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**COLOR MINIMIZATION IN FRONT-LINE PUBLIC SERVICE:
THE DIVERSITY PERSPECTIVES OF CHILD WELFARE WORKERS**

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A large literature on street-level bureaucrats has investigated their practice, routines, leadership and capacity for change (Lipsky, 1980; Vinzant & Crothers, 1998; Foldy & Buckley, 2009). Some of it has explored how these street-level workers address issues related to race in the course of their work (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003) and whether outcomes differ depending on the demographic make-up of the employee population (Dolan & Rosenbloom, 2003). However, little work has systematically explored these workers' perspectives about the role of race and ethnicity in their work and how that sensemaking might affect their practice. Work in the business management literature has suggested that these "diversity perspectives" may be central to effectively addressing diversity-related issues (Ely and Thomas, 2001).

In this paper, we describe an investigation of the diversity perspectives of teams of child welfare workers as they discussed how to work with their racially and ethnically diverse caseload of families. Child welfare is an environment in which race and culture are often salient and in which professional standards call for cultural competence (National Association of Social Workers, 2006). However, research suggests that many workers lack the specific attitudes, knowledge and behaviors that comprise culturally competent approaches (Pyles & Kim, 2006; Uttal, 2006). In fact, studies show that families of color are often treated differently, and more punitively, than white families (Becker, Jordan, & Larsen, 2007; Roberts, 2002; Rodenborg, 2004). Therefore, it is critical to understand in more depth how these workers viewed the role and impact of race and culture in their work.

The study followed the teams for 2.5 years and included interviews and observation of team meetings. We found that, while workers espoused the importance of race and culture, in their practice (or theory-in-use) they actually minimized their importance (Argyris & Schon, 1996). This "color minimization" occurred in several different ways. For example, workers noted that the "child's needs" would be the most important element guiding their decision-making, but then defined those needs as separate from race and culture, such that race and ethnicity were not seen as central to the child's well-being. In addition, workers associated race and culture almost entirely with recently arrived immigrants rather than with native-born or longer-established immigrant families. In other words, racial and ethnic differences were seen as largely related to language and early acculturation, rather than more long-standing, culturally embedded values, norms and traditions.

While this study took place in a context in which race and culture are immediately relevant and salient, we believe the work has implications for any public organization attempting to work effectively with its heterogeneous clients or customers and to draw on the expertise and skills of its diverse membership.

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In this paper, we describe an investigation of the sensemaking of teams of child welfare workers as they discussed how to work with their racially and ethnically diverse caseload of families. Child welfare is an environment in which race and culture are often salient and in which professional standards call for cultural competence (National Association of Social Workers, 2006). However, research suggests that many workers lack the specific attitudes, knowledge and behaviors that comprise culturally competent approaches (Pyles & Kim, 2006; Uttal, 2006). In fact, studies show that families of color are often treated differently, and more punitively, than white families (Becker, Jordan, & Larsen, 2007; Roberts, 2002; Rodenborg, 2004). Therefore, it is critical to understand

¹ While the concepts of race, ethnicity, culture and color are analytically distinct and meaningful, in practice they can be hard to distinguish. Indeed, colloquially and academically, they are often used interchangeably. For readability, we often use "race" or "culture" to stand in for the complex of these entwined constructs. However, where relevant, we make distinctions between these terms and use more specific terminology. Further, we use "color" to name some of our main constructs because of the broad dissemination of the term "color blind."

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in more depth how these workers viewed the role and impact of race and culture in their work. Further, we believe the work has implications for any public organization attempting to work fairly and effectively with its heterogeneous clients or customers and to draw on the expertise and skills of its diverse membership.

While public management research on workers' sensemaking about race is slim, studies in several other fields suggest that "diversity perspectives" may be central to effectively addressing diversity-related issues (Ely and Thomas, 2001). Much of the research investigates the impact of color blindness and its opposite, what we call "color cognizance," in small group and work settings. Taken as a whole, the results suggest that color-blindness detracts from interactions in racially diverse dyads or groups while color cognizance enhances such interactions (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Evans, 2007; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000). Though color blindness has been the dominant approach in the United States (as well as many other Western countries) for decades, color cognizance informs much of the "managing diversity" movement that has swept through today's workplaces (Cox, 1994; Litvin, 1997; Nemetz & Christensen, 1996; Plaut, 2002; Pless & Maak, 2004). Thus far, however, little data documents how workers on the ground make sense of these dueling discourses and how this affects their practice.

This paper suggests that one approach that attempts to harmonize the two perspectives is "color minimization": a perspective that acknowledges, but then downplays, the importance of race and ethnicity. This finding is particularly noteworthy, given that child protection is a context in which race is salient and in which

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employees are charged to pursue cultural competence. If color cognizance cannot find a foothold in this environment, it suggests there may be significant barriers to establishing it in work environments where issues of race and culture are less salient, though not necessarily less relevant.

We begin by reviewing previous research on color blindness and color cognizance, focusing on research done in organizational contexts. We then describe our study and its findings, and end with some implications of this work for research and practice.

