



## A colorblind ideal and the motivation to improve intergroup relations: The role of an (in)congruent status quo<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Social psychologists have long debated the meaning of treating people as unique individuals for intergroup relations, as empirical evidence on the topic has been rather mixed. In the present research, we examine a normative explanation for this mixed evidence by focusing on colorblindness as an ideal for managing diversity that suggests people should be treated as individuals independently of their group membership. To do so, we contrast colorblindness as a utopian, future-oriented ideal based on individual justice principles from a descriptive observation of society's current functioning (the status quo; i.e., one's point of reference reflecting whether people are *currently* treated by virtue of their individual characteristics versus group membership). We argue that endorsing a colorblind ideal should be associated with a motivation to improve intergroup relations specifically when people are currently perceived to be treated according to their group membership (incongruent status quo) instead of as individuals (congruent status quo). Four studies and a preliminary study (3 pre-registered;  $N = 2049$ ) support this hypothesis, using a measure, experimental manipulations, and a quasi-experimental manipulation of an individual- vs. group-focused status quo, three indexes for the motivation to improve intergroup relations, as well as an internal meta-analysis. Results suggest that, despite widespread claims that colorblindness is at the root of group-based tensions and disparities, endorsing such an ideal can be understood as either perpetuating or working to improve such issues, depending on its (in)congruity with the (perceived) status quo. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Tensions and disparities associated with diversity are a key challenge faced by contemporary societies. Many ideals have been advanced and debated to address these challenges with a goal of ensuring fairness, equality, and harmony between different social groups. One ideal, colorblindness, values the treatment of people as unique individuals, independently of their group membership. Such an ideal is arguably based on individual justice principles (Gale & Staerklé, 2017; see also Knowles et al., 2009) and is often contrasted with multiculturalism which instead places value on group membership. Importantly, colorblindness is often considered incompatible with a motivation to improve intergroup relations (Dovidio et al., 2015; Plaut, 2010; Rosenthal & Levy, 2012), although conflicting evidence exists (Plaut et al., 2018; Rattan & Ambady, 2013; Rios, 2022).

Rather than focusing on whether colorblindness as an intervention or (salient) diversity management approach is related to positive intergroup outcomes, which is a common focus in extant social psychological

research (see recent meta-analyses by Leslie et al., 2020; Whitley & Webster, 2019), the present research focuses on the *meaning* of endorsing a colorblind, utopian (Fernando et al., 2018) ideal. We argue that the degree to which support for such an ideal is associated with a desire for 'progress' and improving intergroup relations depends on one's point of comparison, that is, the perceived status quo (i.e., current state of affairs). If one believes people in society are *already* treated as individuals, an arguably pervasive norm in classically liberal societies like the United States (Azzi, 1998; Gale & Staerklé, 2019, 2021; Licata et al., 2011; Sampson, 1988), then it follows that believing people *should* be treated as individuals would imply an overall satisfaction with the way society currently functions, thereby undermining a desire for social change. By contrast, if one believes group membership instead plays an important role in the way people are treated in society, then a colorblind ideal should take on a different meaning. Our overarching hypothesis is thus that endorsement of a colorblind ideal should be associated with a

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desire to improve intergroup relations only when the current state of affairs is that people are treated according to their group membership (incongruent status quo), and not when they are treated as individuals (congruent status quo).

In the following sections, we introduce existing research on associations between a colorblind diversity ideology, which we consider as an abstract, utopian ideal, and the motivation to improve intergroup relations. Then, we introduce the relevance of context for these associations, that is, the current state of affairs, or the (perceived) status quo. Finally, we present preliminary data to empirically introduce the notion that context plays a role, and subsequently present four full studies addressing the above overarching hypothesis.

## 1. Colorblind ideal and motivation to improve intergroup relations

Despite its polysemantic nature and controversy concerning its underlying meaning (see e.g., Neville et al., 2013; Plaut, 2010; Whitley et al., 2022), colorblindness can be defined as a diversity ideology that is, by its arguably normative nature, utopian and future oriented.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the need to combat a US-centric conception, the term first appeared in the US legal arena towards the end of the 19th century by Supreme Court Justice John Harlan. When contesting a majority opinion in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) that legally reinforced extant racial segregation, thereby undermining progress resulting from the US civil war, Harlan, as the only dissenter, stated that “our constitution is colorblind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens” (Plessy & Ferguson, 1896). Although this rather descriptive connotation of colorblindness subtly defended the progressive direction taken by the American constitution at the time, the Jim Crow period followed, and Harlan himself was also known to have not fully embraced racial equality.

Nevertheless, the term colorblindness was popularized as a more overtly *prescriptive* ideal during the US civil rights movement more than sixty years later (Hahn et al., 2015; Plaut, 2010; Rattan & Ambady, 2013). Motivated to improve intergroup conflict and treatment of racial minorities, Martin Luther King Jr. famously asserted in this context that people should “not be judged by the color of their skin [or their group membership more generally], but by the content of their character”. This argument was therefore presented as a prescriptive ideal of decategorization (see Brewer & Miller, 1984; see also Guimond et al., 2014); a belief that existing group-based treatment is destructive, and that one's individual character should determine their treatment in society rather than the social group(s) to which one belongs. This is consistent with pervasive contemporary individual justice principles, focusing on individual character and merit as a basis for judgments concerning what is right or wrong, just or unjust (Azzi, 1992; Gale & Staerklé, 2019). Notwithstanding important critiques surrounding construals of King's speech (e.g., Plaut, 2010; Yogeewaran et al., 2018) and alternate conceptions of colorblindness (Whitley et al., 2022), this reflects the definition of colorblindness that we adopt in the present research, similar to many others within the social psychological literature (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2009; Guimond et al., 2014; Yogeewaran et al., 2021; see meta-analyses, Leslie et al., 2020; Whitley & Webster, 2019).

Conflicting evidence exists, however, concerning whether in the minds of ordinary people, a colorblind ideal truly is associated with a motivation to improve equality and harmony between groups (see Plaut et al., 2018; Rattan & Ambady, 2013, for reviews). Concerning tangible intergroup outcomes, salient colorblindness has been shown to run the risk of (implicitly) silencing oppressed minorities, exacerbating inequalities, and securing majority privilege (Apfelbaum et al., 2010; Plaut et al., 2009). However, it has also been shown to have (short-term)

benefits in high-conflict situations by reducing prejudice and hostile behavior (e.g., Correll et al., 2008; Vorauer & Sasaki, 2011). Apfelbaum et al. (2016) indeed show evidence that ‘one-size does not fit-all’, and that colorblindness as a diversity management approach should be ‘tailored’ to the context (e.g., depending on the size and representation of social groups). Importantly, given our focus on the *meaning* ascribed to a colorblind, utopian ideal, here we are more concerned with correlational research regarding peoples' cognitions and (intergroup) motivations associated with endorsing a colorblind ideal. Such research shows similarly conflicting evidence. For instance, while some correlational research suggests support for colorblindness is associated with increased levels of ethnocentrism and opposition to policies that redress inequalities (e.g., Ryan et al., 2007; Yogeewaran et al., 2018), other correlational research suggests it is associated with weakened prejudice among those with an anti-egalitarian disposition (Yogeewaran et al., 2017). But as these studies use a variety of different measures of colorblindness, sometimes conflating the construct with, for example, hierarchy legitimizing beliefs (Leslie et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2022), this may be one reason for conflicting findings across the literature. According to recent meta-analytic evidence that disentangles the unique influence of differing diversity ideologies on intergroup outcomes, colorblindness is a (weakly) “hierarchy attenuating” ideal, associated with slightly positive intergroup attitudes (Leslie et al., 2020; Whitley & Webster, 2019; see also Levin et al., 2012). Importantly, Knowles et al. (2009) show that colorblindness is a malleable ideology that can be endorsed with a motivation both to legitimize existing inequalities and to reduce discrepancies between group outcomes. So when explicitly focusing on the prescriptive (rather than descriptive) nature of a colorblind ideal, how might context come into play in explaining these divergent and seemingly contradictory motivations?

## 2. Contextual emphasis on individuals vs. groups: The status quo

If endorsing a colorblind ideal is ostensibly associated with a motivation to improve intergroup relations and seek social change (in line with King's speech), then there needs to be a current, dominant ideological orientation *from which* to change. This is where the “status quo” comes into play, that is, the current state of affairs and one's point of reference. Social psychologists largely agree that people rely on the status quo to evaluate alternatives (see Deschamps, 1982). Moreover, people tend to show ‘bias’ towards this status quo (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; see also Jost et al., 2013): Unless deliberately pursuing social change, they are inclined to keep things as they are by default, thus maintaining social stability. In the present research, the status quo refers to how people are believed to be *currently* judged or treated in society, either first and foremost as individuals (according to their merit, character), or instead as members of a group (i.e., categorical differentiation and group-based differential treatment).

Most contemporary research on colorblindness has been conducted in contexts with a pervasive emphasis on individuals, such as in classically liberal societies like the US, Netherlands, UK, and Switzerland (Gale & Staerklé, 2019; Green & Staerklé, 2023; Licata et al., 2011; see also Sampson, 1988). We argue that when this emphasis is salient, colorblindness as a utopian, *future-oriented ideal* is generally congruent with this individual-based treatment *status quo*, and hence may reflect a desire for social stability rather than change in intergroup relations. Nevertheless, when group-based treatment is more salient, a colorblind ideal may take on a different meaning.

