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Whiteness of a name: is “white” the baseline?

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Contents

Abstract:.....	2
Purpose:	2
Design/methodology/approach.....	2
Findings	2
Research limitations/implications	2
Practical implications	3

Originality/value	3
Keywords: Discrimination, Groups, Virtual teams, Equal opportunities	3
The American context.....	4
CRT and Critical Whiteness studies.....	5
Research on names.....	6
Study 1	7
Results.....	9
Discussion.....	10
Study 2	10
Results.....	11
General discussion	11
Limitations of the studies.....	13
Conclusion and implications	14
References	16

Abstract:

Purpose:

– The purpose of this paper is to examine the hypothesis that Whiteness is used as a normative standard when comparing a variety of first names.

Design/methodology/approach

– Respondents (full- and part-time business students) evaluated names that sounded common, African-American, Russian, and unusual.

Findings

– Results from two studies suggest that “common” or “neutral” names are perceived to be white, and to be more American than African-American, Russian or unusual-sounding names. Results also demonstrate that the common names have more positive attributes, including socio-economic class.

Research limitations/implications

– The study found that the basic comparison of American respondents will be to a white person. Second, the authors applied Critical Race Theory (CRT) to the research on names. Finally, the authors demonstrate that unless they are totally anonymous, virtual

teams will still have the type of social categorization and stereotyping of team members found in ordinary teams.

Practical implications

– Organizations and managers need to recognize that a “colorblind” approach simply reinforces the expectation that any differences in American organizations will be compared against the Whiteness standard. This can be a problem in any organizational setting, especially given the proliferation of virtual teams. This may be addressed with attempts to increase common in-group identity and strategies for identifying bias.

Originality/value

– In this research the authors integrate concepts and theory from Virtual Teams, CRT and the Psychology of Names, providing both theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords: Discrimination, Groups, Virtual teams, Equal opportunities

Article: With business becoming increasingly global and diversity initiatives linking to strategic objectives for increased organizational performance (Choi and Rainey, 2010), technology has allowed virtual teams to become commonplace in organizations (Siebdrat et al., 2009). Virtual teams are defined as “groups of geographically and/or organizationally dispersed coworkers that are assembled using a combination of telecommunications and information technologies to accomplish an organizational task” (Townsend et al., 1998, p. 18). One advantage attributed to virtual teams is the emphasis on team contributions rather than the individual. Writers have argued that “people will be judged by the value of their ideas rather than by gender, race, religion, national origin, class or age” (Rad and Levin, 2003, p. 49). However, is this actually the case? Can we expect employees to ignore the demographic labels and stereotypes that have historically had an impact in face-to-face interactions? We examine how people use one type of information, given names, to perceive others they do not know. In doing so, we also test a basic assumption of Critical Race Theory (CRT).

Virtual teams are seen as providing reduced costs, increased productivity and greater opportunities to enhance customer service ([Horwitz et al., 2006](#)). In addition to these advantages is the potential for anonymity of the team members. If team members communicate exclusively via e-mail, intranets, discussion boards, social media or other venues that primarily utilize written communication, team members are likely to have limited information about each other. Team members may know the gender of a member, and perhaps a location, but other demographic information will be unspecified. Some authors have argued that this lack of information results in positive outcomes, including making individuals more likely to contribute to discussions and decisions ([Rad and Levin, 2003](#)), making team discussions more about content and less about who said what ([Willmore, 2003, p. 53](#)), reducing biases in performance ratings ([Kirkman et al., 2002](#)), reducing stereotyping, personality, power or political conflicts ([Berry, 2011](#)), and making ideas and feedback more honest ([Johnson et al., 2002](#)).

With access to technology seemingly ubiquitous, [Nowak \(2003\)](#) suggests that a type of “utopia” exists in computer-mediated interactions which causes individuals to place less importance on the status or physical characteristics of the source. This is presumed to result in fewer social judgments and stereotypical perceptions of individuals. However, categorizing individuals into in-groups and out-groups remains a common socio-cognitive process ([Pearson et al., 2009](#)). Realistically, then, unless a nickname, abbreviation, acronym or nonsensical name is used, virtual team members are likely to work with individuals whose on-line names are the same as – or relatively similar to – their given names. Given that one's name becomes an identifier or social cue for others, we wondered whether individuals may become labeled or stereotyped when their name is known. Although one's surname can provide clues as to ethnicity, do similar attributions and judgments come from knowing only an individual's given name (i.e. first name)?

