

**Changes in White female college students' CBRI over four years: The influence of  
compositional diversity and campus climate**

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### **Abstract**

This four-year longitudinal study will examine how campus climate and compositional diversity affect the color-blind racial ideology (CBRI) of White female college-students at two public Southern universities. Research questions include: 1) Does the institutionally espoused value of racial diversity (campus climate) impact White students' CBRI over their time attending the university? 2) Does increased compositional diversity impact White students' CBRI over the course of their time attending the university? The sample will be selected using a non-probability convenience sample to ensure the largest possible sample size. Data will be collected at three points over a four-year period (during the first semester, the end of the fourth semester, and the eighth semester). At each data collection point participants will respond to a digital survey that includes both demographic information and the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS). Results will be analyzed for each individual and increases or decreases in score over time will be reported. Trends for each university will be compared using a multiple regression analysis. I hypothesize that students who attend a campus with greater compositional diversity and a cultural focus on diversity will experience a greater decrease in CBRI over four years.

## **Changes in White female college students' CBRI over four years: The influence of compositional diversity and campus climate**

Racism in America has not always looked the way it does today. Before the laws and protections that were born from the civil rights movement the dominant form of racism was overt. When this overt racism was no longer tolerated legally or by society at large racism had to adapt in order to survive; it became much more subtle. The form of racism we see in America today has been labeled *color-blind racism* or *color-blind racial ideology* (CBRI) by scholars because Whites largely use the idea of color-blindness to defend the racial status quo (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). This racial ideology obscures the function of contemporary Whiteness and upholds a system that continually elevates Whites while denigrating people of color. It does this by blaming racial minorities for their marginalization and continually denying the existence of systemic racism (Cabrera et al., 2016). Unfortunately, research has shown that simply providing White people with facts about race and expecting them to change their long-standing racial ideologies is ineffective (Cabrera et al., 2016).

### **Why College?**

It is widely recognized that cross-racial relationships are one of the determining factors of racial ideology (Bowman & Park, 2015). For many students, college is one of the first periods of prolonged exposure to people from other groups, including racial groups; they have not had the opportunity to make cross-racial relationships to this point. Doane and Bonilla-Silva (2003) examined a group of White university students and found that their pre-college experience with different groups was characterized by a lack of exposure, racism (both subtle and overt), a lack of successful role models who are people of color, and racial tokenism. They argue that these experiences significantly affect white students' social identity. A key facet of this social identity

is the way that White students think about and perceive racial “Others.” These typical pre-college experiences are an excellent example of how color-blind racial ideology is reified today.

### **Campus Climate**

The majority of universities in the United States are predominantly white institutions (PWIs), but not all PWIs are created equal in terms of racial make-up or campus climate/culture. Though more students of color are enrolling in PWIs in the past few decades, this change has not necessarily been reflected in the institution’s racial culture, climate, or ecology (Cabrera et al., 2016). It is important to note that the terms *campus climate* and *campus culture* are not interchangeable. Though both are important concepts in examining the impact of the university, I am interested here in *campus climate*. Broadly stated, campus climate is “the current perceptions, attitudes, and expectations that define the institution and its members” (Bauer, 1998, p. 2). Hurtado et al. offer a four-dimensional framework of *campus climate* that is specific to race and includes “(1) the historical context of inclusion or exclusion of colleges, (2) compositional diversity, (3) psychological dimension, (4) a behavioral component” (Cabrera et al., 2016, p. 55). None of these dimensions act on their own; of particular interest is the mutually reinforcing relationship between compositional diversity, the behavioral, and psychological dimensions of the campus racial climate (Cabrera et al., 2016).

### **Research Questions**

The study presented here is focused on the ways in which color-blind discourse can be challenged through an examination of the CBRI of White female undergraduate students at two demographically different PWIs with significantly different campus racial climates (as seen in the institutionally purported value in diversity). Some preliminary research questions include: Does the institutionally espoused value of racial diversity (campus climate) impact White

students' racial ideology over their time attending the university? Does increased compositional diversity in the student body impact White students' racial ideology over the course of their time attending the university?

## **Literature Review**

### **Color-blind Racial Ideology (CBRI)**

Since the 1960s the dominant racial ideology of the United States has shifted. Bonilla-Silva (2003) argued that “Instead of relying on an in-your-face set of beliefs, the new ideology is as indirect, slippery, and apparently non-racial as the new ways of maintaining racial privilege” (p. 68). He labeled this new racial ideology *color blind racism* and argued that “it is centrally anchored in the abstract extension of egalitarian values to racial minorities and the notion that racial minorities are culturally rather than biologically deficient” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, p. 68).