COLOR BLINDNESS AND COLOR COGNIZANCE

A large stream of research in sociology, psychology and other fields has documented and investigated different ways that Americans make sense of race and ethnicity by examining “models” or “discourses” related to cultural diversity (Berrey, 2005; Plaut, 2002; Spencer, 1994). While language can vary, the great majority of this research compares color blindness, a belief that race and culture are irrelevant because “we are all the same under the skin,” with some version “of color cognizance” (this term is adapted from Frankenberg, 1993), sometimes called multiculturalism (Correll, Park, & Smith, 2008; Nemetz et al., 1996; Richeson et al., 2004; Spencer, 1994; Wolsko, Park, & Judd, 2006; Wolsko et al., 2000) or color consciousness (Crenshaw, 1989; Ladd, 1997). Color cognizance is the belief in the importance of racial and ethnic differences because of their impact on individuals, groups, communities and societies. Experimental and lab research with dyads and small groups, from a social psychology perspective, largely shows that some version of color cognizance leads to better outcomes or processes

than color blindness (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Norton, Sommers, Apfelbaum, Pura, & Ariely, 2006; Richeson et al., 2004; Wolsko et al., 2006; Wolsko et al., 2000)². For example, one study found that multiculturalism was associated with less bias than colorblindness (Richeson et al., 2004) while another found that colorblindness led to greater perceived unfriendliness in dyadic encounters (Norton et al., 2006).

Organizational researchers in management and social psychology have also begun similar research, though the inquiry “is still at an embryonic stage” (van Knippenberg et al., 2007b:532). Several terms have been used to refer to organizational members’ cognitions about diversity. Van Knippenberg and colleagues have used both “diversity mind-sets” (van Knippenberg et al., 2007b) and “diversity beliefs” (Homan et al., 2007; van Dick, van Knippenberg, Hagele, Guillaume, & Brodbeck, 2008; van Knippenberg, Haslam, & Platow, 2007a), while Ely and Thomas coined the term “diversity perspectives (Ely & Thomas, 2001) and Purdie-Vaughns and colleagues use the term “diversity philosophy” (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlemann, & Crosby, 2008). In all cases, however, these cognitions refer to how the individual or group understands the role of diversity in the workplace; in particular, comparing beliefs that support the suppression of diversity with those that support the active engagement of it because it is perceived to have value for group task and processes. Research has investigated attitudes toward gender diversity (Homan et al., 2007; van Knippenberg et al., 2007a)

² One exception is Correll et al. (2008), an experimental study which found that in high conflict situations, colorblindness led to less prejudice than multiculturalism. However, after a delay of 20 minutes, color blind participants showed a rebound effect, evidencing greater prejudice than multicultural participants. The authors conclude that color blindness only works well in very short-term situations. Given that most work relationships, either dyads or groups, would be considered long-term, this study also suggests that multicultural approaches have better outcomes in actual work settings.

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and racial and ethnic diversity (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; van Dick et al., 2008).

In experimental studies, researchers have manipulated diversity beliefs to be either pro-diversity (participants are told that diverse groups typically have stronger performance than homogeneous groups) or pro-similarity (participants are told homogeneous groups typically perform better) or used simple measures to capture participants' existing beliefs. This research has found that, under certain conditions, groups with pro-diversity beliefs out-perform groups with pro-similarity beliefs (Homan et al., 2007) and tend to have higher group identification (van Dick et al., 2008; van Knippenberg et al., 2007a). One set of experimental studies compared color blind and "value-diversity" perspectives, finding that African Americans felt less comfort and trust in a company with a color blind approach (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008).

These studies have made a significant contribution by suggesting that our sensemaking about racial and ethnic diversity matters for group outcomes, but they have two limitations. First, the perspectives they worked with were simple and dichotomous: A person or team was either pro-diversity or pro-similarity (or color blind.) Field studies in sociology and political science exploring this sensemaking in neighborhoods and schools, however, have found far more complex approaches among their informants (Berrey, 2005; Pollack, 2004; Walsh, 2007). In the organizational literature, Ely and Thomas conducted interviews and observed staff meetings in three racially heterogeneous organizations in order to explore their rationale for being diverse (2001). They identified three different diversity perspectives among the workgroups

they studied. Two could be considered pro-diversity, but only the perspective that recognized cultural experience as a broad and deep source of work-related expertise and skill led to greater effectiveness. A pro-diversity perspective that valued employee diversity only because of its potential for reaching new customer or client populations did not lead to better results, nor did a color blind perspective that saw no work-related value to diversity.

Further, given the widespread and ongoing societal debate between color blindness and color cognizance, many may be legitimately uncertain about what to believe, as others have also pointed out: “[Diversity training] participants may be confused about programs that emphasize racial or gender differences when they had been taught in the past to be *color blind* or *gender neutral*” (Nemetz et al., 1996, 453; their italics). Other organizational studies show that individuals often hold conflicting ideas about the impact of gender identity at work rather than one consistent belief (Bartunek, Walsh, & Lacey, 2001; Foldy, 2006). As a whole, this work suggests the importance of documenting actual sensemaking in the workplace, sensemaking that is likely to be layered and complex and even contradictory.

Second, these experimental studies did not explore how diversity beliefs affect actual practice. Perhaps people hold espoused beliefs of one kind or another, but do not behave in ways consistent with those beliefs. Such inconsistency has been established regarding other organizational issues (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Argyris & Schon, 1996) and one study did find that while MBA students said that they valued cultural diversity, they enacted homogeneity in their study and friendship groups

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(Tomlinson & Egan, 2002). In their field study described above, Ely and Thomas (2001) describe three workgroups, each holding a different perspective, and each with a concordance between belief and behavior. However, their study was not designed to investigate the link between the two.