Categorizing individuals based on their given name may also apply to other managerial duties, such as hiring, training, promotions, and so on. As such, a given name can indicate diversity. Although diversity can improve organizational outcomes, it also complicates organizational processes. A major dimension of diversity in America is race. Many in the USA want a colorblind society, and some believe society is moving in that direction; however, recent research challenges this belief ([Pearson et al., 2009](#)).

The American context

Although the issue of race arises around the world, it is especially problematic in American society. The discussion of race in the USA typically focusses on one of two ideologies, either colorblindness or multicultural diversity. Colorblindness theory argues that racial categories do not matter and should not be considered ([Richeson and Nussbaum, 2004](#)). Multiculturalism focusses on recognizing and appreciating different identities rather than blending them into a single “American” category, which emphasizes white American cultural traditions ([Morrison et al., 2010](#)). CRT disputes the colorblind perspective and argues that instead of being colorblind, comparisons are made against a baseline of “Whiteness.” Additionally, in the USA, this “Whiteness” is equated with being more American ([Frankenburg, 1997](#); [Roediger, 1999](#)). Anonymity (as touted in virtual team's literature) may provide the type of color-free interaction that many desire. However, is this possible or even realistic? CRT argues that it may not be.

In this paper, we explore how even minimal information (e.g. first names) leads to assumptions about people. We conducted two studies that explore a host of first names across different samples to investigate the perceptions individuals have about these names without the influence of visual, verbal or any other attributional cues (e.g. gender, status). We begin with a brief review of research that establishes a foundation for the embeddedness of race in everyday perceptions. We use CRT to develop arguments that individuals tend to hold perceptions of “Whiteness” based on given names. Results are presented that indicate that specific attributes are given to names perceived to be common, ethnic or unusual. These attributes include perceptions of whether a person is American, levels of education and expected salary, and whether the name is more or less familiar (i.e. white). We then consider

the implications of these perceptions relative to management issues, and discuss study limitations and directions for future research.

CRT and Critical Whiteness studies

Believing that the gains of the Civil Rights era had stalled, a group of legal scholars in the 1960s initiated a new approach to understanding race, labeled CRT ([Delgado, 2003](#); [Delgado and Stefancic, 2001](#)). These writers took a radical perspective, arguing that many mainstream beliefs about race are, at best, incomplete. As a cross-disciplinary approach to studying race and racism within both historical and contemporary cultural contexts, CRT challenges the ways that race influences social structures, practices and discourse ([Yosso, 2005](#)). CRT has many themes. Among them are first, that “blindness” to race will not eliminate racism. Second, racism is not just an issue within individuals, but also within systems. From this perspective, race and racism are endemic, and inextricably interwoven into the fabric of American society. Finally, it claims that racism cannot be fought without paying attention to sexism, homophobia, and other forms of injustice ([Carbado and Gulati, 2003](#)). CRT is committed to social justice and the eradication of racism by promoting the experiences of women and people of color. It has been used to interpret American foreign policy ([Gordon, 2000](#)), and is a theoretical underpinning in marketing communication ([Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002](#)), marital and family therapy ([McDowell and Jeris, 2004](#)), postmodern philosophy ([Cook, 1991/1992](#)), and other areas of interest.

Understanding the role of race in the workplace requires the recognition of “Whiteness” and understanding how it functions as an invisible normative standard by which others are compared. According to Critical Whiteness studies, when comparing people of color in US organizations, the baseline for comparison is not neutral, but “white.” For example, it is noted that “[i]f a person of color is admitted into the organization, they are expected to conform to the general practice of Whiteness to be viewed as a professional, whereas the white-collar worker is never asked to perform anything other than simply being White (i.e. culturally speaking)” ([Lair et al., 2005, p. 332](#)). Further, “[w]hen whiteness is accepted as an invisible norm, differences are ignored; and white people, their assumptions, and ways are empowered” ([Grimes, 2002, p. 382](#)).

