Thinking About Group Differences: Ideologies and National Identities

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Thinking About Group Differences: Ideologies and National Identities

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In her article “Diversity Science: Why and How Difference Makes a Difference,” Plaut (this issue) argues that social psychology should put a stronger emphasis on sociocultural norms that guide behavior and perception. One such cultural norm is how ethnic and racial diversity is construed. Plaut discusses colorblind and multicultural ideologies as distinctively different ways to approach racial and ethnic diversity, specifically because they put opposite emphases on the importance of group differences. As a general approach, a colorblind ideology advocates treating everyone the same without regard to skin color (i.e., we should not pay attention to group differences), whereas multiculturalism stresses the importance of acknowledging and embracing differences among racial and ethnic groups. In discussing the research on both ideologies, Plaut describes that both ideologies can have negative consequences, and various lines of research have shown that they can sometimes lead to more and sometimes to less harmonious intergroup relations.

The current commentary has two primary goals. In solving the puzzle of inconsistent results of the two ideologies that Plaut presents, one goal is to offer a more systematic scheme for organizing racial and interethnic ideologies by considering two dimensions along which such ideologies simultaneously vary. The first of these dimensions focuses on the degree to which an ideology acknowledges group differences or tries to minimize them. As just discussed, multiculturalism and colorblind ideologies clearly differ on this dimension. The second dimension for thinking about intergroup ideologies is the degree to which they evaluate outgroup members relatively favorably or relatively unfavorably. Crossing these two dimensions results in four different intergroup ideologies. We have laid out these two dimensions and given labels to the resulting four ideologies in Figure 1. In the first section of this commentary, we elaborate on these four different ideologies, justify our labels, and explain why we think they help clarify some of Plaut’s arguments.

We think a useful result of this fourfold typology is that it makes clear the potential downsides of either acknowledging or minimizing group differences. Plaut goes to some length to make clear many of the negative consequences of a colorblind ideology, particularly when it bleeds over into its more negative counterpart: assimilationism. She also acknowledges some potential downsides to a multicultural ideological viewpoint. The second goal of our commentary is to be much more explicit about the conditions under which the emphasis on group differences that is at the core of multiculturalism can also have significant downsides, when it bleeds over into its more negative counterpart: separatism and segregation. We wish to argue that one factor that may allow multiculturalism to flourish, rather than to deteriorate into separatism, is one’s construal of the superordinate identity of one’s country and culture. Making use of both recent social psychological thinking (e.g., Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999) as well as theory in political science on conceptions of national identity (Brubaker, 1989, 1990, 1992), we argue that some notions of national identity are much more conducive to multiculturalism than others.

The Fourfold Structure of Intercultural Ideology

Both the colorblind and multicultural ideologies, although well-intentioned, bear some perils and dangers and thus can have both positive and negative effects on intergroup relations. For instance, Wolsko, Park, Judd, and Wittenbrink (2000) found that both a colorblind and a multicultural prime led their participants to evaluate outgroups more positively. That is, although there were notable differences between participants who received a colorblind prime and participants who received a multicultural prime in the degree to which they saw stereotypic differences between groups, both the colorblind and the multicultural primes led to increased levels of outgroup liking compared to a control condition.

Other authors, however, have found quite different results. Plaut, Thomas, and Goren (2009), for instance, find that minority well-being and psychological engagement in organizations were higher the more multicultural their White employer’s attitude, whereas they were negatively related to the employer’s endorsement of a colorblind ideology.

As Plaut asserts in her summary, one problem with integrating the different findings concerning the colorblind ideology is that colorblindness can refer to rather different ideologies and the specifics of these may have rather different consequences. That is, one meaning of colorblindness makes reference to the individuation of people without regard to their
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Emphasis on group differences

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<th>Low – differences should be overcome</th>
<th>High – differences should be emphasized</th>
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<td>Positive</td>
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<td>Colorblindness</td>
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Figure 1. The fourfold table of interethnic and racial ideology.

ethnicity or race. In line with liberal-democratic ideals of statehood (Citrin, Sears, Muste, & Wong, 2001), this conception of colorblindness is “blind” to “color” with the intent of ending racial discrimination and treating all people equally. Used in this sense, colorblindness could also be called egalitarianism.