The study we describe in this paper investigated in depth the attitudes about the role and impact of racial and ethnic diversity held by teams of child welfare workers, as manifested both in their responses to interview questions and in their discussions of their cases. Therefore we can compare their espoused beliefs with their actual approach to their casework. Also, because we asked questions in a variety of ways, we were able to capture the complex thinking of these social workers about the role of race and culture in their work.

METHODS

Research Site

This study was designed to explore how front-line public service workers understand the role of race and ethnicity in their work and, in particular, where they stand on the continuum between color cognizance and color blindness. Since relatively few workplaces explicitly discuss these issues, we took extra care in finding an appropriate context, since we required a setting in which race, ethnicity and culture were salient enough that they were actually addressed on some level. The field of child welfare seemed promising: it focuses on dynamics in the home, on intimate details of family life and child rearing that are broadly understood to be culturally informed. It is an environment in which race and culture are often salient and in which professional

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standards call for cultural competence (National Association of Social Workers, 2001). However, there is a robust debate in the field about the role and impact of race and ethnicity. Some believe that cultural competence is central to effective casework (Cohen, 2003; Courtney et al., 1996; Yan, 2005), while others believe that race has been overemphasized (Bartholet, 1999, 2006). Moreover, research suggests that many workers lack the specific attitudes, knowledge and behaviors that comprise culturally competent approaches (Maiter, 2004; Pyles & Kim, 2006; Uttal, 2006). In fact, studies show that families of color are often treated differently, and more punitively, than white families (Becker, Jordan, & Larsen, 2007; Roberts, 2002; Rodenborg, 2004). Therefore, child welfare seemed to be a setting in which employees might be engaged in active sensemaking about the role of race and ethnicity in their work.

Our particular site was a state child protection agency. In 2004, it launched a pilot Teaming Initiative to explore how a team-based structure could improve social worker morale as well as services to families. The agency was concerned about its front-line employees who worked directly with clients and suffered considerable stress and isolation. It hoped that a team-based model could facilitate better outcomes for workers and clients by bringing together a broader set of perspectives and experiences in thinking about how to work with a given family as well as by providing more emotional support to individual workers.

These front-line workers were the agency employees in the field, going to people's homes to investigate allegations of child abuse or neglect, speaking with teachers, counselors and other "collaterals" as the agency called them, finding resources (such as

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counseling or temporary financial support) for families, and making recommendations to their superiors about whether or not a child should be removed from a home. The work involved both clinical expertise, as workers attempted to understand the dynamics of a family and what interventions could create positive change, and administrative tasks, such as identifying agencies who could provide needed services and coordinating a network of family members and caregivers to support a family.

In the traditional set-up, each social worker was a member of a “unit” with a supervisor and four or five workers. Members of these units sat near each other, but each worker had his or her own caseload, and was singly responsible for those cases. (Caseload was officially capped at 18, but often went higher.) In the Teaming Initiative, the structure was similar: each worker was a member of a “team” with a supervisor and four or five social workers. However, the form of service delivery was expected to change in that multiple workers would be involved in cases and all team members could be called on for advice and assistance. Further, all teams were expected to meet at least weekly to discuss their cases, their team processes, and administrative issues.

While the Teaming Initiative was not explicitly linked to diversity or cultural competence, the agency had recently identified six core practice values, one of which was “committed to cultural diversity/cultural competence.” While agencies and social workers vary in their adoption of the field’s standards of cultural competence (Rodenborg, 2004; Yan, 2005), the leaders of this agency site sought to send a message that awareness of race and ethnicity was critical to child welfare practice.

Data Collection

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The Teaming Initiative involved seven teams in six offices around the state. The first author enrolled all seven teams in the research, working with a research assistant, a doctoral student in social work who had spent ten years as a child protection worker. The first author is native-born and white and the assistant is Vietnamese-American and an immigrant.

Data collection included both interviews and observation. The first author conducted interviews with each team (meeting as a whole) in three rounds: at the beginning of the teams' work together, as a baseline (2004), after about one year (2005), and after two to two-and-a-half years (2006-07). She also conducted interviews with four team stakeholders or observers for each team, including the team's immediate superior, the director of the office in which the team was located, a teaming consultant working directly with the teams, and the coordinator of the Teaming Initiative. These two latter stakeholders were familiar with all the teams. All told, the paper draws on 28 interviews.

Data collection also included observation of team meetings approximately every other month for about two years, for a total of 47. (These meetings lasted at least an hour and sometimes longer.) The first author and RA wrote field notes as they observed, as well as taped the meetings. When the field notes did not have the detail required to understand what was happening in the team at a given point, the first author fully (word for word) or semi- (catching the gist of each comment) transcribed portions of the meetings. She also compared these transcripts to the field notes, since the latter captured things like non-verbal behavior that the transcripts did not.

The sample: Overall, the sample consists of 64 social workers, 78% female. (Because the workers were largely women, we will use “she” to refer to them throughout the paper.) About 70% of the sample was white, with about 30% people of color. (All racial or ethnic identifications were self-reported.) Of the people of color, about half were Latina or Latino and one-third were African American. Two people categorized themselves as Asian and two checked the “other” box. All of the teams had some racial or ethnic diversity; all included at least one bi-lingual worker; all teams had significant diversity in their caseloads, including multiple families of color; and all the members of all the teams faced a significant likelihood that they would work with families with backgrounds different from their own.