CBRI is both what is being measured in this study and the theoretical frame from which to eventually analyze the data. In an attempt to fully breakdown and understand what CBRI is, this section will be broken down into four subsections: *The Origins of CBRI*, *The Framework of CBRI*, *What CBRI Accomplishes*, and *The Impact of CBRI*.

#### ***The Origins of CBRI***

CBRI has become the dominant racial ideology in the US since the civil rights movement. Rather than express racial views openly as they did during the Jim Crow period, Whites in America now express their racial views in a more “sanitized” way (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). This shift was caused both by legal changes that emerged from the civil rights movement and a necessity for White supremacy to adapt to a changing socio-political climate in order to remain intact. Today, CBRI is not simply an individual belief, but something enshrined in our legal system; the Supreme Court has promoted a Constitutional basis for color-blindness

which provides historical context and structural support for individual CBRI (Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

### ***The Framework of CBRI***

Color-blindness can be understood in terms of relatively simple beliefs held by individuals, more complicated institutional structures, and as a racial ideology. On the individual level, people who believe in color-blindness generally believe that we live in a post-racial society where “racism” is not really the problems, but rather a small number of individual “racists” (Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Since race is no longer viewed as a structural phenomenon, people who claim color-blindness believe that race does not play a significant role in determining life outcomes; instead, success or failure is a direct result of work ethic and pulling yourself up by the bootstraps. Color-blind beliefs are deeply related to the American myth of meritocracy which is enshrined in our legal system. The logic of CBRI is inherently circular; there is no need to take race into account when discussing disparities in outcomes between racial groups because race no longer shapes life in a post-racial world (Gallagher, 2003). While the name *color-blindness* might lead us to conclude that race is not seen on an individual or institutional level, it is important to remember that CBRI does not “ignore race; it acknowledges race while disregarding racial hierarchy” (Gallagher, 2003, p. 25).

### ***What CBRI Accomplishes***

While an individually professed belief in color-blindness may appear democratic or even egalitarian, CBRI actually obscures the reality of White privilege while negating the importance of race-based social programs by constructing an image of a racially harmonious society (Gallagher, 2003). According to Bonilla-Silva (2003), there are five main outcomes of CBRI. First, CBRI provides a logic that allows White people to ignore racial inequity. Second, it

provides what Bonilla-Silva terms “racial etiquette” for racial actors which influences decisions about what constitutes “Other” and “same.” Third, CBRI constitutes the racial subject in a way that is unique to this paradigm. Fourth, it is systemic and therefore affects all social actors. Fifth, and finally, CBRI normalizes inequality by universalizing the interests of the dominant race (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Due to its universal and inherently inequitable nature in our current racial frame, it is important to examine the ways in which CBRI may be combatted formally and informally.

### ***The Impact of Color-Blind Racial Ideology***

According to Bonilla-Silva, “The major stylistic elements of colour blind racism are: (1) *avoidance of racist terminology*, (2) *semantic moves to avoid being labelled as racist (racetalk)*, (3) *diminutives*, (4) *projection*, and (5) *rhetorical incoherence*” (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, pp. 70-71).

In 2003, Ditomaso, Parks-Yancy, and Post conducted a study that examined just how Whites use color-blindness, equal opportunity, and individualism to maintain White privilege. In this qualitative examination of 246 Whites from three states the researchers found that the subjects consistently constructed an image of themselves as “supportive of civil rights” (generally in the form of color-blindness) which allowed them to avoid the conflict that a recognition of racial inequity might engender.

In their 2004 study, Spanierman and Heppner took this ideological issue one step further to examine how CBRI and, more generally, what they call “modern racism” impacts Whites who profess this ideology. They found that CBRI has negative effects not only on minorities and those explicitly perpetrating racism, but all people in a racist society.

In a more concrete terms, it has been shown that CBRI is linked with increased fear of racial minorities (Neville et al., 2014; Spanierman & Heppner, 2004), greater modern racism

(Awad et al., 2005), and negative cognitive outcomes for both ethnic minorities and White students (Apfelbaum et al., 2010; Holoien & Shelton, 2012). As previously mentioned, the pervasiveness of CBRI requires a deep-dive into the various ways these beliefs can be disrupted.