For the most part, scholars have studied organizations as if race was neutral. As [Nkomo \(1992\)](#) has pointed out, “The defining group for specifying the science of organizations has been white males [...] We have amassed a great deal of knowledge about the experience of only one group, yet we generalize our theories and concepts to all people” (p. 489). A similar point has been made that “immigrant employees deserve the attention of organizational scholars, but to date have been an under-studied group” ([Dietz, 2010, p. 140](#)). In addition, “research results regarding international careers are frequently exported from North American and west European countries, generalized based on mainstream western assumption and supposed to work worldwide” ([Al Ariss et al., 2012, p. 94](#)).

Another central tenet of Critical Whiteness studies is that being white is equated with being American. Not only is Whiteness an unexamined and invisible ethnic/racial standard, it is also a marker for positive national identity ([Baldwin, 1998](#)) and national ownership ([Frankenburg, 1997](#)). Baldwin argues that none of the groups now considered white were white before they came to America. He argues that early immigrants became white by devaluing people of African descent. This distinction is still considered the standard for assuming a white identity in America ([Warren and Twine, 1997](#)). Whiteness often influences individuals' perceptions of their own and others' "Americanness." For example, [Devos and Banaji \(2005\)](#) conducted several empirical studies investigating how various ethnic groups perceive the category, "American." They found that African-Americans and Asian-Americans were not seen as "American" as white Americans (except by African-American participants). Overall, respondents tended to perceive American as being synonymous with being white. Maybe this is why, as [Bell et al. \(2010\)](#) have noted, immigrants are virtually invisible in the diversity literature. As [Al Ariss and Syed \(2010\)](#) point out, "Addressing inequalities requires questioning the power through which ideas, actions and structures in society become accepted as self-evident. It entails inquiring about accepted social functioning to better understand power relations in society" (p. 290).

Research on social cognition suggests that people create categories in which to place people and make sense of them ([Macrae and Bodenhausen, 2000](#)). One obvious category that people use is race. Because many virtual teams are ambiguous in terms of identifying the race of team members, it may be thought that race is not considered. However, people use whatever cues are available to activate social categories. We argue that one potential cue that is likely to be available in a virtual team, despite substantial anonymity across other factors, is one's first name. How might a first name stimulate social cognition? The next section examines extant research on names and perceptions based on names.

Research on names

Critical Whiteness studies suggest that what might be regarded as common, neutral, or typical names might actually be "white" names. If Critical Whiteness studies assumptions are correct, the notion of "typical" names parallels the construction of Whiteness as "normal." Therefore, this ambiguous categorical cue could indicate the social category of white. The effects of names are potentially amplified when we recognize that common names might also be seen as more American, and therefore be regarded more positively in hiring, forming teams, and other organizational activities.

Names have been studied in both social psychology ([Mehrabian, 1990, 2001](#)) and labor economics ([Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2003](#)). Studies have found that unique names (unusual names or unusual spellings) imply less attractive characteristics than common names ([Mehrabian, 2001](#)) and are seen as less desirable ([Mehrabian, 1992](#)). However, these studies have not examined racial/ethnic perceptions about names. Labor economists have studied how names are chosen in different ethnic groups, and how they influence employment decisions. For example, [Fryer and Levitt \(2004\)](#) describe how the names chosen by African-American parents have changed over time, with these parents increasingly choosing African-sounding names. [Bertrand and Mullainathan \(2003\)](#) examined how names influence callbacks for job

interviews, finding that résumés with African-sounding names received fewer callbacks than white names.

In this paper we conduct two studies that examine how people respond to so-called typical or common names, to racial/ethnic names, and unusual names. The first study compares how racial/ethnic and unique names are viewed in comparison with ordinary, common names:

H1. We predict that common names will be perceived as more white and as better and more American than African-sounding names.

To control for African-sounding names being more unusual than common names, we have two comparison groups of unusual and white/ethnic (Russian) names. In addition, Russian names provide an example that crosses national boundaries. We do not have explicit hypotheses for how unusual and Russian names will be perceived. Critical Whiteness Theory, however, suggests that unusual and Russian names will be perceived differently from common names. The extent of these differences is not predicted.

In the second study we examine additional reactions of perceived similarity and socio-economic class of white names vs racial/ethnic and unique names:

H2. We predict that common names are perceived as more familiar and of a higher socio-economic class than African-sounding names. We expect that unusual and Russian names will be perceived differently, but make no specific predictions.

With these two studies, we make several contributions to existing literature. First, if names do engender categorization, perceptions will be biased across many organizational settings. Second, we bring CRT and specifically Critical Whiteness studies to the study of names. Third, we empirically examine one of the basic assumptions of CRT and Critical Whiteness studies.