Colorblindness has also been used to refer to an assimilationist ideology, a definition explicitly endorsed in the previously mentioned article by Plaut et al. (2009). By this definition, one should be colorblind because the different “colors” of other groups are seen as disruptive to the social fabric and minorities should reject their separate identities and assimilate to majority norms. To be sure, both of these definitions share an emphasis on minimizing differences between groups of different “color.” The difference between the definitions concerns the degree to which members of other groups are appreciated or valued. Although the assimilationist approach sees minority group members in a more negative light (because they don’t “fit in”), a liberal egalitarian approach has the prescribed ideal to positively value all members of society regardless of their ethnic or group memberships.

Plaut also mentions negative aspects of adopting a multicultural approach to interethnic ideologies. That is, as previously mentioned, many studies have shown that multicultural ideological views, whether manipulated (Correll, Park, & Smith, 2008; Wolsko et al., 2000) or simply measured (Plaut et al., 2009; Wolsko, Park, & Judd, 2006), are associated with more outgroup liking and more well-being among minorities. On the other hand, many authors have recently pointed to the dangers of a multicultural approach (e.g., Brewer, 1997; for a summary see Plaut, this issue). In particular, Plaut notes the danger of reifying group differences; of perpetuating social separation; and, in the ideology’s emphasis on the validity of group differences, of failing to address social inequalities. Importantly, we suggest that the differences between reifying group differences and advocating segregation, on the one hand, and appreciating differences between groups as enriching, on the other, lie again in the degree to which outgroup members are appreciated or valued. Although a segregationist approach shows little willingness to engage in contact with the outgroup, a multicultural approach values differences and sees them, and consequently contact with minorities, as enriching.

Thus one can make a clear valence distinction between different ideologies that put similar emphasis on category differentiation. Accordingly, we suggest that these various ideological approaches to intergroup relations should be organized along two different dimensions rather than just one. Both colorblindness and multiculturalism (which share relatively positive evaluations of outgroup members) have “sister ideologies” that manifest similar beliefs about group differences but that are based on much more negative evaluations of outgroup members. Introducing a valence dimension thus yields two ideologies that both downplay group differences: a more assimilationist approach that disparages group differences and argues that the minority culture should be rejected and that minorities should adapt to majority values, and a colorblind ideology, which remains more true to its original ideal born in the civil rights movement (Plaut, this issue), also downplaying group differences, but in this case arguing that all individuals should be valued regardless of their “color.”

Similarly, the fourfold structure yields two ideologies that share their accentuation of intergroup differences: Although a multicultural approach sees cultural differences as enriching, its sister ideology of segregation or separatism argues that differences between groups lead to conflict and groups should be segregated from each other and largely stick to themselves.

Even while Plaut (this issue) does acknowledge potential downsides of a multicultural ideology, our reading of her arguments is that she is much more cognizant of the downsides of a colorblind ideology (bleeding over into assimilationism) than the downsides of an emphasis on cultural and ethnic differences (with multiculturalism bleeding over in to separatism and segregation). It is therefore our intention in the remainder of this comment to focus on factors that may cause an emphasis on group differences to have the negative consequences of separatism. As we argue, one crucial...
factor here is how the people who make up a nation construe that nation’s identity. That is, how the superordinate identity of the nation that includes many different individuals and groups is defined.

In making this argument, we first turn to the recent experience of the Federal Republic of Germany, as it has dealt with very large numbers of immigrants from (in particular) Turkey. Our argument is that the recognition of ethnic and cultural differences within Germany in recent years, under the banner of multiculturalism, has largely led to a lack of integration of these immigrants, that is, to separatism and segregation rather than to the positive outcome of true multiculturalism. We use this case to then make the argument that one’s construal of the superordinate identity of one’s country can have a major impact on whether an emphasis on diversity in a society leads to the beneficial consequences of true multiculturalism or the more negative consequences of separatism and segregation.