Gathering data on espoused and enacted diversity perspectives. Data was gathered from team members on how they understood the role and impact of race and culture on their work with families in four ways³: 1) Asking whether (and why) it was important for the agency to be racially diverse; 2) Providing a scenario related to race and asking for their reactions; 3) Asking members to discuss a recent case in which “race or ethnicity was an issue” (see the exact wording of all three of these questions in the appendix); and 4) Observing case discussions in team meetings. The first question was designed to elicit their espoused beliefs while questions 2 and 3 were designed to get beyond purely espoused beliefs since they asked participants to think about behavior, both imagined and actual. Finally, observation of case discussions captured enacted

³ We focused on work with families rather than the group’s teamwork, because the field’s professional standards emphasize cultural competence in work with clients, as opposed to with their colleagues.

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perspectives because these discussions were where workers thought together about how to approach a case and, therefore, would be the venue for an exploration of how race or ethnicity might be relevant.

Data Analysis

The authors came to data analysis starting from different positions. The first author had gathered the large majority of the data (a research assistant gathered the rest). The second author had no previous involvement with the study and therefore came with fresh eyes. Further, the first author is a professor of management, while the second author is a professor of counseling psychology, a clinical field like social work. Finally, the first author is white, while the second author is African American. We used these different positions as a way to deepen our analysis and check our assumptions throughout the data analysis process.

Overview. The goal of our data analysis was to identify how these workers understood the role of race and ethnicity in their work with families, as it was revealed both in the interviews and in their behavior during case discussions. We began with the interview transcripts. From our earliest analyses, it became clear that the workers' thinking was complex and varied. Therefore, our analysis strategy was to document the different lines of thinking that we heard and then look for underlying patterns across the participants. From this analysis emerged the notion of color minimization and several different ways in which it was manifested. Once this construct was clarified, we turned to the data from team meeting observation to see whether and how the teams engaged issues of race or ethnicity in their casework discussions. We did not initially

use color minimization as a guide or lens for this analysis; rather we simply identified if race or ethnicity was mentioned and what kinds of things were discussed. It was only after some months of analyzing these discussions that we realized there might be a mirroring of sensemaking and behavior, with the teams manifesting color minimization in their casework. We then began explicitly making a distinction between espoused and enacted diversity perspectives and ultimately identified a disjuncture between the approach that these workers described when we asked their opinions and the approach that came through when they described or we observed their practice. We elaborate each of these steps below.

Specific steps. We began with analysis of the interview transcripts, in which team members thought aloud about the role of race and ethnicity in their work with families. Using Atlas.ti, the qualitative analysis software, the first author used very general codes (such as “diversity: perspective” and “diversity: casework” to identify all the material in the team interview and team stakeholder transcripts related in any way to team members’ diversity perspectives in theory or practice.⁴ She then excerpted all this material, took out any identifying codes, and put it in one long document of about 81 single-spaced pages which included material from all the teams.

Both authors independently analyzed this material, reading and re-reading the material, and writing memos to distill the 81 pages of data into more manageable summaries and to identify emerging insights. We chose this approach for two reasons. First, we were looking as much for the *absence* of discussions of race, or for the absence

⁴ This paper is part of a broader study on how the teams worked and learned together, so only a subset of material was related to sensemaking about race and ethnicity in particular.

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of particular topics, as we were for their presence. As we relate in the Findings section, our analysis draws as much from things that were not discussed as those that were. Second, we wanted to push beyond explicit sensemaking to find deeper, more implicit patterns of thought, patterns that were not readily apparent in single chunks of text. Therefore, we relied on analytic memos, that were then shared with each other, to capture and deepen our understandings.

The first author suggested the concept of color minimization in one early memo and after some discussion and reviewing the data, we agreed that the construct seemed to capture what we were seeing, though we began to notice that responses seemed to differ according to what questions were asked. We then went back to the data and used memos to systematically distinguish among responses to different questions and to ultimately identify three particular patterns of thought in which color minimization seemed to manifest itself: 1) “Color is a factor to consider, but is not central to a child’s needs;” 2) “Color is about language and culture, not race;” and 3) “We need to learn about our clients’ cultures, not about our own.” We present these at greater length in the next section.

We then turned to the field notes and transcripts from observation of a total of 47 team meetings. The first author began the process by counting the number of case discussions each team had over the full course of the observation, for a total of 96 case discussions across all teams. Then, she noted whether anyone, at any point in the discussion, in any way mentioned the family’s race or ethnicity. Fourteen of the 96 discussions, or about 15%, included at least a mention of the race or ethnicity of the

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family, if not additional discussion⁵. She also identified five other instances in which the teams discussed race or culture though not tied to a specific case, for a total of 19 instances in which the teams in some way referenced or discussed race or culture. The first author then created an 18-page single-spaced document which included all of the relevant material for all 19 occurrences. The excerpts ranged from a single worker naming or asking a question about the race of the family with no additional discussion to several members having a substantive discussion about the family's race or ethnicity and the implications for casework.