According to a 2002 study from the cognitive developmental perspective,

traditional-age college students are at a developmental stage in which they are forming their identities and values, so they are particularly open to the growth associated with diversity experiences. Because students' K-12 schools and neighborhoods are often racially homogenous, most students have had relatively few interracial interactions before entering college, and college provides a (relatively) greater opportunity for students to interact across race (Bowman & Park, 2015, p. 604).

Thus, it seems clear that college presents a unique opportunity to challenge CBRI. What is being done, can be done, and is effective in decreasing CBRI throughout college?

### **Racial Ideology in Higher Education**

Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, now frequently referred to as *contact theory* or *intergroup contact theory* has significant implications for the proposed study. Allport hypothesized that "meaningful interracial interactions can increase exposure to diverse perspectives and decrease racial and ethnic prejudice" (Neville et al., 2014, p. 3). Empirical evidence does exist to support this theory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000, 2006), however more recent research comparing the influence of interracial interaction and interracial friendship has suggested that "weak ties" among people (specifically college students) from different racial backgrounds may be even more impactful than close interracial friendships (Bowman & Park, 2015). Considering contact theory and the potential impact of even "weak ties" between



students, how can we be sure that as compositional diversity increases on campus students actually begin to interact across race at a higher rate?

This was a particularly important question in the late 1990s and early 2000s when looking at the perceived prevalence of “racial balkanization.” Racial balkanization refers to the phenomenon of voluntary racial segregation in which little interaction occurs between students from different racial groups; in the context of affirmative action this referenced specific experiences on college campuses. Antonio (2001) studied UCLA undergraduate students to assess both actual prevalence and perceived prevalence of racial balkanization and the effect of racially diverse friendship groups on cultural awareness and racial understanding. He found that balkanization was perceived by students as more prevalent than it was, and that students who had racially diverse friendship groups were more likely to engage in the types of interactions with students beyond that circle that contribute to greater cultural awareness and understanding.

Similarly, Chang’s (2002) thesis examined the impact of a racially diverse student body on students’ educational experiences and quality. Through Chang’s examination of more than 11,600 students at over 300 universities in the US, Chang found that greater compositional racial diversity in the student population leads to greater frequency of socialization across race for White students. This greater frequency of socialization also resulted in improved student outcomes across a variety of indicators.

Spanierman et al. (2008) and Engberg & Mayhew (2007) both examined the connection between diversity experiences, student outcomes, and racial ideology. Rather than simply look at compositional racial diversity as Antonio (2001) and Chang (2002) did, however, both studies involved a specific educational intervention focused on ideology. For Engberg & Mayhew this intervention was first-year success courses while for Spanierman et al. interventions included

both formal and informal diversity experiences. Engberg & Mayhew (2007) found that students who took the first-year success courses scored higher than their counterparts on all student outcome indicators. Spanierman et al. (2008) found that participation in their formal and informal diversity experiences increased students “universal diverse orientation” and decreased color-blind racial ideology.

Neville et al. (2014) elaborated further. They examined the ways in which gender, diversity attitudes, and college diversity experiences predicted patterns of CBRI change. Through this four-year longitudinal study of over 800 undergraduate students, they found that college diversity experiences did in fact predict change in CBRI over time. White students who completed a greater number of diversity experiences and had a greater number of close Black friends showed a greater decrease in CBRI over their four years.

### **The Purpose of the Present Investigation**

The above research shows several key findings. First, CBRI harmed not only racial minorities, but every person in a racist society (Spanierman & Heppner, 2004). Second, compositional diversity did in fact lead to higher frequency of interaction across race (Antonio, 2001; Chang, 1996). Finally, direct educational intervention consistently resulted in lowered CBRI and greater levels of openness (Engberg & Mayhew, 2007; Neville et al., 2014; Spanierman et al., 2008). What these studies do not address, however, is how/if frequency of interaction across race is related to CBRI and how campus culture can contribute to change in racial ideology. Given these past findings, it is clear that decreasing CBRI on college campuses is an important goal and that effective formal strategies exist to combat CBRI. The purpose of this study is to build on these conclusions by examining if and how *informal* conditions (campus climate and compositional diversity) impact CBRI over four years in White female students. I

hypothesize that there will be a negative correlation between compositional diversity on campus and change in CBRI. Additionally, I hypothesize that students who attend a campus with a cultural focus on diversity will be more likely to experience greater change in CBRI over four years.