Immigration to the Federal Republic of Germany

After recovering from the aftermath of World War II and regaining economic strength in the 1960s and 1970, the Federal Republic of Germany (BRD – Bundesrepublik Deutschland) quickly became one of the most migrated-to countries in the world, and is today “Europe’s immigration country number 1” (Berlin-Institut für Bevölkerung und Entwicklung, 2009, p. 6). In contrast to other immigrant countries—European countries with an explicitly colonial past and self-understanding such as the United Kingdom and France, or traditional immigration countries such as the United States or Canada—Germany never adopted an assimilationist or colorblind approach to its immigrants. Explicitly invited as “Gastarbeiter” (literally: “guest workers”) and intended to temporarily replace the lack of labor that resulted from the postwar generational gap, it was largely the cultural differences of these immigrants first from southern Europe (Italy, Greece, Spain, and Portugal) and later mainly from Turkey that were emphasized and tolerance toward their cultural differences was preached. Absorption into German society, on the other hand, was neither especially advocated nor encouraged.

Most governmental campaigns for intergroup harmony advocated “tolerance” toward the “Ausländer”—literally translating as “outlanders”: people from other lands, foreigners. That is, aware of Germany’s gruesome past, German officials and other societal groups started large campaigns that advocated how enriching it would be to learn from the Ausländer, try their foods and festivities, and appreciate their participation in the labor force. Indeed the push for tolerance for the Ausländer was such that multiculturalism acquired a special name—multikulti—that was widely used in commentaries about German society. However, as the term Ausländer demonstrates, the idea that those guest workers would one day be German was never really entertained. Because these guest workers were expected to leave and return home after a certain period, second-language classes, if offered, were poorly implemented and citizenship was not granted even to the offspring of immigrants born in Germany until the year 2000 (Ateš, 2007; Berlin-Institut, 2009).

Of course, the immigrants did not end up leaving as expected; families followed and new offspring were born who began attending German schools. After the guest worker invitation program was halted, the continuing immigration of family members from those countries was supplemented with new immigration waves, such as asylum seekers from former Yugoslavia and many more from all over the world.1 Together with declining fertility rates within the German population, today about 15 million people living within German borders have some sort of “migration background,”2 adding up to 20% of the total population and one third of children younger than the age of 5 (Berlin-Institut, 2009; German Federal Statistical Office, 2010). There are 2.8 million people with Turkish migration background alone, making Germany the country with the largest Turkish population after Turkey itself. Germany’s citizenship laws were reformed in 2000, making it possible for some of those previous guest workers and their families and offspring to attain German citizenship if they rejected their original citizenship. Dual citizenship is still not allowed in most cases.

The future prospects of these immigrants, especially those from southern European countries and Turkey (see footnote 1), however, are not hopeful. People in Germany with migration backgrounds from those countries today, even those of the second and third generations (i.e., individuals born in Germany with immigrant parents or grandparents) achieve lower average education levels (Stanat & Cristensen, 2003), have lower incomes, often still do not speak fluent German,

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1 As noted by the Berlin-Institut’s last publication on immigration (2009), two other significant immigrant groups not mentioned here are, first, the so-called Aussiedler, who are considered ethnically German minorities from Eastern Europe and either fled during the cold war or immigrated in large numbers after 1989, and second, other European Union–member-state citizens that move around the European Union. Because both of these groups integrate fast and have no status problems in German society compared to the majority population (Berlin-Institut, 2009), they are beyond the scope of this commentary, and this commentary focuses mainly on issues of integration of the guest worker and asylum seeking immigrants from southern Europe, Turkey, and former Yugoslavia.

2 The German Federal Statistical Office (2010) defines “persons with migration backgrounds” as persons who were born outside of German territory or on German territory as a foreigner, or have at least one parent that was born outside of German territory or on German territory as a foreigner.
are more often unemployed than the German majority (Berlin-Institut, 2009), and, although the fact is empirically disputed by Schönwälder and Söhn (2009), they visibly seem to live in segregated areas of many cities. Of importance, the citizenship reform implemented in 2000 did not yield the success anticipated by many German officials. Many immigrants rejected the citizenship offer and younger generations continue to do so today and instead remain loyal to their parents’ home countries. More than two thirds of persons with Turkish migration backgrounds born in Germany still do not have German citizenship today, even though many of them could (Berlin-Institut, 2009). (For a summary on the integration debate in Germany and the demographics, see Berlin-Institut, 2009, summarized in English by Elger, Kneip, & Theile, 2009, as well as Ward, 2009).