Each of us then independently analyzed these excerpts, looking at the length and substance of the conversation. We initially explored the depth of the discussion: was it a simple question or brief comment or did the group engage race or ethnicity in any depth by using a cultural lens to understand what might be happening with a given family? As we conducted this analysis, however, we saw some preliminary data that suggested the participants might be enacting in their case discussions the three specific

⁵ This analysis prompts the question of whether naming or engaging race or ethnicity in some way is always called for or whether it is really appropriate only for certain kinds of cases or families. In other words, if we use the number of times the team engages race as the numerator, then what should the denominator be? All cases, or just a subset of cases?

Certainly the level of relevance of race will vary among families. But in this kind of work, race always has the potential of being relevant. The first example most of us might jump to is workers of one race or ethnicity working with families of another race or ethnicity – for example, a white worker working with a black family or vice versa. Attention to culture is very important under those circumstances. But it could be important even when workers and families are matched by race or ethnicity. For example, there is great heterogeneity even within racial groups. A white, Jewish social worker could be working with a devoutly Catholic Polish family. An African American social worker could be working with an African immigrant family, for example, or a Haitian one. Further, even with a close match, issues related to race could still be relevant. For example, an African American mother might claim that the agency is targeting her because she is black, but her African American social worker might disagree. Though they are from the same racial background, race could still be an important issue. Therefore, we believe that questions of race or ethnicity are potentially pertinent in any case and, therefore, do not distinguish among the various cases that are brought up for team discussion.

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color minimizing ways of thinking identified earlier. We then analyzed the meeting transcripts to establish more systematically whether this was the case, and found that it was. The next section provides our findings.

COLOR MINIMIZATION IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Overall, we found that these workers initially espoused the importance of race and culture, but under deeper probing, and in their behavior, didn't hold on to it.

When simply asked for their opinions about the role of racial and ethnic diversity in their work, participants overwhelmingly gave color cognizant answers, in that they explicitly recognized and valued cultural differences. Some of these statements referred to the importance of cultural matching between a worker and a family -- clients like to work with people "with similar faces" -- or between the agency and its community -- "I think it is important that you really [racially] match the community that you are servicing..." One person noted, "Somebody coming from that ethnic background might be able to have a better understanding maybe of the needs of the particular family that we are working with or their culture." Another said that employee diversity wasn't just about enhancing work with particular families, but about the broader benefits of racial and ethnic heterogeneity: "I really see our bilingual, bicultural workers training all of us... That the understanding that they bring... Sometimes it cuts through things that the rest of us can't cut through."

Other color cognizant statements recognized the presence of racism and discrimination and the difficulty of addressing these issues as part of their work: "The great thing about having diverse staff is it really gets you to check your ethnocentrism at

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the door, or try to... Like the ability to try to see the world through somebody else's eyes. Or understand another way of making sense of a problem." Others noted the importance of workers being willing to have difficult conversations about tough issues. One person spoke soon after Hurricane Katrina: "It was very clear from what was happening in New Orleans that there's still in this country a lack of understanding that barriers still exist and people don't want to talk about it... For me, it's really important to share those differences and to be able to conduct a conversation about it." And one respondent spoke to professional values and the importance of tough conversations: "I think of social workers. Our job is so much different than anybody else's job in the world. We have to open ourselves up to difference... In that there are conversations and you are comfortable with other people talking about that. It's hard to do sometimes."

However, when we asked questions designed to get beyond espoused beliefs, by asking participants to imagine their behavior by presenting them with a scenario and to describe past behavior by asking them to discuss a recent case "in which race or ethnicity had been an issue," we found the respondents used, overall, a very different perspective. We also identified this perspective in their case discussions in team meetings. This approach acknowledged the importance of race and culture, while downplaying them in some way. We call this pattern "color minimization" and identified several ways or strategies that the workers used to minimize race. These appeared to be inadvertent strategies, not deliberate ones, but they were repeated multiple times as we looked across the dataset.

The first strategy was *“Color is a factor to consider, but is not central to a child’s needs.”* These workers continually invoked the notion of “the child’s needs” as the touchstone of their decision-making. However, they also differentiated these “needs” from race and culture. This came up primarily in discussions about a scenario presented to the team, about a young black child who needed to be placed in a foster home. The scenario stipulated that both a black home and a white home were available and added a few more details. The respondents were asked in which home they would place the child and to explain their reasoning (the full scenario is in the appendix). There was no right answer to this question; we were simply interested in how the workers thought through the issues involved.

The dominant response was to acknowledge race and ethnicity as one of many factors, point to the overriding importance of the child’s “needs,” and then distinguish between those needs and racial or cultural factors. “It’s kind of like what [team member] said about looking at all the kid’s needs and discussing that, and then being culturally sensitive,” said one team member. Another said, “Race wasn’t the first factor that I was thinking of. It was the child’s needs and who could address those best for the child.” Therefore, respondents didn’t see considerations of race or culture as primary to a child’s well-being, thereby minimizing the importance of color in their work with families.

If this were borne out in practice, we would expect to see relatively few discussions in which race or ethnicity were raised (though not zero, since that would suggest a fully color blind practice), and particularly few which explored culture in any

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depth. And that was what we found: race and ethnicity were raised occasionally as part of their discussions, but not very often and usually superficially. We observed 96 case discussions; in only 14 were race or culture even mentioned and in only five of these were they discussed in any depth. (We considered an incident “in-depth” if it involved at least two team members and investigated some kind of question or issue related to race, ethnicity or culture. Superficial incidents involved only one worker making a statement or asking a question that went unanswered. Please see Table 1 for examples.) The relative rarity of these conversations indicates that these concerns appeared to the workers to be tangential to their goal of attending to the child’s needs.

