

## ~ Chapter 1 ~

### The Color Bind

The local office of the state's child welfare agency was difficult to find. Although it was located on a busy road, no signs indicated that the office was inside. In fact, the door from the street looked almost like a back entrance, without identification of any kind. Once inside, instead of a lobby, there were just a dark and somewhat dingy set of stairs leading up and a hallway leading to an elevator. The office of the agency was on the third floor.

In one of its conference rooms, a team of eight social workers sat in folding chairs around a long dun-colored folding table. The room was large and light, but spare, with faded gray and tan colors and little decoration save for several posters tacked on the wall. Like those advertised in airline magazines, one proclaimed Teamwork, accompanied by a photo of the Great Wall of China. Another announced Vision and included a picture of a lighthouse by a rocky coastline.

The workers were immersed in a conversation about a particularly challenging case. The members of this family were recent immigrants from West Africa who had witnessed terrible violence because of their country's civil war.<sup>1</sup> The agency was involved in the case because the fourteen-year-old son, living with his grandparents, had become too difficult for them to handle. He was currently at a group facility receiving treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

One particularly troubling behavior was his tendency to move in very close to others, but the source of the behavior was unclear. Was it culturally informed or a sign of aggression? The lead caseworker, Dave, described what the boy would do. "He'll corner her [the staff person at the group facility]. Get right up into her face. He does that with other people. Did that with me, [with] every one of us in that meeting." His coworker, Chris, wondered about the boy's diagnosis: "Sounds to me like we don't have a lot of information on the kid. What's his evaluation say? To me PTSD is a throw

away diagnosis. More going on.” Arlo, another team member, agreed, raising the possibility of cultural misunderstanding or stereotyping: “[PTSD is] attached to every kid [that] comes from Africa.” Chris built on this: “Culturally, from [West African country], talking close to someone might not be a boundary issue.”

Katie, their team leader, picked up this theme, noting that their consulting psychologist had puzzled over the role of culture when doing a psychiatric evaluation: “He was debating [whether to give] him psychosis as part of his diagnosis, because we don’t have a full understanding of his culture.” “Or what he lived through,” noted Katie’s supervisor, Harriet. But Dave was resistant to a cultural explanation: “[The boy] is not getting into anyone’s face because of cultural reasons, he’s getting in people’s face[s] to make them feel uncomfortable. No question in my mind.” Katie pushed back, suggesting that culture could be at least part of the explanation: “That would be good to at least call [the agency that does cultural evaluations]. I do think understanding the cultural is a piece that’s important . . . The more we can become educated.” Finally, Carla, another coworker, appealed to Dave on a personal level: “[Dave], the second you got this case you said, ‘I know the cultural aspect of this is going to be tremendous, I want to take it as a learning experience.’ You could be right, [the boy] could just be trying to get into somebody’s face to piss them off. . . . But, in terms of learning more—maybe there’s something else there. That it comes from the cultural. Why not, if we can, why not explore? Maybe it will uncover some of those questions.” After a pause, Dave concurred: “I agree,” he said.

This discussion illustrates a work group wrestling with the role of culture in its work with families. Standing very close to someone could be a sign of hostility, a reaction to trauma, or a cultural norm. In fact, it could be all three. How can they know? The team ultimately recognized the limits of its knowledge and decided to pursue a cultural evaluation to enhance its understanding rather than settle for a simplistic explanation that either anointed culture as the only explanation or fully rejected it. The team’s conversation, though, didn’t reference only the family’s culture. When Katie and Harriet praised his work with the boy, Dave thought his own “very open, animated” way of interacting rooted in his “Italian family” might have played a role. Although brief, the comment illustrates his awareness that he, like his client, is also informed by culture.

This conversation stands out because this work group was able to grapple with the often-challenging topic of culture, something that most workplaces largely avoid. Indeed, as we document in this book, even in the context of a child welfare agency that extolled cultural competence, explicit discussions related to culture were quite rare—and conversations referencing race rarer still. Ample research suggests that most of us shy away from exchanges related to race or culture, particularly in diverse groups, even if we think such topics are important.<sup>2</sup> We feel caught in a *color bind*. This team did not feel those

constraints, however. This book explores how its story, and the story of other teams in the same agency, can help us break free of the color bind.