## **Method**

### **Population and Sample**

The target population for this study is White, female college students attending a four-year public university in the South. The sample will be drawn from two universities that differ significantly in both compositional diversity and campus climate. The sample will be selected using a non-probability convenience sample in order to ensure the largest possible sample size while taking into account participant attrition over the course of this four-year longitudinal study. The target sample size will be 600 participants at each university (1200 total).

### ***School Selection***

The two schools that will be sampled in this study were chosen for several reasons. First, both schools are public, 4-year universities. Second, both schools are located in Virginia, only a few hours apart. These schools both draw the majority of their students from in-state Virginia residents, though all states and many countries are also represented in the student body. Third, the overall student population size is relatively similar. Table 1 summarizes overall enrollment data from both schools.

**Table 1***Enrollment Data, Fall 2019*

	VCU	Virginia Tech
Total student population	29,757	36,383
Undergraduate students	22,837	29,300
Graduate students	6,920	7,083
Full-time students	24,782	33,617

*Note.* Data pulled from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

Given the large number of similarities between the schools, the differences are all the more evident. The campus climates differ significantly. VCU is located in a city environment while Virginia Tech is a traditional campus. VCU heavily markets “diversity” while Virginia Tech focuses on “home” and “community.” Additionally, the demographic breakdown (compositional diversity) of the two schools differs significantly. US News & World Report gives VCU a diversity index of 0.71 and Virginia Tech an index of 0.46 (the closer the score is to 1 the more “diverse” the school). Table 2 summarizes compositional diversity data.

**Table 2***Racial Breakdown, % of Student Population, Fall 2019*

	VCU	Virginia Tech
White	46%	61%
Black	17%	4%
Hispanic/Latino	9%	6%
Asian	13%	9%
Two or More Races	6%	4%
Unknown	4%	3%
Nonresident Alien	4%	11%

*Note.* Data pulled from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

These two schools were specifically selected in an attempt to isolate the effect of compositional diversity and campus climate on CBRI while keeping other campus characteristics as similar as possible.

## **Variables Under Investigation**

### ***Independent Variables***

This study will involve three independent variables: compositional diversity, campus climate, and time. Compositional diversity can be defined as “the numerical and proportional representation of different groups of people within the campus environment”; for the purposes of this study, those “different groups of people” refer specifically to racial/ethnic groups (Milem et al., 2005). Here, campus climate refers to the purported value the institution places on “diversity.” This “value” can be seen in marketing materials, mission and vision statements, and diversity indices provided by third party sources such as US News & World Report.

### ***Dependent Variable***

The dependent variable in this study will be color-blind racial ideology (CBRI). Simply put, CBRI refers to the belief that race should not and does not matter (Neville et al., 2000). The instrument used to measure CBRI in this study will be the Color Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS).

### ***Potential Extraneous Variables***

To reiterate, the purpose of this study will be to examine the effect of compositional diversity and campus climate on the CBRI of White female college students with no other intervention. The most obvious extraneous variable, then, is the possibility of curricular or extracurricular content exposure that would affect CBRI. In order to account for this possibility, the participants will take an additional survey at each time of data collection. This survey will

include questions about curricular and extracurricular involvement including course titles, job titles, and club involvement as well as questions tracking the academic evolution of each student on a very basic level (i.e. major and minor at each data collection point and expected graduation date) as well as basic demographic information (socioeconomic status, state of residence, etc.). The demographic section of this survey will be multiple choice and the rest will be free answer. This information will not be used for data analysis but will allow the researcher to ensure the sample is representative of the population and to make informed decisions about whether a participant should be dropped from the study.

### **Research Design**

This will be a four-year longitudinal non-experimental causal-comparative quantitative study. The longitudinal format presents some limitations. Students will drop out of the school, transfer, and simply not respond to the second or third request for data collection (participant attrition will likely be high). That said, it seems unlikely that the drop-out/transfer rate would strongly influence the results of the study. Additionally, the longitudinal design will allow for a glimpse at how real students change over time in these environments.

### ***Data Collection***

Data will be collected at three points over a four-year period. The first data collection point will be in the first semester of the first-year, the second will be at the end of the second year, and the third will be in the final semester of the fourth year. At each data collection point two surveys will be combined into one and administered digitally. The first will measure demographic information as outlined in the “Potential Extraneous Variables” section above and the second will measure the dependent variable, CBRI.