Unlike the United States, where the media and social scientists generally laud a multicultural approach to intergroup relations, German media and social scientists have come to blame the alleged promotion of multiculturalism for the current problems in Germany in incorporating immigrants into German society. Typical headlines one might see published regarding the “integration question,” often by authors who themselves have migration backgrounds, translate as “multikulti is irresponsible” (Feddersen & Atés, 2005), “the multikulti mistake. How we can live together better in Germany” (Atés, 2007); “Farewell to multikulti. Ways out of the integration crisis” (Luft, 2007), “Multikulti has failed” (Luft, 2008), and so on (see also Kelek, 2006).

Although most of these media outlets have very sophisticated and nuanced—and often quite disparate—views on integration of immigrants into German society, they all share the assumption that the mistake in Germany was one of “multikulti,” one of multiculturalism. Although there is debate about whether the German approach was ever truly multicultural (Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010; von Törne, 2008) at least preaching tolerance toward Ausländer and their differences, it seems, did not yield the happily multicultural, diverse society it had promised.

If emphasizing group differences can lead to such positive outcomes in American social-psychological studies (Correll, Park, & Smith, 2008; Plaut et al., 2009; Wolsko et al., 2000; for a review, see Plaut, this issue), what went wrong in Germany? Why did the emphasis on differences lead to a more separatist rather than multicultural approach in Germany? Without claiming in any way to be able to explain the German integration problem in its entire historical trajectory and significance, there exists social-psychological theory, as well as political-scientific research on national identities, that can help us understand. In particular, one social psychological theory that elucidates the differences between how different societies fare when cultural differences are accentuated among different groups is Mummendey and Wenzel’s (1999) Ingroup Projection Model.

The Ingroup Projection Model (Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999)

Mummendey and Wenzel’s (1999) ingroup projection model (for an overview of the findings, see Wenzel, Mummendey, & Waldzus, 2007) claims that an important factor in intergroup conflict between two groups is the tendency for individuals to project the characteristics of their ingroup onto the next superordinate level of categorization that includes both the ingroup and the outgroup. The outgroup is then evaluated by how much it deviates from these ascribed norms, and because that norm is based on ingroup qualities, outgroup evaluations tend to be negative. So, for example, in the United States, to the extent that Whites define what it means to be an “American” by projecting qualities of their own group onto the national identity, then evaluations of other groups in American society (e.g., Blacks, Latinos, etc.) will be less positive because they conform less well to the superordinate vision of what it means to be American.

Supporting their theory in one study, Wenzel, Mummendey, Weber, and Waldzus (2003) asked students in psychology and business administration programs to rate (a) the typical psychology and the typical business administration student, (b) a typical university student in general, and (c) their liking of students of both business administration and psychology programs. Results supported their model in that students’ characterization of a typical general university student resembled more students in their own ingroup (psychology or business administration) than students in their outgroup, and the degree to which that was true negatively predicted outgroup liking. That is, the more psychology students thought that a typical university student resembled a typical psychology student, the less they liked business administration students, and vice versa. Similar results have been shown with German respondents’ evaluations of Polish citizens when the superordinate group was defined as Europeans, and many others (for an overview, see Wenzel et al., 2007).

Of importance, Mummendey and Wenzel (1999; Wenzel et al., 2007) noted that different superordinate identities lend themselves more or less well to the projection process they propose. Specifically, they proposed that a more “vague or complex” (p. 171) superordinate identity will lend itself less to the proposed ingroup projection process than a more stringently defined superordinate identity. Because more ingroup projection leads to less outgroup liking, such variation in superordinate identities may influence how outgroups are evaluated. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to suggest that how the superordinate identity is
defined may influence whether an emphasis on diversity leads to multiculturalism or to separatism.

