

Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres “The Ideology of Colorblindness”**Main Point**

Guinier and Torres propose that the ideology of colorblindness, far from advancing equality, blinds people to the realities organizational, institutional, and cultural discrimination. Because individuals who believe in the colorblind ideology do not recognize the systematic racism in society, they are in a position to intentionally or unintentionally reinforce existing racial hierarchies and power dynamics. To illustrate this point, Guinier and Torres investigate the inequality in our economic systems. They conclude that the unequal distribution of assets between whites and blacks and the inability of blacks to accumulate and pass on wealth reflect historical discrimination and produce the contemporary wealth disparities between whites and blacks in this country.

Central Ideas and Concepts

Guinier and Torres first address what constitutes colorblindness. They assert this ideology has three main features:

- Race is equivalent to skin color; that is race as no meaning outside of so-called “formal” or “biological” race. Because race characterizes only skin color, racial categories are inherently undesirable. This perspective disregards hierarchies associated with these racial classifications.
- Racial classification is tantamount to pseudoscience and those who practice it are inherently racist or prejudice. This perspective disregards the role of social construction in determining race. It also does not recognize that social constructions like race, gender, and socioeconomic status – though not a scientific fact – are nevertheless real and influential.
- Race is a problem of individuals, not society. This perspective disregards – and reinforces, Guinier and Torres submit – the effect of indirect forms of discrimination, such as historical, cultural, psychological, ecological and, most importantly, economic discrimination.

Guinier and Torres propose that colorblindness is unrealistic, as we live in a society that defines race and is defined by race. Because colorblindness ignores the racism associated with social structures, colorblind individuals cannot change or fix these systems. These individuals can only perpetuate existing racism. Moreover, there are serious consequences of the widespread, colorblind belief that racism is an individual problem: if it is an individual problem, than it must have an easily-enacted individual solution. The colorblind perspective defines racism as a problem of individual race relations and assumes individuals can erase racism by simply learning about races other than their own. However, such action does nothing to address institutional racism.

To investigate how colorblind ideology reinforces existing systems of racial inequality, Guinier and Torres investigate possible causes of economic inequality between blacks and whites. They cite several statistics that illustrate that race is linked to economic discrimination and that

economic discrimination, in turn, leads to an unequal distribution of wealth and the inability of blacks to accumulate and pass down wealth to successive generations:

- Blacks earning \$50,000 or more have a net worth that is less than one-half that of their white counterparts.
- For the lowest income earners, the median black family has no assets, while the median white family has \$10,000 of equity. For the highest income earners, the median black family has 2-3 times fewer assets than the median white family.
- “The median net worth of whites is 12 times that of blacks.” (111)

Guinier and Torres cite disparities in homeownership rates between whites and blacks as a chief cause in the disparity of equity and net worth between the races. They also state that the current economic state of blacks is the product of “historical discrimination” and “an entire complex of Social relations reflected in poorer housing markets, less adequate schools, reduced access to banks and other sources of capital, hostile relations with police authority, and increased crime.” (112) They cite studies by Thomas Shapiro and Melvin Oliver to show that these results are attributable solely to race, not class. These existing economic systems create substantial barriers to black achievement, social mobility, accumulation and transmission of wealth.

Key Quotes

“...We argue, as a practical matter, that it is impossible to be colorblind in a world as color-conscious as ours.” (110)

“The reality for most families is that while income may provide basic necessities, wealth is a critical resource for improving life chances, securing prestige, passing status along to the next generation, and influencing the political process.” (111)

“To me that term [first-generation black middle-class] doesn’t mean anything other than someone who is one step out of poverty and two paychecks from being broke. I have income but not true wealth.” (112)

“Black people as a group not only have lower incomes than whites but also reduced access to the major avenue of wealth creation and transfer in the middle and working classes, namely higher-quality education.” (113)

“...the most potent determinant of economic success lies in the accumulated assets that are passed from one generation to the next.” (113)

“Race cannot be defined outside the economic or political system; ‘it is defined by the economic system, to grant or deny access to wealth accumulation.’” (113)

Questions

- 1) How are Guinier and Torres’ views on colorblindness similar to Gallagher’s (chapter 13)? How are they different?

- 2) Guinier and Torres assert that the act of a single individual becoming more informed about other races is NOT enough to overcome racism. What, then, is the use in learning about different races and cultures? Does becoming more informed about other races help combat prejudice? If so, does this change in attitude necessarily promote a change in behavior and action; that is, are individuals who are more informed about races other than their own less likely to practice discrimination?
- 3) If race is not an individual problem, can it ever be meaningfully analyzed through psychology methodology?
- 4) If, as Guinier and Torres propose, individual changes in attitude are not enough to overcome racism, what do you think they would say can combat racism?
- 5) Guinier and Torres cite several statistics as evidence of their assertions. Do you believe the data they cite is valid? For example, they highlight disparities in rates in homeownership between blacks and whites as a main cause of the disparity in black-white wealth. However, given historical patterns of black migration and the contemporary black preference for urban (where there are fewer homes) rather than rural (where there are more homes) environments, are rates of homeownership a valid indicator of economic discrimination?
- 6) Do Guinier and Torres clearly show a cause and effect relationship between colorblindness and existing systems of discrimination? That is, does their argument clearly show how colorblindness perpetuates discrimination?