar or morally troubling? Assuming that an effective democratic society must be an inclusive one that cannot be separated and balkanized, toleration for others involves much more than just noninterference. It involves active efforts to promote the identity safety of other people, efforts to ensure that group-linked representations, expectations, and reactions are not limiting, devaluing,

and alienating. To this end, Americans must become sufficiently practiced in valuing and respecting each other to achieve the level of inclusion and interdependence that is essential to maintain a stable society in a changing world.

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ENDNOTES

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