To support their argument that the complexity of the superordinate identity affects the degree of ingroup projection to the superordinate group and, hence, outgroup liking, Waldzus, Mummendey, and Wenzel (2005; see also Waldzus, Mummendey, Wenzel, & Weber, 2003) had German participants evaluate other Europeans (as the superordinate identity), specifically the English and Italians (Waldzus et al., 2005) or Poles (Waldzus et al., 2003). Of importance, they asked half of their participants to write about the diversity of Europe in the beginning of the study (complex identity), whereas the other half were asked to write about the unity of Europe (simple identity). The diversity prompt was designed to lead participants to consider a more varied definition of what it means to be European, which should hamper the projection process, whereas the unity prompt was designed to lead to a more homogeneous definition of what it means to be European, encouraging the projection of ingroup characteristics onto that superordinate identity. Consistent with this hypothesis, compared to the group that wrote about unity, German participants who wrote about the diversity of Europe showed more positive evaluations of European outgroups (English, Italians, Waldzus et al., 2005; Poles, Waldzus et al., 2003), and in line with the ingroup projection model, this was mediated by the extent to which they projected what they saw as typically German characteristics onto the category of Europeans. In other words, the more they thought about how diverse and complex the superordinate category of “European” was, the less they projected typically German characteristics onto that European category. The less they projected German characteristics onto Europeans, the less they judged other subgroups within that superordinate category as deviating from the European norm, and thus liked them more.

In light of this work, it seems reasonable to suggest that the complexity with which the superordinate identity is defined may affect how one reacts to the presence of diversity in a country or society. Increases in diversity within a country may lead either to multiculturalism or to separation and segregation depending, perhaps, in part on the complexity with which the superordinate identity of the country is defined. Accordingly, in an effort to help us understand differences between societies in the possibilities of a truly multicultural response to increasing diversity, we turn to recent work in political science on conceptions of national identity.

National Identities and the Possibility of Ingroup Projection

Political scientists tend to talk about “national identities” as the ways in which the citizens of a country talk about what defines them as a country. In Brubaker’s (1990, 1992) analyses of German versus French national identities, for instance, the German identity is described as more ethnic and differentialist, whereas the French identity seems more political and inclusionary. That is, according to Brubaker, the idea of the French nation is based on political ideals rooted in the French revolution, whereas the German state is based largely on an ethnic idea of descent and a cultural community. This German definition of nationhood is reflected in its citizenship laws that grant citizenship to anyone born anywhere in the world being able to document German descent, whereas offspring of immigrants born in Germany, as mentioned earlier, were not automatically allowed citizenship until 2000 and still face obstacles if they want to attain that citizenship today (such as giving up citizenship in their parents’ country). France, given its colonial history, on the other hand, has long granted citizenship to anyone born on French soil and allows for dual citizenship, so that a person can simultaneously be French and Algerian, for instance.

The U.S. identity is not hard to place on the continuum that Brubaker uses to differentiate the German and French national identities. By tradition an immigrant country, the United States’ strongest foundation is a belief in commonly shared values. Anyone born on American soil is guaranteed citizenship, and ethnicity can be attached to any American identity (Italian American, African American, etc.) without a loss in status as a proper American citizen. That is, as complicated and deeply entrenched as racial relations are within the United States, few Americans would deny citizenship to African Americans.

Returning to the ingroup projection model of Mummendey and Wenzel (1999; Wenzel et al., 2007), the alternative ways in which a national identity can be defined seem likely to affect the degree to which particular groups can project their own characteristics onto the superordinate identity that is the nation, thus affecting the treatment of diverse racial and ethnic groups within the country.

Consider again the German national identity, defined in Brubaker’s terms largely along ethno-cultural rather than political lines. What it means to be German rests less on certain political values and principles and more on a historically defined ethnicity and culture, united by language and locale. Given this definition, it seems that projection of an ingroup identity to the nation by the dominant majority group is inevitable. As a result, when confronted by the diversity that results from immigration, and when the cultural particularities of those immigrant groups are emphasized, the result is that their deviation from the German prototype becomes obvious to all. As a result, diversity gives way to separatism and segregation (“They are after all not like us; they are after all not German”) rather than to true multiculturalism.
On the other hand, as we have suggested, the national identity of the United States is more defined by shared political values and these include the value of a diverse society united by common political principles. As a result, it may be more difficult in the United States, compared to Germany, for the dominant majority European-White group to project its own identity onto the superordinate national identity. As a result, increasing diversity and an emphasis on cultural differences may in fact come to be associated with greater respect and liking for diverse outgroups, so long as they are recognized as easily belonging within the political identity of what it means to be an American. To the extent that the political identity of the United States is defined in part by the “melting pot” ideal, then an emphasis on diversity may in fact lead to multiculturalism rather than to separation and segregation.

