

Why Do Millennials Not Understand Racism?

They think if we ignore skin color, racism will somehow disappear.

By Jamelle Bouie



Millennials see racism as a matter of different treatment, justified by race, that you solve by removing race from the equation.

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When you hear MTV, you don't think "research." But, for the last few years, the music television channel has been building a public affairs campaign to address bias called "Look Different." Aimed at millennials, it seeks to help them deal with prejudice and discrimination in their lives. And as part of the project, MTV has worked with pollsters to survey a nationally representative sample of people ages 14 to 24 to measure how young people are "experiencing, affected by, and responding to issues associated with bias."





JAMELLE BOUIE

Jamelle Bouie is a *Slate* staff writer covering politics, policy, and race.

Overall, MTV confirms the general view of millennials: Compared with previous generations, they're more tolerant and diverse and profess a deeper commitment to equality and fairness. At the same time, however, they're committed to an ideal of colorblindness that leaves them uncomfortable with race, opposed to measures to reduce racial inequality, and a bit confused about *what racism is*.

All of this is apparent in the findings. Ninety-one percent of respondents "believe in equality" and believe "everyone should be treated equally." Likewise, 84 percent say their families taught them to treat everyone the same, no matter their race, and 89 percent believe everyone should be treated as equals. With that said, only 37 percent of respondents (30 percent of whites and 46 percent of minorities) say they were raised in families that talk about race.

For this reason, perhaps, a majority of millennials say that their generation is Advertisement "post-racial." Seventy-two percent believe their generation believes in equality more than older people, and 58 percent believe that as they get older, racism will become less of an issue. It's almost certainly true that this view is influenced by the presence of President Obama. Sixty-two percent believe that having a black president shows that minorities have the same opportunities as whites, and 67 percent believe it proves that race is not a "barrier to accomplishments."

It's no surprise, then, that most millennials aspire to "colorblindness." Sixty-eight percent say "focusing on race prevents society from becoming colorblind." As such, millennials are hostile to race-based affirmative action: 88 percent believe racial preferences are unfair as a matter of course, and 70 percent believe they are unfair regardless of "historical inequalities." Interestingly, the difference between whites and people of color is nonexistent on the first question and small (74 percent versus 65 percent) on the second. But this might look different if you disaggregated "people of color" by race. There's a chance that black millennials are more friendly to affirmative action than their Latino or Asian peers.

For all of these aspirations, however, millennials have a hard time talking about race and discrimination. Although 73 percent believe that we should talk "more openly" about bias, only 20 percent say they're comfortable doing so—despite the fact that a plurality of minorities say that their racial identities shape their views of the world.

What's more, for all of their unity on tolerance and equality, white and minority millennials have divergent views on the status of whites and minorities in society. Forty-one percent of white millennials say that the government "pays too much attention to the problems of racial minority groups while 65 percent of minorities say that whites have more opportunities." More jarring is the 48 percent of white millennials who say discrimination against whites is as big a problem as discrimination against racial minorities. With that in mind, it's worth a quick look at a 2012 poll from the Public Religion Research Institute, where 58 percent of white millennials said that discrimination against whites was as big a problem as discrimination against minorities.

It's hard to say which is the "true" number, but there's no doubt that a substantial plurality of young white people believe their race is a disadvantage, which is ludicrous given the small number who say that they've felt excluded because of their race (10 percent) or say that they've been hurt by racial offenses (25 percent).

But while this reaction doesn't seem to have a basis in reality, it makes perfect sense given what millennials writ large believe about racism. Let's go back to the results on colorblindness and affirmative action. Seventy-three percent believe that "never considering race would improve society," and 90 percent say that "everyone should be treated the same regardless of race."

From these results, it's clear that—like most Americans—millennials see racism as a matter of different treatment, justified by race, that you solve by removing race from the equation. If we ignore skin color in our decisions, then there can't be racism.

The problem is that racism isn't reducible to "different treatment." Since if it is, measures to ameliorate racial inequality—like the Voting Rights Act—would be as "racist" as the policies that necessitated them. No, racism is better understood as white supremacy—anything that furthers a broad hierarchy of racist inequity, where whites possess the greatest share of power, respect, and resources, and blacks the least.

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And the magic of white supremacy is that its presence is obscured by the focus on race. When

a black teenager is unfairly profiled by police, we say it's "because of the color of his skin," which—as a construction—avoids the racism at play, from the segregated neighborhood the officer patrols to the pervasive belief in black criminality that shapes our approach to crime. Likewise, it obscures the extent to which this isn't just *different* treatment— it's *unequal* treatment rooted in unequal conditions.

Millennials have grown up in a world where we talk about race without racism—or don't talk about it at all—and where "skin color" is the explanation for racial inequality, as if ghettos are ghettos because they are black, and not because they were created. As such, their views on racism—where you fight bias by denying it matters to outcomes—are muddled and confused.

Which gets to the irony of this survey: A generation that hates racism but chooses colorblindness is a generation that, through its neglect, comes to perpetuate it.