CBRI will be measured using the Color Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS).

CoBRAS is a 20-item scale on which participants respond to items on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Higher scores reflect higher levels of CBRI, though some questions are scored backwards to minimize potential response bias.

CoBRAS was first created and validated in 2000 through a series of five interrelated validation studies. Initial validation suggested that CoBRAS was reliable and had construct, concurrent, discriminant, and criterion-related validity with acceptable internal validity (Neville et al., 2000). Other instruments do exist to measure CBRI; CoBRAS, however, is the only measure that was validated specifically on White college students, and is the most widely used and accepted measure (Awad & Jackson, 2016).

Both surveys will be administered online to increase likelihood of response across the four years. In order to combat participant attrition, participants will be entered into a drawing for a prize upon completion of the surveys.

### ***Possible Sources of Sampling Bias***

The most likely source of sampling bias will result from the online survey administration format. Given the total number of students in each class and the proportion of those students who are White females, every student in the class studied with the desired characteristics will receive the surveys via email. Given the frequently low return rate when surveys are administered in this manner, it is possible that the participant pool will not be representative of the class as a whole. The demographic survey outlined in the “Potential Extraneous Variables” section will allow the researcher to approximate a representative sample when taken in conjunction with university-collected data.

## **Analysis**

### ***Data Analysis***

Individual CoBRAS scores will be calculated for each participant at each time period. These scores will then be analyzed for each individual over the four-year time period and increases or decreases in score over time will be reported. Trends for each university will be compared using a multiple regression analysis.

### ***Validity***

Two threats to internal validity that have not been mentioned to this point are participant effects and history. It is quite possible that participants will respond to answers in the way they believe they should rather than in a way that is reflective of their actual beliefs in an effort to appear more politically correct. Previous research has indicated differences in Whites' reported racial attitudes depending on the mode of data collection with higher levels of CBRI reported in an interview setting than on a written survey (Bonilla Silva & Forman, 2000). In order to minimize these effects, participant identity will be kept anonymous and the survey will be administered online away from the pressures of peers. Additionally, it is possible and likely that unplanned events will occur over the course of the four-year study. This includes participant attrition, classes taken that may directly affect racial ideology, and world events that may affect the participants' ideology. The demographic survey administered at each data collection time should help provide the information needed to minimize these effects.

External validity in this study is threatened by the specificity and intangibility of campus climate. This study should not be viewed as an end point in the testing of the relationship between campus climate, compositional diversity, and racial ideology. Rather, this study should be viewed as a springboard for future studies that looks more specifically at the range of campus



climates. I have chosen to keep this research to two schools in the same state of approximately the same size so that they may be more easily compared to one another; however further research should examine how geography, size, and type of institution (public vs. private) may affect CBRI.

### **Reflection/Implications**

How do we put a stop to racism in all of its forms? This is the overarching question this research seeks to address. We know that college represents a unique ideological developmental opportunity. Traditional-aged college students are at a developmental stage where their identities are being formed and they are exposed to large groups of people different from themselves for the first time (Bowman & Park, 2015). This makes college an ideal time to challenge the pervasive form of modern racism we call CBRI. How do we do this? Modern debates over affirmative action highlight one potential route: increase compositional diversity, interracial interaction will increase, and the range of perspectives each student is exposed to will expand their horizons. But does this work? How does campus racial climate work with compositional diversity to encourage cross racial interactions? If my hypothesis is correct and White students at a more racially diverse campus that purports to value diversity report a greater decrease in CBRI over four years, we will be closer to understanding what steps need to be taken to challenge CBRI across the country.

This is only the first step. In choosing only two schools I did not allow for separation of the two independent variables: compositional diversity and campus climate. Further research would be wise to include multiple schools with different combinations of these variables. For instance, if I were to redo this proposal, I would include (1) a compositionally diverse school with high purported value on diversity; likely still VCU, (2) a not compositionally diverse school

with a low purported value on diversity; likely still Virginia Tech, (3) a compositionally diverse school with a low purported value on diversity, and (4) a not compositionally diverse school with a high purported value on diversity. In this new model the two independent variables would be more readily isolated and compared. Additionally, “campus climate” as described in this study should be refined and quantified. Finally, further research should examine how these conclusions vary with geography, school size, and institution type.

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