Study 1

For the two studies described below, we prepared collections of four categories of names: common names, African-American names, Russian names, and unusual names. Since previous research on names indicates that unfamiliar or unusual names are often seen negatively ([Mehrabian, 2001](#)), we incorporated multiple groups of names. Including unusual names allows us to examine the impact of novelty in names. To differentiate between the effects of race vs unfamiliarity, Russian names were employed as a comparative group, since pretesting showed that these names (like African-American names) are seen as unusual, but are also perceived as being white ([Daniels, 1981](#)). For common names, we accessed the Social Security Administration (SSA) web site (see www.ssa.gov/OACT/babynames/) which identified the most common male and female baby names in the USA for the past three decades. We selected male and female names that consistently ranked as the most popular names, as these names would be most likely to be perceived as similar by respondents.

Since the SSA web site does not provide a list of names by race or ethnicity, we conducted an internet search on a variety of web sites devoted to Russian, African-American, and unusual names. African-American and Russian names were chosen based on the names we found most often and we included several names examined in prior studies (e.g. [Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2003](#)). Unusual names were chosen based on consensus by several coders and unlikely to be found in mainstream American culture (i.e. not used by any popular/media person).

A total of 48 names (six male and six female from each of the four categories) were employed in this study. The complete list of names used can be found in the Appendix. Half of the names (three male and three female from each category) were given to half of the respondents (labeled Sample 1) while the other half of the names were given to the remainder of the respondents (labeled Sample 2). The names were split this way to reduce exhaustion (and inappropriate responses) from the respondents.

Sample 1 consisted of 261 individuals enrolled in business programs at a university located in the Midwest. This group included 75 working adults (employed full-time and participating in a part-time graduate business program) and 186 full-time undergraduate business students (either not working or working part-time). The part-time graduate students in our sample represent the working population. The undergraduate business students in our sample represent the future working population. Although some of the undergraduates currently have little work experience, their studies are focussed on work organizations. In total, 53 percent (138) of the respondents in Sample 1 were male and 47 percent (121) were female. In addition, 81 percent (211) of the respondents in Sample 1 were Caucasian, 4 percent (ten) were African-American, 5 percent (13) were Hispanic, 6 percent (15) were Asian and 3 percent (seven) identified themselves as "other."

Sample 2 consisted of 244 individuals enrolled in business programs at the same university, 78 working adults in a part-time graduate business program, and 166 full-time undergraduate business students. In total, 57 percent (140) of the respondents in Sample 2 were male and 40 percent (97) were female, seven respondents did not indicate their gender. Similar to the other sample, 82 percent (199) of the respondents in Sample 2 were Caucasian, 4 percent (ten) were African-American, 3 percent (eight) were Hispanic, 5 percent (13) were Asian, and 2 percent (six) were "other."

Students did not receive extra credit for participation, but were simply asked to volunteer their time during class. The vast majority of students (approximately 95 percent) responded. Using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), the respondents were asked to agree or disagree with a variety of statements concerning the names. These statements asked if the respondents liked the name, and if they would expect a person with each name to be American, Caucasian, and African-American. Other questions not related to this study were also included in the survey.

Results

Ideally we would have some type of overall analysis comparing the four types of names. However, the name types are categorical variables and do not vary along any continuum. Because of this, there is no straightforward way to combine all four categories. Therefore, individual *t*-test comparisons were made between the various types of names in each of the two samples. Because of the unwieldy number of possible comparisons and since we have a large sample size, we utilized a two-part decision rule for discussing the effects. We discuss only those effects which are significant at the $p < 0.01$ level, and for which a significant effect is found in both Samples 1 and 2. We discuss the overall effects for the names, and then any gender differences in terms of the names. The means for the survey items we examined for both samples are presented in [Table I](#).

In support of *H1*, there are clear differences in how the names were perceived. For the question, "I would expect a person with this name to be a Caucasian," the effects are consistent across both Samples 1 and 2. The common names were seen as being most Caucasian, followed by the Russian names, the unusual names, and the African-American names (all t 's > 8.0). However, the findings for the question "I would expect a person with this name to be an African-American" are not exactly the reverse of the first question. Here, the African-American names were seen as being most African-American, and the common names were seen as the least African-American. The unusual names and Russian names were in between the other groups, but in different order in the two samples. With Sample 1, the order was African-American, unusual, Russian and common names. With Sample 2, the order was African-American, Russian, unusual, and common names (one $t = 2.5$; all other t 's > 5.0).