There is indeed variation and ambiguity both between and within Western societies in terms of this widespread emphasis on individuals. The US, for example, where most social psychological research on colorblindness has been conducted, could be considered even more prototypically individualistic, and thus more antithetical to the salience of group-based treatment, than other western countries like New Zealand or Canada. Specifically, unlike the US which is known to be a melting pot

<sup>1</sup> Although not the focus of the present research, multiculturalism can also be defined as a diversity ideology that is future-oriented.

of individuals coming from a variety of backgrounds who are construed to be responsible for their own fate, New Zealand and Canada are countries where an emphasis on the individual exists alongside recognition of group-based differences and disparities that are anchored in national policy (Multiculturalism Policy Index; see Banting & Kymlicka, 2013; Wallace et al., 2021). Furthermore, despite the pervasive, foundational principles of classical, individualist liberalism (aligned with colorblindness) in the US, substantial historical and present-day intergroup tensions and inequalities persist (in line with Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech; Devos & Mohamed, 2014; Nosek et al., 2007; Sears & Henry, 2003). For social psychologists, these tensions and inequalities tend to be crucial and fundamental societal concerns. But from a lay perspective, such tensions are more readily acknowledged by some people than others, in some contexts than others (e.g., via media attention, the education system, longstanding policies), giving rise to perceptions of the status quo as focused relatively more on group treatment, or relatively more on individual treatment (see Chrysochoou, 2018; Staerklé, 2009) even within societies. We propose that among lay people, endorsing a colorblind ideal should be generally more associated with a motivation for social change (i.e., improving intergroup relations) when there is more room for (perceiving) an existing group-based treatment status quo.

### 3. The motivation to improve intergroup relations: Equality and/or social cohesion?

The motivation for social change via a desire to improve intergroup relations can have more than one interrelated facet depending on the targeted social issue. Indeed, some research on correlates of diversity ideologies focuses on inequality as a social issue (see e.g., Chrysochoou, 2018; Levin et al., 2012; Saguy et al., 2009), assessing, for example, one's support for policies that redress inequalities (e.g., Yogeewaran et al., 2018), or even one's willingness to engage in collective action (see Dovidio et al., 2016; see also Drury & Reicher, 2009; Leach et al., 2006). Other research, however, focuses on conflict as the social issue (see e.g., Plaut et al., 2018; Whitley & Webster, 2019). While inequality can be associated with conflict (but not always), this research on social conflict measures intergroup attitudes, trust, cooperation, and thus, cohesion (see Hewstone, 2015; Jansen et al., 2016; Meeussen et al., 2014; Putnam, 2007; Stevens et al., 2008; Wolsko et al., 2000).

Existing research on colorblindness that claims this ideology improves (or not) intergroup relations often focuses on one of these two overarching, interrelated facets: the desire to redress group-based inequalities, or improve social cohesion between groups. In the present research, we simultaneously examine both. We also examine the desire to engage in collective action as a more action-based, combative approach to addressing social issues than feeling broadly motivated to redress inequalities and improve social cohesion.

### 4. The present research

To test our hypothesis, we underwent several crucial steps. First, we ensured our measure of colorblindness, which was comprised of items from existing research (Guimond et al., 2013; Levin et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2007), was exclusively prescriptive, future-oriented, and focused on individual justice principles and a cognitive process of decategorization (Brewer & Miller, 1984; Guimond et al., 2014). In a series of preliminary correlational studies, we examined the association between this measure and the motivation to improve intergroup relations in the US, New Zealand, and Canada. This served as a preparatory step; an initial (naturalistic) check of the pattern of correlates across these national contexts, to see if a prescriptive colorblind ideal may indeed appear to hold a nuanced meaning in varied contexts.

Second, we conducted four full studies using both fictitious society paradigms and real-world dominant and non-dominant group participants from the US. Studies 1, 2, and 3 adopted the fictitious society paradigm. This paradigm allowed us to examine a social context similar to the one people—in this case, Americans—experience in their real lives but making specific aspects of this context salient. Because there are ample mixed information and experiences leading people to have a variety of different beliefs in the societies in which they live, this methodological approach grants researchers more control over which specific information they want readers to attend to (as the fictitious society reflects a simplified version of the society in which participants live; see Azzi, 1992; Jetten et al., 2015). Study 1 thus served as an initial attempt to describe a society in which two groups experienced relative group-based inequalities. This description left participants the chance to subjectively interpret the status quo, that is, how people are treated in this society when these inequalities are salient, either as individuals (in line with modern racism; Sears & Henry, 2003) or according to their group membership (in line with critical consciousness; Schwarzenhal et al., 2022). Then, in Studies 2 and 3, we experimentally manipulated the status quo by emphasizing a context where people are treated by virtue of their individual attributes versus group membership.

Because societies are generally composed of relatively dominant and non-dominant groups, and because differences likely exist between these groups in the extent to which they perceive the status quo as focused on individual treatment vs. group treatment, Studies 1, 2, and 3 also allowed us to examine perspective-taking of participants imagining themselves as either dominant or non-dominant group members (e.g., Azzi, 1992; Gale & Staerklé, 2019). Finally, in Study 4, we examined real dominant and non-dominant groups. Assuming that, based on their longstanding lived and shared experience, real dominant groups perceive a status quo focused more on individual treatment, and real non-dominant groups perceive a status quo focused comparatively more on group treatment, this allowed for a quasi-experimental manipulation of the perceived status quo.

In the four full studies, the same, consistent analytical procedure was used, where support for a colorblind ideal was the predictor, motivation to improve intergroup relations was the outcome, and status quo was the moderator (as a measure in Study 1, as a manipulation in Studies 2 and 3, and as a quasi-experimental manipulation in Study 4). We report all manipulations, measures, and exclusions in these studies. All materials, data, syntax, and a codebook describing them are available at [https://osf.io/45w3m/?view\\_only=a74f8773bad54a7baffada577d8bece13](https://osf.io/45w3m/?view_only=a74f8773bad54a7baffada577d8bece13).

### 5. Preliminary studies

Prior to the full studies described below, we initially conducted a series of preliminary studies to explore how our measure of prescriptive colorblindness is associated with the motivation to improve intergroup relations in different western nations with varied levels of emphasis on group vs. individual treatment. To do this, we examined associations in the US, (TurkPrime sample, Litman et al., 2017;  $N = 200$ ) which is arguably one of the most individual-focused nations in the world, and New Zealand ( $N = 184$ ), where biculturalism policy and norms, as well as media attention, have historically rendered group-based treatment especially salient (Sibley & Ward, 2013; Ward & Liu, 2012). We later collected similar data in the US<sub>2</sub> ( $n = 199$ ), and Canada ( $n = 200$ ), for similar reasons (e.g., multiculturalism policy, norms, and media attention in Canada, Multiculturalism Policy Index, 2020). To ensure participants comprised the people most exposed to the dominant norms and socialization embedded within these respective contexts, all samples were restricted to native-born citizens belonging to the dominant ethnic group ( $n = 146$  US,  $n = 103$  NZ;  $n = 199$  US<sub>2</sub>,  $n = 200$  Canada). All items

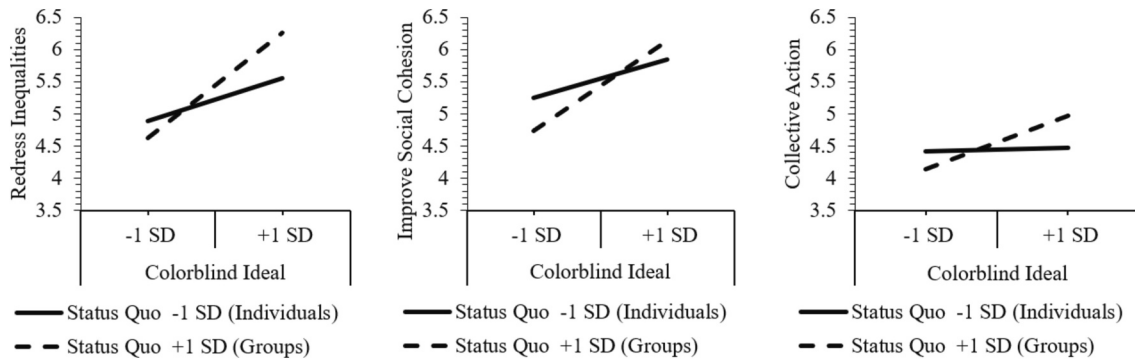


Fig. 1. Support for a Colorblind Ideal and Motivation to Improve Intergroup Relations by Perceived Status Quo (Study 1).

were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. **Support for a Colorblind Ideal** (5 items;  $\alpha = 0.89$  US,  $\alpha = 0.76$  NZ;  $\alpha = 0.84$  US<sub>2</sub>,  $\alpha = 0.85$  Canada) items were taken from previous research (Guimond et al., 2013; Levin et al., 2012; Ryan et al., 2007), ensuring they all had a prescriptive, idealistic, future-oriented connotation (i.e., including the word “should”) as well as reflecting a process of decategorization and individual justice (i.e., focusing on treatment of people as individuals). Sample items included “we should treat people according to their individual characteristics and not as members of a group,” and “instead of putting ethnic or racial labels on people, everyone should be treated as a unique individual.” Motivation to improve intergroup relations was assessed using the following three measures. A desire to **Redress Group-Based Inequalities** was assessed using two items (US:  $r(144) = 0.95$ , NZ:  $r(101) = 0.91$ , US<sub>2</sub>:  $r(197) = 0.91$ , Canada:  $r(198) = 0.91$ ; Glasford & Dovidio, 2011), for example, “Right now, I have a strong motivation to change disparities between groups.” A desire to **Improve Social Cohesion** between groups was also measured using two items (US:  $r(144) = 0.86$ , NZ:  $r(101) = 0.79$ , US<sub>2</sub>:  $r(197) = 0.76$ , Canada:  $r(198) = 0.80$ ), for example, “I feel motivated to participate in volunteer activities to enhance cooperation between groups.” A desire to **Engage in Collective Action** was measured using eight classic items for the first two preliminary studies (US:  $\alpha = 0.92$ , NZ:  $\alpha = 0.91$ ; see Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Tausch et al., 2011), assessing the degree to which participants felt motivated to, for example, “sign a petition in line with your views,” or “take part in a lawful public demonstration.”<sup>2</sup> All items are available in Supplementary Materials Section 1, including a detailed description of confirmatory factor analyses for all studies.