A second color minimizing strategy was, *“Color is about language and culture, not race.”* Overall, these workers were far more attentive to issues of cultural diversity when working with immigrant families, rather than native-born white families or families of color. For example, when asked if the team worked differently with families in which “race or ethnicity plays a role,” one respondent said, “I think it is individual to the case. If you have a family that has just recently been here... their level of acculturation is certainly different...than somebody who has been here six years, fifteen years...” This suggests that racial or ethnic issues only arise with immigrant families and particularly with those who arrived more recently.

This strategy also manifested itself when the team was asked to name a case that they had discussed in their team meetings “in which race or ethnicity was an issue.” The teams always mentioned an immigrant family, not a native-born one. When pushed

to think more broadly, the respondents often went back to issues related to immigrant families, as suggested in this example.

Interviewer: Can you think of a case in which race or ethnicity is an issue?

Respondent: Mostly it would be just around language...

...

Interviewer: So you can't think of any cases where language was not an issue, but race or ethnicity still played a role?

Respondent: Well, if we didn't have a Spanish-speaking worker, I think that would be a huge issue. And there's not enough bi-lingual workers.

In this case, the respondent went back to issues of language, even when asked to consider cases in which language was not an issue. We consider this strategy to be color minimizing because respondents were much more likely to associate race, ethnicity and culture with immigrants, rather than families born in this country, and therefore downplayed racial or cultural issues related to the native-born, particularly white or African American families.

If this approach were mirrored in practice, one would assume that the 14 case discussions during which race or ethnicity was raised would be largely those of immigrant families rather than native-born white families or families of color. A review of the 14 discussions indicates that ten out of the 11 discussions for which we have data about immigration status⁶ were about immigrant families and one was about a native-born family. Perhaps more tellingly, the five in-depth case discussions all involved immigrant families. Taken together, this suggests that their practice reflected the

⁶ For three out of the 14 conversations, there was no data pertaining to the immigration status of the family, generally because the discussion was relatively brief and focused only on one or two urgent issues rather than being a lengthier case discussion in which a fuller portrait of the family emerged.

perspective articulated in their interviews in that the workers were associating racial and ethnic issues with immigrant families rather than native-born families.

The third color-minimizing strategy was *“We need to learn about our clients’ cultures, not about our own.”* Respondents often noted that it was essential to learn about their clients’ backgrounds in order to enhance their work with them, but never referred to the importance of learning about their own cultural background and how it might influence their casework. This issue came up most often when discussing the demographic make-up of the agency’s employees. While the agency had some racial and ethnic diversity, some respondents noted that it was still disproportionately white given its client population. Most also went on to say that this was less of a problem because workers could learn about a given family’s culture from employees of that background. For example, one team member said, “We [team members] just are from different backgrounds... Just by having them in my team, it’s just like a reference page right next to you,” while another noted, “How many times have I said to [Latina team member]: ‘You have to explain your Latino culture because you have got to help me understand.’” A third referred to one common issue: “Like disciplining techniques. Some that are common with certain cultures, we might term abusive, but someone on staff can explain that that is culturally acceptable in that culture.”

This strategy put the focus entirely on the clients’ cultural backgrounds, not the workers’. As one member said, families may raise race as an issue and “we acknowledge and are sensitive to those issues, but also remain focused on why the department is there and not my race or my background or what not.” This quote

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suggests that this worker has nothing to learn about her background and how it affects her work on child protection. Workers seemed to see themselves as neutral learners, blank slates who could straightforwardly absorb information about other cultures, rather than as individuals with prior knowledge, assumptions and biases, all of which could affect whether and what they learned. Therefore, they appeared to dramatically minimize the role of race and culture in their own background and experiences.

If this were borne out in practice, we would see conversations in which the team members explored how their clients' cultures might affect their family life and how the workers should intervene, but few to no conversations in which team members reflected on their own racial or ethnic background and how it might affect their work with families. And, as with the other two strategies, this third strategy was reflected in the evidence regarding the workers' theory-in-use. Several of the five in-depth case discussions involved learning about the immigrant families they were working with. One team had a long discussion about a Liberian family with a 14-year-old son who had to be institutionalized. They debated whether the boy's habit of standing very close and "put[ting] his face in yours," as the caseworker described it, could be informed by cultural norms regarding interpersonal distance. They also wondered whether his sister should work with a female caseworker, given possible cultural norms about interaction between unrelated people of different sexes. Ultimately, they decided that they should hire a consultant to do a cultural audit with the family. In another case, a team discussed a mother from the Dominican Republic who was hearing voices. A

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psychologist who met regularly with the team and was informally considered a team member said that hearing voices could be considered normal in some cultures.

But we *never* saw a team member raise a question or issue related to her own racial or ethnic background, whether it might affect how she saw the family, how the family saw her, or how she intervened with the family. To the extent that these workers were learning about race and ethnicity in their work, it was about their families' cultures, not about their own.