Concerning the question, "I would expect a person with this name to be an American," the common names were seen as being most American, followed by the African-American names. The Russian names, were third in Sample 1, but fourth in Sample 2, reversing with the unusual names (all t 's > 4.5), supporting *H1*. Respondents were also asked how good they perceived the names to be. The common names were perceived as good names to a greater extent than the other names. Common names were also liked best, followed by African-American names and Russian names (not significantly different from each other), followed by the unusual names (all significant t 's > 11.90).

The only differences between male and female names were with the common names on the Caucasian and African-American questions, and with the unusual names on the American and African-American questions. The female common names were seen as more Caucasian (t 's = 3.19 and 6.56) and less African-American than the male common names (t 's = 10.21 and 8.04). The female unusual names were seen as more American (t 's = 5.45 and 7.88) and more African-American (t 's = 10.45 and 7.96) than the male unusual names.

We also examined whether the responses to these questions varied by the race/ethnicity of the respondents. Because the vast majority of our respondents were Caucasian, we did two sets of analyses, comparing African-American with Caucasian respondents, and then (because of the

small numbers) collapsing across the categories and comparing minority with Caucasian respondents.

Using the same decision rule as above, there were three significant differences in how Caucasians and African-Americans responded. Caucasian respondents viewed common names as being more Caucasian than did African-American respondents (t 's=3.94 and 3.22). African-American respondents viewed African-American names as being more American than did Caucasian respondents (t 's=2.93 and 3.59). Finally, Caucasian respondents viewed unusual names as being more African-American than did African-American respondents (t 's=3.20 and 3.56). When we compared the Caucasian respondents to all others, the only significant difference was that Caucasian respondents viewed unusual names as being more African-American than did minority respondents (t 's=3.10 and 3.55).

Discussion

Overall, *H1* was supported; however, not all of the findings were completely foreseeable. For example, the Common names received the highest rating as being Caucasian. The Russian names had significantly lower ratings. Since Russians are considered a Caucasian ethnic group ([Daniels, 1981](#)), we expected Russian names would be perceived as Caucasian. However, they are seen as different from the baseline. Names like Sergei or Oksana were not viewed as Caucasian to the same degree as names like Michael or Susan.

It was not surprising to see the common names rated as the most American by respondents, with the Russian names as the least American. However, the African-American names were seen as significantly less American than the common names. Apparently Tyronne and Lakisha are American, but not nearly as American as John or Mary.

Therefore, Study 2 was conducted to explore additional reactions to the various names. We were interested in whether different socio-economic classes might be attributed to different categories of names, and how the names might vary in terms of perceived similarity to the respondents. As stated in *H2*, we predict that common names are perceived as more similar and of a higher socio-economic class than African-sounding names. We expect Russian and unusual names to be in between the other two groups, but make no specific hypotheses.

Study 2

The same 48 names employed in Study 1 were used again in Study 2 (six male and six female from each of the four categories). As in Study 1, half of the names were given to one group (labeled Sample 3), while the other half of the names were given to a second group (labeled Sample 4). As in Study 1, the respondents were given time in class to answer the questionnaire. Using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), the respondents were asked to evaluate names across a variety of dimensions (see [Table II](#)). Other questions unrelated to this study were also included.

Sample 3 consisted of 95 individuals enrolled in business programs at a university located in the Midwest. This group included 24 adults (employed full-time and participating in a part-time graduate business program) and 71 full-time undergraduate business students (either not working or working part-time). In total, 62 percent (59) of the respondents were male and 38 percent (32) were female. In terms of demographics, 78 percent (74) of these respondents were Caucasian, 1 percent (one) were African-American, 3 percent (three) were Hispanic, 3 percent (three) were American Indian, 5 percent (five) were Asian and 3 percent (three) identified themselves as “other.”

Sample 4 consisted of 90 individuals enrolled in business programs at the same university, 24 working adults in a part-time graduate business program, and 66 full-time undergraduate business students. In total, 56 percent (50) of these respondents were male and 44 percent (40) were female. Similar to the other sample, 84 percent (76) of the respondents were Caucasian, 2 percent (two) were African-American, 2 percent (two) were Hispanic, 2 percent (two) were American Indian, 6 percent (five) were Asian, and 2 percent (two) were “other.”