Results showed that support for a colorblind ideal was not positively associated with a motivation to improve intergroup relations in the US (for both US samples;  $r(144) = 0.06$ ,  $p = .464$ ,  $r_2(197) = -0.04$ ,  $p = .613$ , for redressing inequalities,  $r(144) = 0.12$ ,  $p = .167$ ,  $r_2(197) = 0.13$ ,  $p = .060$  for improving social cohesion, and  $r(144) = -0.10$ ,  $p = .245$ ,  $r_2(197) = 0.01$ ,  $p = .848$  for collective action). As outlined in the introductory section to the present article, this is consistent with the individualistic orientation of the classically liberal US context and our theorizing that colorblindness as an ideal may be generally congruent with the status quo in such contexts. Nevertheless, in New Zealand, support for a colorblind ideal was positively associated with a motivation to improve intergroup relations ( $r(101) = 0.27$ ,  $p = .006$  for redressing inequalities,  $r(101) = 0.24$ ,  $p = .013$  for improving social cohesion, and  $r(101) = 0.23$ ,  $p = .019$  for collective action). In Canada, support for a colorblind ideal was positively associated with a desire to

<sup>2</sup> For the second set of preliminary studies in the US and Canada, the desire to engage in collective action was assessed with a different 8-item measure indicating the clear target of such actions (i.e., to change disparities and improve cooperation between groups;  $\alpha = 0.96$  US<sub>2</sub>,  $\alpha = 0.96$  Canada).

redress inequalities ( $r(198) = 0.16$ ,  $p = .026$ ) and to engage in collective action ( $r(198) = 0.14$ ,  $p = .050$ ), but not to improve social cohesion ( $r(198) = 0.06$ ,  $p = .404$ ). The latter two samples thus provide rather converging preliminary evidence that in different (national) contexts (characterized by a greater salience of group-based treatment), a colorblind ideal may take on a nuanced meaning.<sup>3</sup> The studies outlined below return to the US context and experimentally examine our hypothesis using these same measures except Study 3 where an alternate outcome variable was used.<sup>4</sup>

## 6. Study 1

Study 1 was designed to prime a context characterized by reasonably salient group-based differences and inequalities. Assuming people perceive individual treatment by default in the US context, the goal of this study was to render group-based disparities more salient, facilitating the perception of a status quo more focused on group treatment (among some participants). In other words, in this primed context of tangible group-based disparities (of which people are unavoidably aware), we examined how people *subjectively interpret* the extent to which people are *treated as individuals vs. according to their group membership*, as well as how this perceived status quo plays a role in the meaning they ascribe to a colorblind ideal (to improve intergroup relations, or not). In this study, we also experimentally manipulated membership in majority/dominant and minority/non-dominant groups.

<sup>3</sup> Because these were preliminary studies designed to explore patterns and not for hypothesis testing, we did not intend to directly compare differences between countries. Nevertheless, in case of interest, such results are provided in Supplementary Materials Section 2.

<sup>4</sup> A measure of support for a multicultural ideal was also included in these studies (see Supplementary Materials Section 3 for parallel analyses with multiculturalism). As shown in the preregistrations, we did not make parallel hypotheses for multiculturalism. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, a goal here was to decompose the prescriptive (ideal) versus descriptive (status quo) components of colorblindness in particular, which overtly distinguishes treatment of people as individuals versus as members of their group. And secondly, multiculturalism does not imply *only* group treatment: Notwithstanding widespread debate, according to many political philosophers (e.g., Kymlicka, 2001; Modood, 2013; see also Gale & Staerklé, 2019), multiculturalism is an approach to managing diversity that was born out of liberal, individualist theory and policy and that seeks to ensure justice for all members of society, including those who are left in the margins when society is *overly* individualistic (thereby inadvertently privileging those who are already default members). In many ways, multiculturalism acknowledges the place of such classically liberal principles as a foundation that is complemented and even sustained by recognition. Therefore, while multiculturalism has a groupist connotation, it is arguably simultaneously individualistic, whereas colorblindness more deliberately and explicitly opposes the two.



**Table 1**

Unstandardized Regression Coefficients (Standard Errors) Showing Association between Colorblind Ideal and Motivation to Improve Intergroup Relations Depending on Perceived Status Quo (Study 1).

	Redressing inequalities		Social cohesion		Collective action	
	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	95 % CI	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	95 % CI	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	95 % CI
<b>Step 1</b>						
Status quo	0.06 (0.11)	[-0.17, 0.28]	-0.14 (0.10)	[-0.34, 0.06]	0.00 (0.14)	[-0.28, 0.28]
Colorblind Ideal	0.51*** (0.09)	[0.33, 0.69]	0.45*** (0.08)	[0.29, 0.61]	0.17 (0.11)	[-0.05, 0.40]
<b>Step 2</b>						
Interaction	0.28*** (0.08)	[0.12, 0.45]	0.24** (0.07)	[0.09, 0.38]	0.23* (0.10)	[0.02, 0.43]
<b>Simple effects</b>						
Status quo -1SD	0.30** (0.11)	[0.09, 0.51]	0.27** (0.10)	[0.08, 0.46]	0.01 (0.14)	[-0.26, 0.28]
Status quo +1SD	0.87*** (0.14)	[0.60, 1.14]	0.75*** (0.12)	[0.51, 0.99]	0.46* (0.17)	[0.12, 0.81]

Note. Status quo high score represents focus on groups such that +1SD represents focus on groups and -1SD represents focus on individuals. Step 1 shows main effects prior to including the interaction as a predictor. Simple effects represent the decomposition of the interaction. \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001.

6.1. Method

6.1.1. Participants

The sample was composed of 200 American participants recruited via TurkPrime (Litman et al., 2017).<sup>5</sup> Sample size was determined before any data analysis. This number was based on a heuristic of approximately 100 participants per experimental condition (described below). Approximately half of the sample identified as male (54.5 %; 45.0 % female; 0.5 % gender-diverse) and the majority had a university education (69.5 %; 28.5 % having completed high school or equivalent). Age ranged from 21 to 71 (*M* = 38.44, *SD* = 11.08). Almost all participants were US citizens (97.5 %) and 76 % self-identified as White (*n* = 152), 14 % as African American (*n* = 27), 12 % as Asian (*n* = 24), 6 % as Hispanic (*n* = 12), 3 % as Native American (*n* = 6).<sup>6</sup>

6.1.2. Procedure and measures

Participants were first presented with a description of a fictitious society (an island; see Azzi, 1992; Gale & Staerklé, 2019) inhabited by two groups, and were randomly assigned to imagine themselves as a member of the minority (“Felorin”; *n* = 99) or majority (“Kaldan”; *n* = 101) group. The society was described as abundant in terms of resources, with the two groups sharing the island with respect despite tensions between them. The majority had been there for a couple hundred years, was composed of around 300,000 members, and almost all of them had a job, with children who succeeded well at school. The minority had arrived shortly thereafter, initially as exploited workers but gaining equal rights over time. The group was composed of around 50,000 members, they often struggled to find a job, and the children succeeded less well at school. Participants read that because the discrepancy between the two groups had become progressively more difficult to ignore, a neutral, impartial, non-governmental and not-for-profit agency decided to survey the population on their opinion regarding a variety of issues. Participants were asked to participate in this survey by responding to the questions as a member of the group to which they were assigned. Exact wording of the experimental manipulation can be found in Supplementary Materials Section 1.

**Support for a Colorblind Ideal** (5 items;  $\alpha = 0.88$ ) was measured after the experimental manipulation, with the same items described above.

**Perceived Status Quo** was measured with a single item assessed on a 5-point Likert scale: “On the island of Ral, people are treated (1) always

as individuals, (2) most often as individuals, (3) equally as individuals and as members of their group, (4) most often as members of their group, (5) always as members of their group”. A high score therefore represented a perceived status quo focused more on group treatment than on individual treatment, and a low score represented a perceived status quo focused more on individual treatment than on group treatment.

The motivation to improve intergroup relations was assessed using the three measures outlined above (counter-balanced): a desire to **Redress Group-Based Inequalities** ( $r(198) = 0.86$ ), to **Improve Social Cohesion** between groups ( $r(198) = 0.75$ ), and to **Engage in Collective Action** ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ).

Manipulation checks in relation to experimental group membership were included at the end of the survey prior to demographic questions. **Perceived Privilege** was assessed using four items ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ) coded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree, for example, “Belonging to the [Felorin/Kaldan] brings me a sense of advantage.” **Understanding of the Text** was assessed using six items (three reverse-coded,  $\alpha = 0.91$ ; see Gale & Staerklé, 2019) coded on the same response scale, for example, “My group arrived more recently on the island than the other group.” **Easiness of the Exercise** was assessed using two opposing items that were kept separate ( $r(198) = -0.36$ ). On a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) not at all to (7) completely, participants were asked to what extent “was it easy to imagine yourself as a member of the [Felorins/Kaldans]?” and “did you find the questions difficult to answer?”. All items are available in Supplementary Materials Section 1.