DISCUSSION

The predominant approach in public management research to issues of racial and ethnic diversity has been the long-standing work in representative bureaucracy, which has examined whether and under what conditions the presence of public servants of particular demographic groups affects outcomes for constituents of that group or performance as a whole (e.g., Dolan & Rosenbloom, 2003; Meier, O'Toole, & Nicholson-Crotty, 2004; Meier, Wrinkle, & Polinard, 1999). Other work has begun to examine the consequences of workforce diversity more broadly as well as how to manage it (e.g., Choi, 2009; Kellough & Naff, 2004; Pitts, 2006). Both lines of research are critical, but they have tended to focus more on the relationships between various inputs and outcomes and less on the grounded sensemaking of front-line workers and how it might affect their actual practice. Our study begins to address this gap with an intensive exploration of the diversity perspectives of child welfare workers and how they are enacted in case discussions.

While child welfare is a unique context, research has established that, broadly, two basic approaches to racial and ethnic diversity contend for influence in our workplaces: a color blind approach meant to suppress difference and a color cognizant one that acknowledges and explores the impact of difference. Research in social psychology and management has demonstrated that color cognizant approaches generally result in better dyadic and group outcomes or processes but even in these literatures, little work has investigated how employees on the ground make sense of these dueling models. Therefore, our work contributes to research and practice on diversity in organizations, and in public organizations, in several ways.

First, it is important to document workers' actual sensemaking about how racial and ethnic diversity affects their work as it comes up in their day-to-day tasks. In particular, we've documented the complexity of their thinking, showing how it goes far beyond simple pro-diversity, pro-similarity or color blind beliefs. Further, our analysis probes beneath the explicit meaning of our informants' words to identify underlying patterns across informants, patterns that aren't readily apparent, but once surfaced provide a deeper understanding. Research like ours could inform future studies of diversity perspectives, either in the lab or in the field, since it suggests additions or alternatives to the current roster of potential perspectives.

Second, identifying the particular pattern of color minimizing is valuable because of research in several fields that suggests that color cognizance enhances relationships across difference in groups and organizations (Homan et al., 2007; van Dick et al., 2008; van Knippenberg et al., 2007a; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Evans, 2007). Many employees,

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particularly white ones, may engage in color blindness because it feels like a safe and egalitarian approach to race, but it can have the opposite effect, actually impeding cross-race relationships (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Norton et al., 2006). While color minimization acknowledges the importance of race and ethnicity more than color blindness, it stops far short of the full color cognizance that may be critical for better relational and effectiveness outcomes in dyads or groups. This may be particularly true for child welfare workers, given research that suggests that families of color are often treated more harshly than white families (Becker, Jordan, & Larsen, 2007; Roberts, 2002; Rodenborg, 2004).

Further, while this study doesn't shed light on how common color minimization is across workplaces, it may be on the rise. Color minimization may be one potential response to bridging the oppositional models of color blindness and color cognizance, by superficially acknowledging the importance of race and ethnicity without actually incorporating this understanding into deeper thought and action. Color minimization could be a way of holding both models at once and could emerge from an ambivalence or confusion about how important race really is (Nemetz & Christensen, 1996). Further work could investigate how widespread it actually is, and whether it looks different in different organizational contexts.

Finally, diversity perspectives only get us so far; what matters is how employees behave. Therefore, it is critical to explore whether employees enact what they espouse. In our case, because we asked a variety of questions in interviews while also observing behavior, we were able to identify a mis-alignment between espoused beliefs and

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deeper beliefs and actions. Thus our research supports earlier work suggesting that such mis-alignments are common in organizations (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Argyris & Schon, 1996), while expanding this literature to include espoused theories and theories-in-use related to race and ethnicity. This previous literature also suggests another possible motivation for color minimization: espoused and enacted beliefs often diverge because it is somehow difficult or unsafe to act out what one might believe. Race and ethnicity are charged, often taboo, topics in organizations which may have inhibited these teams from exploring them in more depth. However, this taboo itself stems at least in part from the predominance of color blindness in most work settings, suggesting one possible mechanism for how diversity perspectives actually influence behaviors at work.

Our research also has implications for practice. Getting at employees' diversity perspectives is critical because it can inform organizational interventions such as supervision, training, coaching and other developmental activities. In this agency, which explicitly holds cultural competence and sensitivity to diversity dynamics as a core value, simply holding more trainings which extol the importance of cultural competence or the virtues of diversity may not work. However, naming color minimization as a dominant pattern – and illustrating the various ways in which that pattern manifests itself – would provide employees with real data about their approach. Leaders could work with employees to investigate the pros and cons of their current thinking and its impact on their case practice. This provides a solid platform from which to explore new ways of thinking that could underlie new ways of working with families.

Despite these contributions, this research also has a number of limitations that suggest further avenues of research. First, it took place in a child welfare agency, a context in which race and ethnicity are quite salient and employees are charged to pursue cultural competence. While a similar context may be somewhat more common in public organizations than business firms, it is not normative. However, just because race may be less salient doesn't mean that it is less relevant. Employees in many work organizations engage with diverse clients or customers and many participate in culturally diverse workgroups. An individual's or group's diversity beliefs could inform – positively or negatively -- both their performance and their interaction processes. As we noted, we think color minimization might be found more broadly, though empirical study is required to prove that. However, the particular color minimizing strategies we identified in this research may be limited to particular contexts, such as social service agencies.