Results

As in Study 1, we used a two-part decision rule to choose the effects to examine. Because the number of respondents was much smaller in this study, we only discuss those effects which are significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, and in which a significant effect is found in both Samples 3 and 4. Like the first study, we discuss the overall effects for the names, and then any gender differences we found. The means for the various questions for both samples are presented in [Table II](#).

As $H2$ predicted, the common names were seen as the most familiar ($t's > 17.5$), with unusual names being seen as the least familiar ($t's > 4.30$). Interestingly, the Russian and African-American names were seen as equally familiar to these respondents ($t's = 2.59$ and 1.89). Also supporting $H2$, common names are given the most positive attributes. People with common names are expected to be more likely to have a college degree ($t's > 4.94$) and to make \$100,000 or more ($t's > 5.18$). Russian names ranked second on both socio-economic expectations. African-American names and unusual names ranked last, with neither set of names being significantly different from each other on the college degree and salary questions in Sample 4.

Differences between male and female names were infrequent and unpredictable. People with female Russian names were seen as more likely to have a college degree ($t's = 3.56$ and 2.84) and make \$100,000 ($t's = 2.99$ and 3.63) than those with male Russian names. People with male unusual names were seen as more likely to have a college degree ($t's = 4.18$ and 5.06) than those with female unusual names.

General discussion

Both hypotheses were supported. It is clear that when comparing specific ethnic groups to a general or neutral group, the general group is seen as white. People with common names were seen as more likely to be Caucasian. In addition, a number of other attributes are also applied to common names. People with common names are seen as being more American than the other categories, more likely to have a college degree, to make a large salary (e.g. higher socioeconomic class), and were seen as less different and more familiar than the other groups. It is apparent that when no explicit ethnic label is given (e.g. a common name), an attribution of Whiteness is made. In addition, these results suggest that Whiteness carries a sense of familiarity and a number of positive attributes.

CRT argues that race is part of every social interaction, even when the issue is not explicitly raised. However, when diversity is discussed, the focus is primarily on people of color. People colored white ([Dyer, 1997](#)) are not racially marked and Whiteness is not addressed or explicitly examined. As [Grimes \(2002\)](#) has pointed out, “Difference is celebrated at a superficial level, but White people and their ways are implicitly presented as more ‘normal’ or more important” (p. 389). Essentially, white people, their attributes and behavior automatically become the standard for comparison. In the USA, employees in high status jobs are generally those with attributes similar to the dominant societal group (e.g. young, attractive, male, white, with no foreign accent) ([Hosoda and Stone-Romero, 2010](#)). Given that those authors found that a Mexican-Spanish accent negatively affected employment decisions, we expect similar negative responses to African-sounding or unusual names. As [Carbado and Gulati \(2003\)](#) state, “Whiteness functions as the identity against which all other identities are measured” (p. 1777).

The findings from our studies clearly support arguments from CRT. When evaluating “common” names, respondents saw them as being “White” more so than Russian or unusual names. In addition, “Whiteness” had clear implications for how a person was viewed. The body of work by Dovidio and colleagues (see [Dovidio et al., 2002](#)) suggests that whites tend to discriminate against African Americans when their bias is attributed to factors other than race, even when they are unlikely to see this behavior as motivated by race. [Pearson et al. \(2009\)](#) argue that the very act of affirming a non-prejudiced image of oneself can actually increase discriminatory behavior against a minority group in hiring decisions (i.e. gender or racial group). Attributions relative to being American, being similar to oneself on level of education and/or socioeconomic class may provide “factors” for justifying racially motivated attributions and discriminatory behavior. Additional research is needed to investigate this.

In an organizational context, virtual team members may know little about each other, but they will typically know team members’ names. As our research demonstrates, simply knowing a name leads to categorization and implicit (or explicit) assumptions about someone. Therefore, when members of a virtual team have common American names, it may be assumed that they are Caucasian. However, unusual names, Russian names, and African-American names may lead to other assumptions ([Bell et al., 2010](#)). This suggests that some positive consequences attributed to virtual teams (e.g. focussing on the content of contributions and ignoring the source of the contribution) may only exist only if everyone has common names. Additional research is needed to directly test these hypotheses.