6.2. Results

6.2.1. Manipulation checks

Participants assigned to take on the majority perspective showed significantly higher levels of perceived privilege (*M* = 5.50, *SD* = 1.07) in comparison to those assigned to take on the minority perspective (*M* = 3.35, *SD* = 1.06),  $F(1, 198) = 203.30, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.51$ . Participants assigned to the two groups also significantly differed in the way they recalled information from the text, successfully alluding to their respective majority/dominant (*M* = 5.73, *SD* = 1.18) or minority/non-dominant (*M* = 2.49, *SD* = 0.95) group,  $F(1, 198) = 459.93, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.70$ . Participants assigned to each group did not significantly differ in the degree to which they found the exercise easy,  $F(1, 198) = 0.14, p = .711, \eta_p^2 = 0.00$ , or difficult,  $F(1, 198) = 0.02, p = .877, \eta_p^2 = 0.00$ .

Of note, participants also did not significantly differ in their perceptions of the status quo,  $F(1, 198) = 0.02, p = .877, \eta_p^2 = 0.00$ . This is perhaps unsurprising, as the same information was provided to both experimental groups – unlike real groups where different repeated experiences, intragroup narratives, and social representations are likely to play a more profound role. Nevertheless, including the two experimental

<sup>5</sup> A sensitivity power analysis conducted using G\*Power 3.1.9.4 suggested that with this sample size, a minimum effect size of  $R^2 = 0.04$  could be detected (0.80 power,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ).

<sup>6</sup> Participants could select more than one racial/ethnic group, so the total number can exceed 100 %, for all studies.

group membership conditions remained relevant for the present study to render the fictitious scenario relatable for participants and to ensure group-based disparities were salient.

Descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables by experimental group (and for the full sample) are available in Supplementary Materials Section 6 (including interpretation).

### 6.2.2. Hypothesis testing

A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted in which Step one included the main effects of support for a colorblind ideal and the perceived status quo on indicators of the motivation to improve intergroup relations, and Step two included the interaction between perceived status quo and support for a colorblind ideal to test our main hypothesis. This interaction was significant when predicting all three outcome variables: desires to reduce group-based inequalities ( $p < .001$ ;  $R^2 = 0.05$ ), to improve social cohesion between groups ( $p = .001$ ;  $R^2 = 0.04$ ), and to engage in collective action ( $p = .031$ ;  $R^2 = 0.02$ ). Simple effects in all models showed that support for a colorblind ideal was associated with a motivation to improve intergroup relations especially (or only, in the case of the desire to engage in collective action) when the status quo was perceived to focus on groups ( $p < .001$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $p = .009$ , respectively) rather than on individuals ( $p = .005$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $p = .951$ , respectively; see Fig. 1 and Table 1). A three-way interaction incorporating experimental group membership as a supplementary moderator was non-significant,  $b = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ , 95 % CI [-0.04, 0.31],  $t(192) = 1.49$ ,  $p = .138$  predicting redressing group-based inequalities,  $b = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ , 95 % CI [-0.04, 0.29],  $t(192) = 1.54$ ,  $p = .125$  predicting improving social cohesion,  $b = 0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ , 95 % CI [-0.18, 0.28],  $t(192) = 0.44$ ,  $p = .661$  predicting collective action, suggesting there were no differences between those taking on the majority vs. minority perspective.<sup>7</sup>

### 6.3. Discussion

Study 1 provided preliminary support for our hypothesis via a fictitious society paradigm, using a measure of perceived status quo. By encouraging people to take on a majority, dominant vs. minority, non-dominant perspective, we primed a society where differential group-based outcomes were relatively salient, leaving participants to interpret whether they believed people in the society were treated generally as individuals, or generally as group members. Indeed, support for a colorblind ideal was associated with a desire to improve intergroup relations predominantly when the status quo was perceived to focus on groups (incongruity), rather than, comparatively, on individuals (congruity).

Disparities here refer to outcomes (i.e., distributive justice), but a colorblind ideal (anchored in King Jr.'s speech) is instead concerned with treatment (i.e., procedural justice). Acknowledging outcome disparities does not always mean one perceives group-based differential treatment; indeed, one may also assume society is procedurally just despite that distribution of outcomes is not. Focusing on treatment, we disentangled in this study the implications of endorsing a colorblind ideal depending on its (in)congruity with one's point of reference, the perceived status quo. Indeed, this status quo was subjectively perceived, in the eyes of the individual. Nevertheless, the following question therefore arises: What occurs when we examine a colorblind ideal in societies where the status quo more objectively differs (e.g., via shared perceptions), focusing either on group- or individual-based treatment? This was the purpose of Study 2.

<sup>7</sup> For all three studies, all analyses were also conducted when controlling for gender, age, education, race/ethnicity, and experimental group membership (see Supplementary Materials Section 4), as well as when implementing stringent inclusion criteria (see Supplementary Materials Section 5; includes explanation). Conclusions were the same.

## 7. Study 2

Study 2 replicated and extended Study 1 by experimentally manipulating the status quo (i.e., more objectively, rather than using a subjective measure in the interaction; see preregistration at <https://aspre dictated.org/yps9-t3n6.pdf>). To do so, we focused on explicit (reported) individual- vs. group-based treatment of all members of society.

### 7.1. Method

#### 7.1.1. Participants

The sample was composed of 400 American participants recruited via TurkPrime (Litman et al., 2017). This sample size allowed for approximately 100 participants per cell (see below) and for the detection of a minimum effect size of  $R^2 = 0.02$  (0.80 power,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ). Sample size was determined before any data analysis. Just over half of the sample identified as male (52.3 %; 47.0 % female; 0.8 % gender-diverse) and the majority had a university education (68.3 %; 28.2 % having completed high school or equivalent). Age ranged from 18 to 100 years ( $M = 40.44$ ,  $SD = 13.23$ ). Almost all participants were US citizens (96.5 %) and 76.8 % self-identified as White ( $n = 307$ ), 7.8 % as African American ( $n = 31$ ), 10.3 % as Asian ( $n = 41$ ), 7 % as Hispanic ( $n = 28$ ), 1 % as Native American ( $n = 4$ ).

#### 7.1.2. Procedure and measures

Participants were first presented with a description of a fictitious society, like Study 1. This time, however, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (group membership) x 2 (status quo) design. The group membership conditions were similar to Study 1: participants were asked to take on the perspective of a member of the minority ("Felorin";  $n = 193$ ) or majority ("Kaldan";  $n = 207$ ) group. The two groups were maintained in this study to keep membership on the island concrete and relatable, and also to explore if the lack of effect of experimental group membership in Study 1 would remain null.

Group size and history were described, but new to this study, the status quo conditions emphasized a current state of affairs reflecting either treatment as groups ( $n = 199$ ) or as individuals ( $n = 201$ ). Specifically, it was mentioned that either individual characteristics like talent and friendliness (in one condition), or group membership (in the other condition), were strong determinants of peoples' outcomes, and that members of both groups reported being treated first and foremost either as individuals (in one condition) or as group members (in the other condition) in their day-to-day lives. Finally, like Study 1, participants were asked to participate in a survey by responding to the questions as a member of the group to which they were assigned. Exact wording of this experimental manipulation can be found in Supplementary Materials Section 1.

**Support for a Colorblind Ideal** ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ) was measured after the experimental manipulation using the same items as Study 1.

The motivation to improve intergroup relations was assessed using the same three measures as Study 1: A desire to **Redress Group-Based Inequalities** ( $r(398) = 0.95$ ), to **Improve Social Cohesion between groups** ( $r(398) = 0.84$ ), and to **Engage in Collective Action** ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ).

Finally, manipulation checks included the same measure of **Perceived Privilege** ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ) as Study 1, two simplified items assessing **Understanding of the Text** ("my group is larger than the other one," and "my group has lived on Ral for longer than the other one";  $r(398) = 0.87$ ), and the same two opposing items assessing **Easiness of the Exercise** as Study 1, again kept separate ( $r(398) = -0.35$ ). The **Perceived Status Quo** measure from Study 1 was included in this study as a manipulation check for the individual- and group-based status quo experimental conditions.

## 7.2. Results

### 7.2.1. Manipulation checks

Manipulation checks concerning experimental group membership are reported in Supplementary Materials Section 6. All functioned as expected, similar to Study 1, including that the perceived status quo did not significantly differ between the experimental group membership conditions,  $F(1, 398) = 1.23, p = .269, \eta_p^2 = 0.00$ . This is again unsurprising, as both groups reported experiencing the same treatment in this study's experimental material.

For the experimental status quo conditions, as expected, participants in the group-based treatment status quo condition ( $M = 4.01, SD = 0.69$ ) showed significantly higher scores on the measure of perceived status quo (high score representing treatment as group members, low score representing treatment as individuals) compared to those in the individual-based treatment status quo condition ( $M = 2.66, SD = 1.05$ ),  $F(1, 398) = 228.73, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.37$ . It is also worth noting that the mean score on this measure ( $M = 3.33, SD = 1.11$ ) was substantially lower in the present study than in Study 1 (as a reminder,  $M = 3.90, SD = 0.82$ ), suggesting that group-based treatment was indeed comparatively more salient in Study 1. There were no significant differences between conditions concerning the degree to which participants found the exercise easy,  $F(1, 398) = 0.80, p = .372, \eta_p^2 = 0.00$ , or difficult,  $F(1, 398) = 0.08, p = .774, \eta_p^2 = 0.00$ .

Descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables by status quo experimental conditions (and for the full sample) are available in Supplementary Materials Section 7. Like for Study 1, descriptive statistics and correlations by experimental group membership are available in Supplementary Materials Section 6.

### 7.2.2. Hypothesis testing

Like Study 1, hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted, in which Step one included the main effects of support for a colorblind ideal and the experimental status quo conditions on indicators of the motivation to improve intergroup relations, and Step two included the interaction between support for a colorblind ideal and status quo conditions to test our main hypothesis. Table 2 shows that to some extent, in line with preregistered analyses, results from Study 1 concerning our hypothesis were replicated in the present study. This was particularly the case when the desire to redress inequalities served as the outcome variable ( $p = .019; R^2 = 0.01$ ). Simple effects for this model showed that support for a colorblind ideal was associated with a motivation to redress group-based inequalities only in the experimental condition where the status quo was focused on group treatment ( $p < .001$ ), and not in the experimental condition where the status quo was focused on individual treatment ( $p = .779$ ). Simple effects were the same in the model predicting the desire to improve cohesion between groups ( $p = .010, p = .253$ , respectively; despite a non-significant interaction,  $p = .586$ ); and no simple effects were significant when predicting the desire to engage in collective action ( $p = .890, p = .983$ , respectively; non-significant interaction,  $p = .923$ ; see Fig. 2).<sup>8</sup>

## 7.3. Discussion

Study 2 provided some further evidence that support for a colorblind ideal is associated with a motivation to improve intergroup relations

<sup>8</sup> Like Study 1, a three-way interaction incorporating experimental group membership as a supplementary moderator was non-significant in all models,  $b = -0.05, SE = 0.08, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.21, 0.11], t(192) = -0.60, p = .549$  predicting redressing group-based inequalities,  $b = 0.06, SE = 0.07, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.07, 0.20], t(192) = 0.93, p = .350$  predicting improving social cohesion,  $b = 0.04, SE = 0.08, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.12, 0.19], t(392) = 0.48, p = .630$  predicting collective action, suggesting there were no differences between those taking on the majority vs. minority perspective.

when a status quo (experimentally manipulated) focuses on group treatment rather than on individual treatment. This occurred specifically when predicting the desire to redress group-based inequalities. Importantly, there were some differences between the outcome variables in this study. Firstly, the interaction effect predicting the desire to improve social cohesion was non-significant, despite simple effects being consistent with our hypothesis. It may be that when people endorse a colorblind ideal, as incongruent with the status quo, they are most concerned with improving intergroup equality, rather than harmony, in society. This is consistent with the magnitude of the interaction effects in Study 1, too. Secondly, no effects were found when predicting the desire to engage in collective action, consistent with the corresponding weak effect size in Study 1. Yet, despite its action-based nature, people can engage in collective action for different goals or reasons. These include but are not limited to concerns for group-based inequalities, even though social psychological literature often addresses collective action in this way (see Hässler et al., 2020). The measure used in the present study and Study 1 remained rather ambiguous, without any explicit goals mentioned. Despite that, outcome variables were counterbalanced in the questionnaires, meaning that for approximately two-thirds of participants, some kind of desire to improve intergroup relations was arguably primed prior to the collective action items, Study 3 sought to directly clarify this issue.

## 8. Study 3

Study 3 was designed as a conceptual replication of Study 2, focusing on a new, adapted measure of the desire to engage in collective action with a goal of improving intergroup equality and harmony (see pre-registration at <https://aspredicted.org/gvxj-vwks.pdf>).

### 8.1. Method

#### 8.1.1. Participants

The sample was composed of 401 American participants recruited via TurkPrime (Litman et al., 2017). We aimed for 400 participants for the same reasons as Study 2 (allowing for approximately 100 participants per cell, and for the detection of a minimum effect size of  $R^2 = 0.02; 0.80$  power,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ) and inadvertently recruited one extra. Sample size was determined before any data analysis. Gender was evenly divided (49.6 % male and female, 0.7 % gender-diverse) and the majority of participants had a university education (66.8 %; 31.7 % having completed high school or equivalent). Age ranged from 20 to 76 years ( $M = 39.14, SD = 11.83$ ). Almost all participants were US citizens (98.5 %) and 79.6 % self-identified as White ( $n = 319$ ), 13.0 % as African American ( $n = 52$ ), 10.7 % as Asian ( $n = 25$ ), 5 % as Hispanic ( $n = 20$ ), 1.7 % as Native American ( $n = 7$ ).

#### 8.1.2. Procedure and measures

The exact same experimental conditions were used as in Study 2 (see Supplementary Materials Section 1).

**Support for a Colorblind Ideal** ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ) was measured after the experimental manipulation using the same items as Studies 1 and 2.

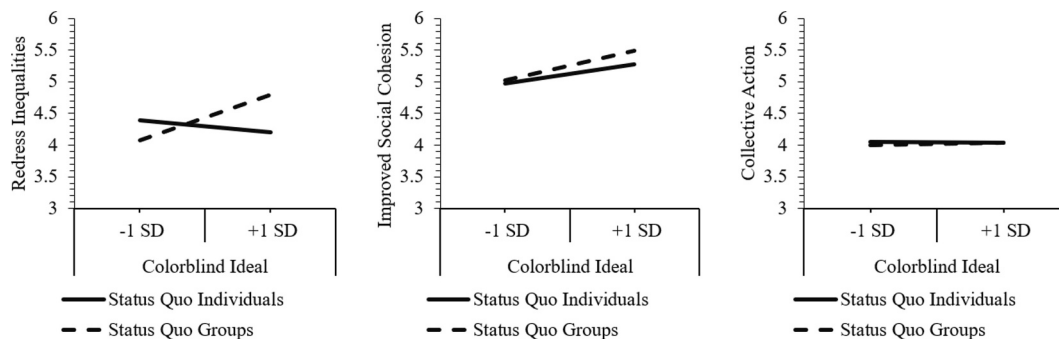
The motivation to improve intergroup relations was assessed using measures of a desire to **Engage in Collective Action** taken from existing research (Orazani & Leidner, 2019) and adapted for the experimental context. Participants were presented with four movements: "Movement promoting equal rights between Kaldans and Felorins," "Movement seeking to change disparities between groups on the island of Ral," "Movement combatting tensions between groups on the island of Ral," "Movement encouraging positive relationships between Kaldans and Felorins." For each movement, they were asked to indicate on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much so*) the degree to which they, as a member of the group to which they were assigned, would like to participate in events to support the movement, donate money to support the movement, and post or share information about the movement

**Table 2**

Unstandardized Regression Coefficients (Standard Errors) Showing Association between Colorblind Ideal and Motivation to Improve Intergroup Relations Depending on Experimentally Manipulated Status Quo (Study 2).

	Redressing inequalities		Social cohesion		Collective action	
	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	95 % CI	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	95 % CI	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	95 % CI
<b>Step 1</b>						
Status quo	-0.09 (0.09)	[-0.27, 0.09]	-0.07 (0.08)	[-0.22, 0.08]	0.01 (0.09)	[-0.15, 0.18]
Colorblind Ideal	0.22** (0.08)	[0.07, 0.37]	0.18** (0.07)	[0.05, 0.31]	0.01 (0.07)	[-0.14, 0.15]
<b>Step 2</b>						
Interaction	-0.19* (0.08)	[-0.35, -0.03]	-0.04 (0.07)	[-0.17, 0.10]	-0.01 (0.08)	[-0.16, 0.15]
<b>Simple effects</b>						
Status quo Grp	0.35*** (0.09)	[0.16, 0.53]	0.20* (0.08)	[0.05, 0.36]	0.01 (0.09)	[-0.16, 0.19]
Status quo Ind	-0.04 (0.13)	[-0.30, 0.23]	0.13 (0.11)	[-0.09, 0.35]	-0.00 (0.13)	[-0.25, 0.25]

Note. Status quo manipulation coded -1 focused on groups, 1 focused on individuals. Step 1 shows main effects prior to including the interaction as a predictor. Simple effects represent the decomposition of the interaction. \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001.



**Fig. 2.** Support for a Colorblind Ideal and Motivation to Improve Intergroup Relations by Experimental Status Quo (Study 2).

within their social networks. While these movements were expected to be divided into those seeking to redress inequalities and those seeking to improve social cohesion between groups (see preregistration <https://aspredicted.org/gvxj-vwks.pdf>), a Principal Component Analysis suggested all items loaded on one component (explaining 71.77 % of the variance,  $\lambda = 5.74$ ; see Supplementary Materials Section 1 for the confirmatory factor analysis leading to a similar conclusion). Therefore, results presented below involve all 12 items collapsed together ( $\alpha = 0.96$ ). Analyses were also conducted on the two separate dimensions for theoretical reasons and results were consistent with those reported (especially for the interaction predicting support for movements seeking to redress inequalities; results concerning support for movements seeking to improve social cohesion between groups were marginally significant; see Supplementary Materials Section 8).

Manipulation checks included the same measures of **Perceived Privilege** ( $\alpha = 0.73$ ), **Understanding of the Text** ( $r(399) = 0.91$ ; see Study 2), **Easiness of the Exercise** (again kept separate,  $r(399) = -0.35$ ), and **Perceived Status Quo**.

**8.2. Results**

**8.2.1. Manipulation checks**

Manipulation checks concerning experimental group membership are reported in Supplementary Materials Section 6 (all functioning like Study 2). For the experimental status quo conditions, as expected, participants in the group-based treatment status quo condition ( $M = 3.99$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ) showed significantly higher scores on the measure of perceived status quo (high score representing treatment as group members, low score representing treatment as individuals) compared to those in the individual-based treatment status quo condition ( $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ),  $F(1, 399) = 204.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.34$ . It is noteworthy here that the mean score on this measure ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) was very comparable to Study 2 ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ). There were no significant

differences between conditions in terms of the degree to which participants found the exercise easy,  $F(1, 399) = 0.55$ ,  $p = .460$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$ , or difficult,  $F(1, 399) = 0.58$ ,  $p = .448$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$ .

Descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables by status quo experimental conditions (and for the full sample) are available in Supplementary Materials Section 7. Like Study 2, descriptive statistics and correlations by experimental group membership are available in Supplementary Materials Section 6.

**8.2.2. Hypothesis testing**

Like Studies 1 and 2, a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted in which Step one included main effects of support for a colorblind ideal and the experimentally manipulated status quo on the updated version of motivation to engage in collective action, and Step two included the interaction between these two predictors (see Table 3, in line with preregistered analysis). Importantly for hypothesis testing, the interaction was significant ( $p = .024$ ;  $R^2 = 0.01$ ). Simple effects showed that support for a colorblind ideal was associated with a motivation to engage in collective action to redress group-based inequalities and improve social cohesion between groups only in the experimental condition where the status quo was focused on group treatment ( $p < .001$ ), and not in the experimental condition where the status quo was focused on individual treatment ( $p = .807$ ; see Table 3 and Fig. 3).<sup>9</sup>

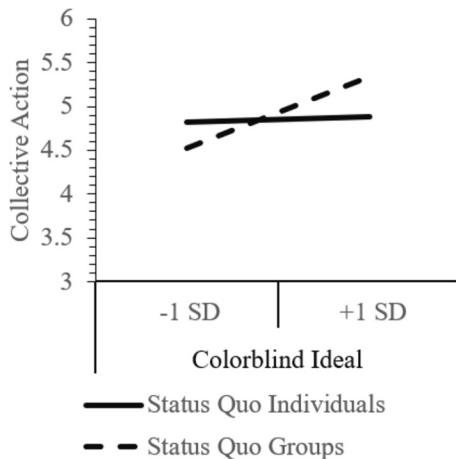
<sup>9</sup> Consistent with Studies 1 and 2, a three-way interaction incorporating experimental group membership as a supplementary moderator was non-significant,  $b = -0.02$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ , 95 % CI [-0.16, 0.14],  $t(393) = -0.18$ ,  $p = .857$ , suggesting there were no differences between those taking on the majority vs. minority perspective.



**Table 3**  
Unstandardized Regression Coefficients (Standard Errors) Showing Association between Colorblind Ideal and Motivation to Improve Intergroup Relations Depending on Experimentally Manipulated Status Quo (Study 3).

	Collective Action	
	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	95 % CI
Step 1		
Status quo	-0.05 (0.08)	[-0.21, 0.11]
Colorblind Ideal	0.24** (0.07)	[0.09, 0.38]
Step 2		
Interaction	-0.17* (0.08)	[-0.32, -0.02]
Simple effects		
Status quo Grp	0.37*** (0.10)	[0.18, 0.56]
Status quo Ind	0.03 (0.12)	[-0.20, 0.26]

Note. Status quo manipulation coded -1 focused on groups, 1 focused on individuals. Step 1 shows main effects prior to including the interaction as a predictor. Simple effects represent the decomposition of the interaction. \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001.



**Fig. 3.** Support for a Colorblind Ideal and Motivation to Engage in Collective Action by Experimental Status Quo (Study 3).

8.3. Discussion

Focusing on a desire for social change through a motivation to engage in collective action, Study 3 replicated effects concerning our hypothesis from Study 2 using an alternate outcome variable. When people endorse a colorblind ideal in a context characterized by an incongruent status quo (that is, where people are currently treated as a function of their group membership rather than as individuals), this ideal is associated with a motivation to engage in collective action to support social movements specifically aiming to redress inequalities and improve cooperation between groups.

9. Study 4

In the three experiments reported above, we did not find any remarkable differences between the experimental group membership conditions. This may be unsurprising, as the status quo was reportedly experienced the same way by both groups in the fictitious societies. However, there are certainly differences between members of (real) majority and minority (or dominant and non-dominant) groups concerning their perceptions and reactions to the status quo. Study 4 was therefore designed as a quasi-experimental replication of the previous studies. In particular, group-based treatment should be particularly salient among minorities (like African Americans in the US; see e.g., Pew

Research Center, 2016; Richeson & Sommers, 2016). It follows that the meaning they ascribe to a colorblind ideal (when they support it) should differ from majorities, too. If our hypothesis is correct, then we would expect to see a positive relationship between a colorblind ideal and a motivation to improve intergroup relations among African Americans, but not among White Americans (see preregistration at <https://aspre dictated.org/zmth-h8v5.pdf>).

9.1. Method

9.1.1. Participants

The sample comprised 400 American participants recruited via Lucid ([www.lucid.id](http://www.lucid.id)). Like Studies 2 and 3, this sample size allowed for the detection of a minimum effect size of  $R^2 = 0.02$ ; (80 power,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ). Sample size was determined before any data analysis. Over half of the sample identified as female (61.3 %; 38.3 % male; 0.5 % gender-diverse) and had a university education (52.8 %; 37.8 % having completed high school or equivalent). Age ranged from 18 to 89 years ( $M = 46.44$ ,  $SD = 17.04$ ). All participants were US citizens and exactly 50 % self-identified as White ( $n = 200$ ), and 50 % African American ( $n = 200$ ).

9.1.2. Procedure and measures

The same measures from Studies 1 and 2 were included in this fourth study: **Support for a Colorblind Ideal** ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ), and desires to **Redress Group-Based Inequalities** ( $r(398) = 0.82$ ), to **Improve Social Cohesion between groups** ( $r(398) = 0.81$ ), and to **Engage in Collective Action** ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ). The same measure of **Perceived Status Quo** was also included, as a quasi-experimental manipulation check.

9.2. Results

9.2.1. Quasi-experimental manipulation checks

As expected, African American participants ( $M = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) showed significantly higher scores on the belief that people are treated more as members of their group than as individuals relative to White participants ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ),  $F(1, 398) = 12.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.3$ . It is noteworthy here that the overall mean score on this measure in this study ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) was understandably higher but again reasonably close to Studies 2 and 3 (as a reminder,  $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 1.11$  Study 2;  $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 1.14$  Study 3) and substantially lower than Study 1 (as a reminder,  $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ). This pattern again suggests that treatment of people according to their group membership was very much salient in Study 1, when American participants were primed to think about group-based disparities. The pattern of means also suggests African Americans in the US context appear to perceive a status quo focused on groups (by default, at least in the present sample) still to a lesser extent than when Americans in general are primed to think about a society characterized by group-based disparities (in Study 1). This observation may illustrate the extent to which dominant norms in the US context are indeed prototypically individualistic and rather antithetical to the salience of group-based treatment, leaving limited wiggle room for perceiving that people are treated more often as members of their group than as individuals.

Descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables by group are available in Supplementary Materials Section 6.

9.2.2. Hypothesis testing

Similar to Studies 1, 2, and 3, a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted in which Step one included main effects of support for a colorblind ideal and group membership on three outcome variables, and Step two included the interaction between these two predictors (in line with preregistered analysis). Table 4 shows a pattern of results rather aligned with our expectations: Although the interaction effects (generally  $R^2 = 0.01$ ) only approached statistical significance in some cases ( $p = .122$  for redressing inequalities;  $p = .015$  for social cohesion;  $p = .223$  for collective action), simple effects consistently showed that support for

a colorblind ideal was associated with a motivation to redress group-based inequalities, to improve social cohesion between groups, and to engage in collective action *only* among African American participants ( $p = .002$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $p = .029$ , respectively). By contrast, support for a colorblind ideal was entirely unrelated to the same outcomes among White participants ( $p = .618$ ,  $p = .820$ ,  $p = .850$ , respectively; see Table 4 and Fig. 4).

## 10. Discussion and internal meta-analyses

Results of this fourth preregistered study suggest there may be a difference between majority and minority (dominant and non-dominant) groups concerning the meaning they ascribe to a colorblind ideal. Despite that results were sometimes approaching significance, the general pattern seemed to suggest that endorsement of a colorblind ideal is associated with a motivation to improve intergroup relations among African Americans, but not among White Americans. Furthermore, the underlying assumption that minority groups such as African Americans, for whom systemic discrimination is generally not a foreign concept, are generally more adept at perceiving a group-based status quo than majority group members, was corroborated by the quasi-experimental manipulation check.

Importantly, given that the same analytical procedure was used across studies (with the present study involving this quasi-experimental manipulation of the perceived status quo, Study 1 involving a subjective measure of the perceived status quo, and Studies 2 and 3 involving an experimental manipulation of the status quo), we conducted a series of random-effects meta-analyses (McShane & Böckenholt, 2017; Świątkowski & Dompnier, 2017) using RStudio version 2023.03.0 (Viechtbauer, 2010) comprising the four studies in this research. This methodological approach allowed us to examine the overall pattern across studies (Cumming, 2014), and the extent to which this pattern was statistically significant.