Second, this is an intensive, exploratory study of a small sample. One strength of this kind of work is that it can identify the presence or existence of a phenomenon, like color minimization, but larger, quantitative studies are necessary to establish the extent of that phenomenon. Further, we used a sample-as-a-whole analysis for this paper, as opposed to looking at teams or individuals. Once we identified the presence and extent of color minimization across the dataset, we felt we had an important story to tell, since we have not seen any work that details this understanding. Also, because of our sample-as-a-whole approach, we don't distinguish between employees of color and white employees, though other research provides ample evidence that, broadly

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speaking, they differ in their attention to and perspectives on race and ethnicity (Alderfer, Tucker, Morgan, & Drasgow, 1983; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; Simons, Friedman, Liu, & McLean Parks, 2007; Tsui, Egan, & Xin, 1995). However, we heard color minimizing coming in some respect from all participants, regardless of cultural background. This doesn't mean there may not be individual differences that may be based at least partly based on race. Nor can we rule out the possibility that members of color, in the minority on most of the teams, were going along with the dominant view even if they didn't agree with it. However, despite these important caveats, color minimization dominated the dataset which we believe is important to document in itself. We also believe that further individual-level analyses would provide additional insight into the phenomenon.

Third, our paper does not link color minimization to effectiveness in any way. Given that previous research, mostly experimental, has already investigated this link, we felt it was more important to document the complexity of actual sensemaking in the field. However, future work could investigate the relationship between color minimization and group outcomes.

Finally, the racial and ethnic background of the researchers can affect what data is gathered, how it is analyzed, and what conclusions are drawn. While the two-person data collection team (the first author and a research assistant) and the two-person data analysis team (the two authors) were bi-racial, we do not claim a purely objective or omniscient standpoint (DeVault, 1990; Harding, 1993). Further work done by larger and

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more diverse groups of researchers could add new insights into the perspectives held by employees and workgroups and their impact on practice.

APPENDIX

Questions used to elicit team members' understandings of the role of race and ethnicity in their work with families

Round one:

1) Team members were asked: Is it important for [agency] staff to be racially and culturally diverse? Why? If the client population is racially homogeneous, then should the staff be homogeneous or heterogeneous?

2) Respondents were given a sheet of paper with the following scenario and room to write their reactions:

Suppose you had a child who needed long-term placement in a foster home. The child is five years old and is African American. An African American foster family is available, but both parents work full-time outside the home. A white home is also available. In this case, while the father works full-time, the mother is at home full-time. In which home would you place the child? Write down your choice and your reasoning.

Round two:

Respondents were given a sheet of paper with the following and asked to record their answers. After that we had a group discussion about why team members had chosen the rank order they did.

Please rank order the importance, in your view, of each of the following reasons for why [this agency] should hire a racially and ethnically diverse workforce. **1 is the most important reason and 5 is the least important reason.** Give one reason a 1, give another a 2, give another a 3, etc.

[This agency] should be committed to hiring a racially and ethnically diverse workforce in order:

- _____ a. To give us legitimacy in the eyes of other care providers.
- _____ b. To draw on the perspectives and insights of one another that come as a result of our experiences in different racial and ethnic groups.
- _____ c. To provide equal opportunities to people from all racial and ethnic groups.
- _____ d. To give us credibility in the eyes of the families we work with.
- _____ e. To give all of us an opportunity to learn about the needs of families from all backgrounds.

Round three:

Team members were asked the following

Can you think of one case that the team has handled recently in which cultural diversity – race or ethnicity – was an issue?

- a) Describe the case and how race or ethnicity played a role
- b) Did race/ethnicity affect how you managed the case? How?
 - (1) Who worked on the case? Was there more than one worker? How did you divvy up the work?
 - (2) (How) did it affect how you worked with the family?
 - (a) Did you attempt to get culturally relevant information? How?
 - (b) Did you work with anyone outside the team who had expertise in this area? Access any other resources?
 - (c) Did you discuss this case as a team more than you might have otherwise?
 - (3) Overall, did you work with the family as you would have worked with any other family, or did you approach it differently?
- ii) What, if anything, do you feel you learned from that case? Does the case have lessons for other cases?

Table 1

Examples of an in-depth and a superficial discussion related to race, ethnicity or culture.

Illustration of in-depth discussion

A Latina team member asked her team members and a consulting psychologist for feedback to help her think through a disciplinary technique that her Latina client was using: "In Latin culture there is a thing ... where a kid goes into the corner and they kneel for the time out. I did it when I was little. I'd face the wall [for] ten or fifteen minutes...Should I tell her that she can't do that? ... It's a cultural thing. I haven't said anything." The team discussed it for a few minutes. The psychologist noted that someone could speak with the mother about alternatives, "including cultural alternatives that are considered acceptable." He added that since the family lived in a studio apartment, the mother had few alternatives since the child couldn't be sent to his or her room. *[This discussion involved multiple team members investigating whether or not a disciplinary practice potentially informed by culture could be abusive.]*

Illustration of superficial discussion

The caseworker, after describing a case involving a Dominican grandmother and her grandchildren, said, "I like this family, I don't mind working with them. The risk of abuse and neglect are low. There are parenting concerns, not major concerns... but one, it's cultural and two, she has some resentment of her own kids [her children who are the parents of the grandchildren she has responsibility for] and that plays out in [her] parenting." *[In other words, the caseworker notes that, while there are concerns about the grandmother's parenting, she herself believes that her parenting is culturally informed, which makes it less problematic. There was no further discussion.]*

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