Our findings also suggest that given names may impact a host of other managerial decisions. [Carbado and Gulati \(2003\)](#) point out that, “[t]he literature has paid little attention to the workplace as a site of racial construction. In part, this is because much of CRT's effort to combat racial discrimination in the workplace has focused on eliminating formal and informal racial barriers to entry” (p. 1759). However, the functionalist approach to diversity management as well as multicultural theories and perspectives ([Thomas and Ely, 1996](#)) suggest that organizations will be more effective and efficient when all members are able to contribute their unique ideas and ways. However, allowing Whiteness to remain an invisible norm may reinforce the inequities present in the status quo ([Grimes, 2001, 2002](#)). One reason why diversity programs fail or are only able to effect superficial change is because privileged groups are not willing to acknowledge the ways that unchallenged assumptions support a status quo from which they benefit ([Grimes, 2002](#)). Exposing these issues might lead to more effective programs and interventions for managing diversity in organizations. Pearson and colleagues suggest several interventions for addressing bias and racism. Having groups highlight their commonalities shifts the focus away from perceptions of “them” and more towards an “us” or “we” perspective. This effectively creates a common in-group identity, which can reduce aversive racism. They also suggest acknowledging and explicitly addressing unconscious biases that may have been learned through earlier socialization processes. One could argue that simply acknowledging bias may do little to engender more positive racial attitudes. However, failure to explicitly acknowledge such biases has been shown to increase perceptions of racial prejudice ([Pearson et al., 2009](#)).

Limitations of the studies

There are, of course, limitations with the present studies. First, only 12 names (six male and six female) were employed from each category. It is possible that the reactions found may not be due to the group from which the names were drawn, but to specific attributes of those particular names. We reduced the likelihood of this by only examining effects which were significant with two samples of different names, and choosing as Common names those which were statistically most popular. However, it is possible that we somehow selected atypical samples of names from the other groups.

A second limitation is the potential for response bias in how respondents answered the questions. It is possible that some may have suspected the nature of the study and tried to answer accordingly. However, if this had occurred, it would likely reduce stereotyping of African-American names. In contrast, our results indicated the opposite reaction.

A third limitation is the small number of non-Caucasian respondents, making it difficult to examine their reactions to the names, especially in Study 2. The primary objective of these studies was to determine if the Whiteness arguments of CRT were accurate and empirically testable. Our results provide support for those arguments and offer opportunities for future empirical research. Comparing white and minority reactions to names raises provocative questions about how non-Caucasians view given names. Despite the small numbers of minorities in our studies, we did find minority respondents viewed African-American names

differently than Caucasian respondents. As noted in the findings for [Hosoda et al. \(2012\)](#), results obtained with small samples actually underestimate the potential strength of the relationships between the variables. Our results are consistent with [Dovidio et al. \(2002\)](#) and their findings of differences between whites and African Americans relative to perceptions of discrimination. They are also consistent with [Sawyerr et al's. \(2005\)](#) findings concerning self-enhancement and perceptions of those who are different. However, we recommend that empirical research with a more racially diverse sample of respondents be conducted to further investigate these and other related questions.

Lastly, it would be valuable to directly test the bias occurring from names within the context of a virtual team. We demonstrate that names generate categorization, and that this leads to biased perceptions concerning the names. However, it would be useful to actually explore these processes within virtual teams. The bias toward Whiteness and “Americanness” may be an American phenomenon, and studies that look at multinational virtual teams may provide additional insight into these processes.

Conclusion and implications

From a theoretical perspective, our study supports the basic assumption of Critical Whiteness studies that when American respondents evaluate others, they use a White person as a baseline. Second, we applied CRT to the research on names, showing that “Whiteness” is an important dimension by which people perceive names. In addition, despite dramatic increases in the use of virtual teams, our research suggests that unless they are totally anonymous, individuals may still experience the adverse social categorization and stereotyping often found in ordinary teams.

In practice, managers need to recognize that a “colorblind” approach may simply reinforce the expectation that any differences in American organizations will be compared against the Whiteness standard. As [Ashcraft and Allen \(2003\)](#) state, “[being] professional’ is at least as much (if not more) about performing Whiteness” (p. 27). Our studies suggest that these informal and invisible normative standards include the perception of one's name. Therefore, the more diverse and global our workforce becomes, the more employers need to address the unspoken and unchallenged standards that make participation challenging for those individuals who are different from the norm of Whiteness. Traditional diversity approaches to managing these differences may be inadequate for examining and challenging such strongly held norms.