Of course, within a society there are inevitable disagreements about how the superordinate identity of the country is defined. Surely within the United States there are strong societal tendencies to define the national identity less politically and more narrowly in terms of the European heritage of its original settlers. In fact, Devos and Banaji (2005) have shown that even though their American participants explicitly endorsed an egalitarian conception of the American identity that gives all racial and ethnic groups equal access (thus exemplifying one fundamental aspect of the American identity), White and Asian American participants implicitly associated America more with Whites than with other racial and ethnic groups (but Blacks did not). If defined in such terms of ethnic and cultural heritage, ingroup projection to the superordinate American identity might be facilitated, deviant outgroups might tend to be rejected, and diversity could then lead to separation and segregation. On the other hand, within Germany one can identify efforts to subscribe less to the ethnic and cultural definition of what it means to be German. In fact, many German authors have called for a de-ethnicization (Entethnisierung) of the national identity (Tibi, 2001). When the political democratic ideals of the Federal Republic of Germany are the salient definition, ingroup projection to the superordinate national identity may be more difficult and diversity may then lead to a true multiculturalism rather than separation and segregation. Thus, although we have argued that there exist dominant and institutionalized (e.g., through citizenship laws) definitions of national identities in countries such as the United States and Germany that may facilitate or impede multiculturalism as a response to diversity, the ideological outcomes are unlikely to be universally shared in those societies. Our argument remains, however, that some definitions of national identity are more conducive for one sort of ideological outcome than another. These definitions can vary both at the level of country and among individuals who make up those countries.

To summarize, one important factor in whether greater category differentiation will lead to more or less outgroup liking (and, correspondingly, a multicultural or separatist ideology) might be the construal of the superordinate identity, that is, how one defines one’s national identity. The more that national identity is construed in terms of values and political beliefs, the more likely it is that category differentiation will encourage greater tolerance of differences, thus enabling a true multicultural ideological outcome. On the other hand, a more ethnically and culturally stringent identity might not lend itself as well to a pluralistic conception, as in that case an emphasis on differences might only make minorities seem more disruptive to the social fabric.

Revisiting the beginning section of this commentary on the fourfold typology of interethnic ideology, multiculturalism might be more than an appreciation of differences. It might be beneficial to think of multiculturalism as an appreciation of differences coupled with an emphasis that those who are different are a positive addition to the superordinate group, the society, and that their diversity will be beneficial to the social fabric. An emphasis on diversity without this explicit inclusion and valuation might not have the positive multicultural consequences that studies involving American college students have shown to date.

Conclusion

The present comment had two primary purposes. One was to extend the interethnic ideology distinction of Colorblindness versus Multiculturalism by incorporating an evaluative dimension, effectively turning it into a fourfold typology of interethnic ideologies. A second was to identify possible factors that might determine whether diversity and an emphasis on group differences will lead to the positive ideology of multiculturalism or instead to its negative sister ideology of separatism. We suggested, borrowing from Mummendey and Wenzel’s (1999) ingroup projection model and theories of national identities (Brubaker, 1989, 1990, 1992), that a nation’s conception of itself can have an important effect here. Specifically, we hypothesize that a more ethnically and culturally construed national identity will mean that an emphasis on differences will result in a more negative ideology, more toward separatism rather than true multiculturalism. On the other hand, a more politically construed national identity should allow for greater tolerance of diversity within one’s country, allowing for a multicultural ideology to prevail in the presence of diversity.

Obviously, more empirical research is needed to support these claims. Future studies should investigate the conditions under which emphasizing difference or similarity can have positive or negative effects.
on intergroup relations. A more precise definition of whether those differences or similarities are coupled with positive or negative appreciation of the outgroup can help yield a better understanding of so-far inconclusive effects. More precise investigations of both the precursors and consequences of all four ideologies: separatism, multiculturalism, assimilation, and colorblindness will lead to a better understanding of how difference makes a difference.

Note

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