The first internal meta-analysis comprised interaction effects from Studies 1, 2, and 4, predicting the desire to redress group-based inequalities (identical outcome measure in each study). The second internal meta-analysis comprised interaction effects from Studies 1, 2, and 4, predicting the desire to improve social cohesion between groups (again, identical outcome measure in each study). The third internal meta-analysis comprised interaction effects from Studies 1, 2, 3, and 4, predicting the desire to engage in collective action (including a slightly different measure from Study 3).<sup>10</sup> Fig. 5 shows a graphic depiction of these internal meta-analyses.<sup>11</sup> Consistent with our hypothesis, all interactions were significant,  $b = 0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ , 95 % CI [0.09, 0.29],  $Z = 3.72$ ,  $p < .001$  predicting the desire to redress group-based inequalities (test for heterogeneity non-significant,  $Q(2) = 2.56$ ,  $p = .278$ );  $b = 0.15$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95 % CI [0.04, 0.27],  $Z = 2.59$ ,  $p = .010$  predicting the desire to improve social cohesion between groups (test for heterogeneity non-significant,  $Q(2) = 4.30$ ,  $p = .117$ );  $b = 0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ , 95 % CI [0.03, 0.20],  $Z = 2.55$ ,  $p = .011$  predicting the desire to engage in collective action (test for heterogeneity non-significant,  $Q(2) = 3.62$ ,  $p = .306$ ). These results provide convergent and robust evidence for our

<sup>10</sup> Because the measure of collective action was identical in Studies 1, 2, and 4, but different (and improved) in Study 3, we also conducted the same internal meta-analysis on this outcome variable excluding Study 3. The interaction effect testing our hypothesis was marginal, but non-significant,  $b = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95 % CI [-0.02, 0.20],  $Z = 1.65$ ,  $p = .099$  (test for heterogeneity non-significant,  $Q(2) = 2.85$ ,  $p = .240$ ). Limitations of this measure are highlighted in the general discussion section. The improved measure from Study 3 is thus important for the present research, by more clearly coinciding with the other outcome measures, to improve intergroup relations.

<sup>11</sup> To ensure comparability between studies, the interaction effects inserted in these meta-analyses were coded to coincide with the direction of the status quo variable from Study 1 (i.e., high score reflecting status quo focused on groups). This is why interaction effects were generally positive.

conclusions.

## 11. General discussion

Colorblindness is a widely contested diversity ideology, sometimes construed as ignoring historical group-based disparities and preserving the existing social hierarchy, and other times construed as an approach to overcome divides and improve intergroup relations via a process of decategorization (Guimond et al., 2014; Knowles et al., 2009; Leslie et al., 2020; Plaut et al., 2018; Rattan & Ambady, 2013; Whitley & Webster, 2019). In the present research, we disentangled a colorblind future-oriented (prescriptive) ideal, from a descriptive observation of the current state of affairs, the status quo. Across four studies (3 pre-registered), and preliminary data from 3 countries, results showed that a colorblind ideal is associated with a desire to improve intergroup relations predominantly when it is *incongruent* rather than congruent with the status quo; that is, when one acknowledges a point of reference *from which* to change. To do so, the measure of support for a colorblind ideal included prescriptive words (i.e., all items included “should”), and we assessed the status quo as a measure, manipulation, and quasi-experimental manipulation of perceiving a society prioritizing individual or group-based treatment. Additionally, we examined three different means of improving intergroup relations: redressing group-based inequalities, improving social cohesion, and engaging in collective action in favor of these outcomes. While the motivation to engage in collective action did not appear to be affected in two of the studies (Studies 2 and 4; with limitations discussed below), a nuanced measure in Study 3 corroborated our hypothesis, with clearer objectives of this action-oriented approach to improving intergroup relations. Indeed, internal meta-analyses of the results from all four studies revealed that a colorblind ideal for managing diversity is associated with a desire to redress inequalities and improve social cohesion between groups *especially* when incongruent, rather than congruent, with the status quo.

The distinction (or rather similarity) between redressing inequalities and improving social cohesion is helpful to consider here. While results were rather convergent on these outcomes (with weaker effects on social cohesion), existing research suggests that social cohesion can sometimes inhibit efforts to redress group-based inequalities by creating a certain “irony of harmony” (see e.g., Dixon et al., 2010; Dovidio et al., 2015; Saguy et al., 2009): Through positive contact and encounters, a common identity is formed, blurring boundaries between groups and reducing efforts to redress group-based inequalities (particularly among the disadvantaged; see also Saguy et al., 2016). Our measure of social cohesion was operationalized, in particular, through a motivation to improve cooperation between groups; that is, by encouraging members of different groups to get along. The measure itself thus preserved the very existence of groups, in a way that did not necessarily undermine their distinctiveness and thus, eventual disparities between them. Furthermore, research on the irony of harmony tends to focus on harmony as a rather *current* situation of contact, trust, or lack of prejudice between groups (e.g., Hässler et al., 2020), not necessarily a future-oriented ideal (as in the present study; for an exception, see Hasan-Aslih et al., 2019). It may not be so surprising that improving social cohesion as an outcome was possible in a way that was separate, yet coherent, with improving equality between groups. Indeed, it is the motivation for *social change* that was examined in the present research, assessed via a desire to improve different issues in intergroup relations.

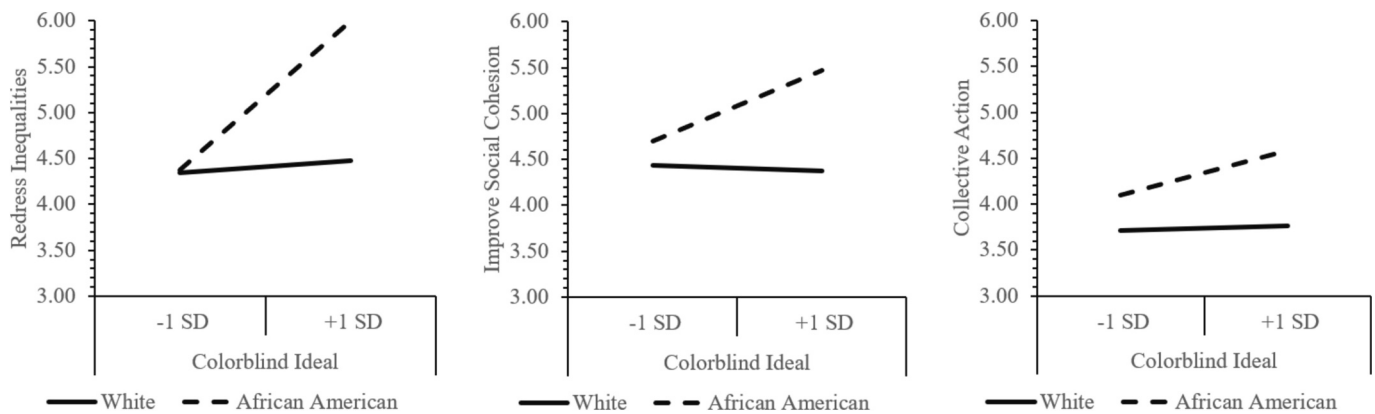
It is interesting to note that effects were the strongest and most consistent when predicting the desire to redress group-based inequalities. In a similar vein, existing research appears to be particularly polarized when it comes to determining whether a colorblind ideal is a hierarchy-enhancing (e.g., Apfelbaum et al., 2010; Yogeewaran et al., 2018) or hierarchy-attenuating (e.g., Guimond et al., 2013, 2014; Levin et al., 2012) ideology. While this may be due to different measures or methodologies used (see e.g., Leslie et al., 2020), psychological research does suggest divergent motivated construals exist (Knowles et al., 2009).

**Table 4**

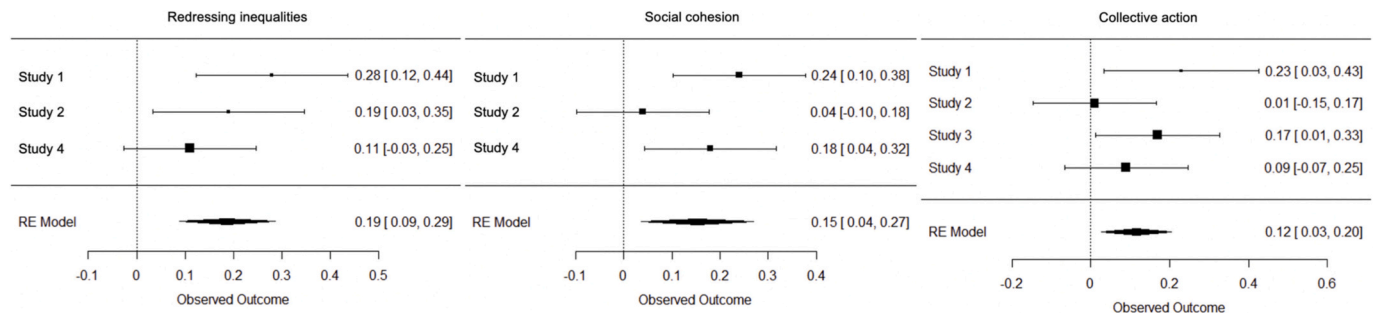
Unstandardized Regression Coefficients (Standard Errors) Showing Association between Colorblind Ideal and Motivation to Improve Intergroup Relations Depending on African American vs. White Group Membership (Study 4).

	Redressing inequalities		Social cohesion		Collective action	
	<i>b</i> (SE)	95 % CI	<i>b</i> (SE)	95 % CI	<i>b</i> (SE)	95 % CI
<b>Step 1</b>						
GroupMembership	-0.14 (0.08)	[-0.29, 0.01]	-0.35*** (0.08)	[-0.51, 0.18]	-0.30*** (0.09)	[-0.47, -0.14]
Colorblind Ideal	0.19** (0.07)	[0.05, 0.32]	0.20** (0.07)	[0.05, 0.34]	0.14 (0.08)	[-0.01, 0.29]
<b>Step 2</b>						
Interaction	-0.11 (0.07)	[-0.25, 0.03]	-0.18* (0.07)	[-0.33, -0.04]	-0.09 (0.08)	[-0.25, 0.06]
<b>Simple effects</b>						
AfricanAmerican	0.27** (0.09)	[0.10, 0.45]	0.34*** (0.09)	[0.15, 0.52]	0.21* (0.10)	[0.02, 0.40]
WhiteAmerican	0.06 (0.11)	[-0.16, 0.27]	-0.02 (0.12)	[-0.26, 0.20]	0.02 (0.12)	[-0.21, 0.26]

Note. Group Membership: African American coded -1, White American coded 1. Step 1 shows main effects prior to including the interaction as a predictor. Simple effects represent the decomposition of the interaction. \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01, \*\*\**p* < .001.