The key to helping overcome bias begins with acknowledging its presence. As mentioned earlier, organization-wide discussions about white privilege would go a long way toward uncovering the normative biases associated with whiteness and blunt some of its effects. When racial bias is not directly acknowledged, managers must realize that utopian expectations of neutrality and a lack of bias are impossible. As a simple, but powerful example, names and the perceptions they generate can serve as signals of invisible organizational expectations, even in settings where expectations are presumed to be neutral. Managers should emphasize teambuilding activities – especially in virtual teams – that develop a common identity for

effective working relationships. The more employees learn about each other, the less likely they are to focus on labels and stereotypes. Although distance between members may seem problematic, virtual team leaders can emphasize more frequent and extensive video interactions, essentially moving teambuilding into a virtual workspace.

Part of the struggle of dealing with issues of race in organizations is understanding how to talk about it. Findings from our study support existing research in Critical Whiteness studies related to name-based attributions in settings where attributions are presumed to be relatively minimal. Future research should focus on increasing knowledge and awareness of such perceptions and highlighting these concepts in a more accessible manner for executives and other decision makers.

	“to be a Caucasian” (Sample 1)	“to be a Caucasian” (Sample 2)	“to be an African American” (Sample 1)	“to be an African American” (Sample 2)	“to be an American” (Sample 1)	“to be an American” (Sample 2)	“I think this is a good name” (Sample 1)	“I think this is a good name” (Sample 2)
Common names	5.83	5.88	3.18	3.05	6.33	6.32	5.44	4.90
African-American names	2.29	2.03	5.72	6.12	4.96	5.00	3.90 _a	3.54 _b
Russian names	4.22	4.23	2.91	4.48	2.83	3.31	3.83 _a	3.70 _b
Unusual names	2.95	3.50	3.87	3.83	3.28	2.99	2.49	2.50

Notes: Each question except the last one was in the format: “I would expect a person with this name to be [...]” Higher means indicate more Caucasian, African-American, or American or greater liking. Means in the same column with a common subscript are not significantly different ($p > 0.01$)

Table I Means for Study 1 questions

	“This name is familiar to me” (Sample 3)	“This name is familiar to me” (Sample 4)	“to be different from me” (Sample 3)	“to be different from me” (Sample 4)	“to have a college degree” (Sample 3)	“to have a college degree” (Sample 4)	“to make \$100,000 or more a year” (Sample 3)	“to make \$100,000 or more a year” (Sample 4)
Common names	6.73	6.66	2.93	2.94	5.00	5.16	4.78	4.80
African-American names	3.81	3.75 _a	4.70	4.82	4.09	4.06 _b	3.72	3.59 _c
Russian names	4.10	3.53 _a	4.56	4.48	4.26	4.42	4.02	4.01
Unusual names	3.02	1.86	5.05	5.11	3.77	3.94 _b	3.38	3.53 _c

Notes: All of the questions except the familiar question were in the format: “I would expect a person with this name to.” Higher means indicate more likely to have a degree, more likely to make money, or be more different. Means in the same column with a common subscript are not significantly different ($p > 0.05$)

Table II Means for Study 2 questions

Samples 1 and 3 names	Samples 2 and 4 names
<i>Common</i>	<i>Common</i>
Elizabeth	Jennifer
Julie	Mary
Nicole	Susan
David	James
John	Robert
Michael	William
<i>African-American</i>	<i>African-American</i>
Aisha	Latoya
Chaunte	Shanice
Keisha	Tanisha
DeShawn	Antwan
Taye	Davante
Tyronne	Jamal
<i>Russian</i>	<i>Russian</i>
Oksana	Anastasia
Svetlana	Katrina
Tatiana	Natassa
Dimitry	Oleg
Nikolai	Sergei
Vladimir	Vasiliy
<i>Unusual</i>	<i>Unusual</i>
Cameo	Crescent
Tangerine	Magestic
Velvet	Nebula
Ajax	Atholl
Argyle	Ion
Xylon	Pollard

Table A1 Names employed in Studies 1 and 2

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