

# Understanding intent crucial to improving race relations

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Credit: Bruce Emerling/Pixabay

Improving race relations starts with understanding whether people feel an incident of racial discrimination was intentional or not, says a new study by UTM management professor Sonia Kang. This applies in situations ranging from a workplace to an interaction between police and demonstrators.

Typically, two approaches are applied to improving race relations. A multicultural approach uses education to highlight and celebrate differences in a group, while a colourblind approach emphasizes commonalities that a group might share. "Both approaches can and will work—the difficulty is identifying which approach to use," Kang says. "We wanted to know if there were variables that would help predict

when one of those two approaches would be better to use."

Kang found that it is important to determine how a target group feels about the issue at hand, specifically whether they feel [discrimination](#) is intentional or unintentional. "Does the incident stem from intentional and deliberate malice, or does it arise from unintentional or accidental ignorance?" Kang asks. "We found that perceptions of intentionality predicted the kinds of solutions people think will be effective."

"Intentionality is important in a legal context for punishments in criminal cases. Even small kids will think about intentionality—did someone push them on purpose, or was it an accident?" she says. "People prioritize ideas of intentionality when they're trying to decide how to make problems better, or recommend punishment or reparations."

"When people see discrimination as intentional, they prefer a colourblindness approach, which encourages looking beyond racial differences," Kang says. "When people see discrimination as unintentional, they prefer a multicultural approach, which encourages recognizing [racial differences](#)."

The paper reports on eight studies which examined a number of different predictors and outcomes, including attitudes about the recent events in Ferguson, Missouri.

The studies recorded how participants reacted to scenarios describing incidents of [racial discrimination](#). In one example, participants were asked to award damages to an employee who had been wrongfully dismissed. Where the discrimination was perceived as intentional, study participants awarded an average of \$100,000 more in damages than in scenarios where the discrimination was perceived as unintentional.

"There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach," Kang says. "But understanding

whether [people](#) think racism is intentional or not can inform which is the best approach to deal with the issue at hand. It's important to tailor your [approach](#) to what's going on in the individual community you're trying to target. If , for instance, you're an employer and want to solve problems in your workplace, you will need to do a careful assessment of where your employees think the problem originates."

**More information:** Evan P. Apfelbaum et al. From ignorance to intolerance: Perceived intentionality of racial discrimination shapes preferences for colorblindness versus multiculturalism, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2016.08.002](#)

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