**Fig. 4.** Support for a Colorblind Ideal and Motivation to Improve Intergroup Relations by Group Membership (Study 4).



**Fig. 5.** Graphic Depiction of Internal Meta-Analyses Comprising Interaction Effects Predicting Motivation to Improve Intergroup Relations.

The present research provides a normative explanation for conflicting evidence in the literature by suggesting construals of a colorblind ideal are anchored in rather congruent or incongruent social contexts. In other words, the extent to which one's ideals are associated with a desire for social change likely depends on their point of reference; the status quo to which that ideal is compared.

In the present research, when the status quo was experimentally manipulated (Studies 2 and 3), a colorblind ideal was more supported in the individual-based status quo condition (see Supplementary Materials Section 7). This suggests that most of the time, this ideal was rather congruent with the status quo, consistent with the well-established phenomenon of status quo bias (see Jost et al., 2013; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) suggesting people generally have a preference that the current state of affairs stays the same. Nevertheless, the present research focused on the important question of what occurs when the two are

*incongruent*; a condition under which social change in favor of improving intergroup relations appears to be idealized and pursued.

To pursue social change, people need to think that their objectives are achievable. The present research suggests that having a point from which to change is a key factor. Nevertheless, when an individual endorses an ideal that is at odds with the societal context in which they are embedded, this may, paradoxically, have a disempowering effect (or at least, perhaps not an empowering one; Drury & Reicher, 2009). We did have a supplementary exploratory variable reflecting this notion of empowerment (“I am able to have a real say on issues that are important to me”), with exploratory analyses in Studies 2 and 3 suggesting this was positively predicted by a colorblind ideal only when the status quo focused on individuals; that is, when people felt their ideals were *congruent* with the status quo and when they were thus *less* likely to show motivation for social change. By contrast, no association was found

when ideals were *incongruent* with the status quo. Therefore, people who endorse a colorblind ideal that is incongruent with the status quo may desire social change towards greater equality, but they may be unlikely to actively seek out this change due to a sense of powerlessness. This may also explain, at least at a theoretical level, the weaker effects on collective action. Nevertheless, there are likely empowering conditions under which people would be even more inclined to show motivation for social change when their colorblind ideal and the status quo are incongruent, such as being surrounded by like-minded people (e.g., in their social network; see e.g., [Roblain et al., 2020](#)). Future research should examine such conditions.

### 11.1. Limitations, strengths, and future directions

While results were remarkably consistent across studies in the present research (despite marginal or weak effects which were addressed with the internal random-effects meta-analyses), an empirical limitation needs to be discussed in more detail concerning one of the outcome variables: collective action. Importantly, in Studies 1, 2, and 4, this measure referred to the motivation to engage in collective, political behavior “in line with one’s views”, without specification concerning what those views are, or what the goals of such action would be. In each of these studies, the outcome variables were counter-balanced, meaning one could assume approximately two-thirds of participants were at least *primed* with the motivation to redress inequalities or to improve social cohesion between groups prior to responding to the collective action questions. Nevertheless, this priming is indeed an assumption, and it may be that among some participants, expressing the motivation to engage in such collective actions could be with a goal to maintain rather than attenuate the social hierarchy; to undermine rather than improve intergroup relations. This may also explain why the meta-analysis concerning this ambiguous measure in Studies 1, 2, and 4 was only approaching significance, suggesting we should not overestimate the conclusive power of this limited collective action measure for the present research. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that Study 3 corroborated our hypothesis with a more targeted measure of collective action that was described as improving intergroup relations, and that the other two outcome measures showed consistent results in line with our hypothesis.

The diverse methods adopted in the present studies served as a strength of this research. Importantly, the experimental nature of the three fictitious society studies provided internal validity and control. These studies were pivotal. They were indispensable to draw participants’ attention to specific characteristics and interpretations of the status quo and allowed for a conceptual separation between a (prescriptive) colorblind, future-oriented ideal and the (descriptive) current state of affairs in society (that can either be challenged or accepted via a colorblind ideal). Without this conceptual and controlled separation, many people may, indeed, conflate the two and express support for ideals that are generally congruent with the (perceived) status quo ([Jost et al., 2013](#); [Kahneman & Tversky, 1979](#)). This is precisely the purpose of the present research; to examine how colorblindness may be contextually and normatively constrained; to show that the meaning ascribed to a colorblind ideal may be contingent on the extent to which a society already ascribes (or is perceived to ascribe) an unwavering importance to individual treatment.

Alone, these experimental studies could have raised a concern for ecological validity. However, we did find some patterns in correlates of a colorblind ideal across national settings in the preliminary studies (null correlations in the US; generally positive ones in New Zealand and Canada), and among African American (positive associations) versus White Americans (null associations) in Study 4’s quasi-experimental manipulation of the perceived status quo. These complementary findings provide essential support for the notion that a colorblind ideal holds a different meaning in different real-world (national and intergroup) contexts.

Nevertheless, there are plenty of directions for future research to take in this area. Firstly, further exploring construals of a colorblind ideal among ethnic minorities is crucial, as a common assumption in the literature is that focusing on individuals is harmful (and threatening) for minorities ([Plaut, 2010](#); [Rios, 2022](#)), and that if minorities support ideologies like individualism and meritocracy, then this reflects an internalization of hegemonic beliefs. Our results appear to suggest minorities can support a colorblind, *prescriptive ideal* specifically to seek social change for equality (as did Martin Luther King Jr. in his seminal speech, and in line with the tendency for minorities to support individual and collective justice simultaneously; [Gale & Staerklé, 2019](#)). Future research should continue to disentangle prescriptive versus descriptive beliefs among majority and minority group members and the potentially divergent implications and meanings of colorblind (and other individual justice-based) prescriptive ideals.

Secondly, while this research deliberately kept the outcome variables open-ended when it came to defining what “groups” people might have been thinking of, there is an implicit assumption in this research that people would have been thinking about racial or ethnic groups (particularly in the US, as well as New Zealand and Canada) as they represent a salient social identity in these contexts. Future research should thus examine if our hypothesis functions, also, in contexts where inequalities and conflict between groups implicate other types of groups, distinguished for example on the basis of religion, language, class, or caste.

Third, more cross-national (and longitudinal) studies would also be fruitful to examine (in)congruity between the status quo and colorblind ideals. Comparing samples from multiple countries with a comparatively stronger normative emphasis on individuals versus groups would be especially desirable (e.g., via multilevel analysis). While the majority of research on colorblindness has been conducted in prototypically liberal societies in which individualist values are fundamental and pervasive (making it appear legitimate to treat and judge people as unique individuals rather than members of social categories; [Licata et al., 2011](#); [Ward et al., 2018](#)), such an ideal may hold a different meaning in other parts of the world, and at different points in time. Indeed, effects in our preliminary study did present some initial naturalistic evidence of colorblindness as an ideal that appears to be generally congruent with the alleged status quo in the US. By contrast, results seemed to diverge in New Zealand and Canada as additional Western societies where a political and normative emphasis on group-based treatment (and recognition) is arguably (contemporarily) more salient.

## 12. Conclusion

Colorblindness is an ideal for managing diversity that is highly contested. In the context of social justice movements in contemporary Western societies, those who endorse such an ideal are often dismissed as naïve or even malevolent towards minorities and people who experience pervasive discrimination or structural disadvantage. The idea is that if such an ideal is endorsed, then one fails to acknowledge historical and present-day injustices that many marginalized groups face. Decades of social psychological research have indeed shown that acknowledging such injustices is indispensable for social change. Nevertheless, in the present research, by disentangling a prescriptive ideal from the descriptive status quo, results remind us of an important nuance inherent to the colorblind ideal: Depending on one’s point of comparison, those who endorse such an ideal may be allies of social justice movements, also desiring progress and greater equality in society.

Perceiving a status quo based on groups implies a certain degree of awareness that discriminatory processes exist; that some people are treated differently (with more or less respect and esteem) than others simply due to their group affiliations. This critical consciousness is known to be associated with solidarity with minority groups and motivation for social change (see e.g., [Gale & Phalet, 2024](#); [Schwarzenthal et al., 2022](#)). Here, we provide evidence that such processes can be



paired with endorsement of a colorblind ideal. If our goal as social psychologists is to examine what motivates people to address inequalities and improve intergroup relations, listening to them, and understanding their point of reference, is an excellent place to start.

### Open practices

Data and materials for all studies comprising the present research are available at [https://osf.io/45w3m/?view\\_only=a74f8773bad54a7baffada577dbeece13](https://osf.io/45w3m/?view_only=a74f8773bad54a7baffada577dbeece13). Preregistrations are available at <https://aspredicted.org/yps9-t3n6.pdf> (Study 2), <https://aspredicted.org/gvxj-vwks.pdf> (Study 3), and <https://aspredicted.org/zmth-h8v5.pdf> (Study 4).

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### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Jessica Gale:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kumar Yoogeeswaran:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Data curation, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of competing interest

None.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2024.104693>.

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