Although our study is based in child protection, analogous conversations might happen in other work contexts in which participants must grapple with the role and weight of race and culture. Policymakers investigate how a proposed public housing regulation preventing convicted felons from living there will have different impacts on black and white tenants because African Americans are so disproportionately ensnared in the criminal justice system. The vice president of human resources and the lead corporate counsel at a large manufacturer wrestle with a recent allegation of racial discrimination. A doctor, nurse, and social worker explore how best to approach a distraught patient in the emergency room, recently emigrated from Indonesia. A professor and her teaching assistants discuss how to teach the achievement gap in education without putting students of color on the defensive. A racially diverse team of field researchers studying a Mexican community checks in every evening to compare notes, including reflections on how their differing backgrounds may shape the way they understand an interaction they observed. Members of corporate teams, brought together from four continents to design and market a new product for a global audience, must learn together how cultural differences can affect how consumers will react.

As the child welfare workers grappled with how to work with the West African family, they reflected—knowingly or not—a larger societal debate about whether, how, and when race, ethnicity, and culture matter. Two basic models of diversity and inclusion contend for influence in the American arena. One is the color-blind approach that emphasizes similarity and assimilation, the dominant model in the United States since the 1960s. Color blindness, informed by a universalistic ideology that presumes a set of broad similarities among all people, argues that race and culture are largely irrelevant and that people should be understood as individuals, not identity-group members.<sup>3</sup> It downplays the existence of current discrimination and racism, seeing them as vestiges of the past. Color blindness is a step in the right direction when compared with slavery, genocide, and outright segregation. Scholars from many fields, however, including sociology, psychology, and education, have delineated how it contributes to searing inequities.<sup>4</sup> Whether driven by a well-meaning desire to do right, an anxious need to evade charged issues, or a hostile animus toward people of color, color blindness ultimately reinforces the current racial hierarchy.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, many call instead for color cognizance, drawing from a culturally particularistic perspective, which combines an awareness of the profound impact of race and ethnicity on individuals and communities, a belief in the richness of racial and cultural heritage, and an acknowledgment of prejudice and discrimination.<sup>6</sup>

Much of this literature aptly addresses the broad currents and institutions in American life that shape these discourses. On the ground, however, these models are enacted by people interacting with other people. Little research

examines what enables color cognizance to flourish or even gain a foothold at the micro level—for diverse groups of people to actually engage in color-conscious behavior that includes discussing racial and ethnic differences as a point of strength and addresses these differences in real time.

In fact, in work groups, color cognizance is *hard*: it requires breaking with established ways of thinking; it challenges those who benefit from the status quo, usually those of European descent; and it means talking about things, like race and culture, that are hard to talk about. Above all, perhaps, it demands being willing to make mistakes. Therefore, many of us who believe these issues matter and think they should be addressed are reluctant to do so. In fact, research suggests that members of all racial groups can be apprehensive about such conversations, though for different reasons. Whites are likely to fear that they will say something racist or offensive or will be perceived as doing so, and people of color are worried that they will be the targets of such statements.<sup>7</sup> Because both sets of concerns are credible, we remain caught in the color bind.

This book, based on an intensive investigation of teams in a child welfare agency, builds theory on how we can transcend the color bind, creating work groups that can discuss racial and cultural issues in ways that advance the work and create trusting relationships.

We suggest that several elements are critical, including the team members' individual racial-cultural practices as well as characteristics of the team and its context. That is, we suggest a multilevel model.

Certainly the inclinations of individual team members toward color cognizance are very important. Our findings suggest that not everyone has to agree, but that there must be several members who model what it looks like to enact a color-cognizant practice. Further, it may be particularly helpful to have people of different racial groups acting as models, forming a kind of cross-racial partnership or commitment to color consciousness.

However, those individual predispositions don't exist in a vacuum. They are influenced by the work context in which they are embedded. Work group members exist in a set of nested contexts, including their profession, organization, office, and team. All these are important, but those most proximate to the individuals—the team and the office in which they are located—may hold particular sway. They make up the everyday interactional milieu in which the workers carry out their responsibilities, the location of countless, often mundane encounters that send implicit but decipherable cues about what kinds of thinking and behavior are appropriate and welcome.

Our study suggests that two kinds of environmental messages are especially important. First is the safety of the environment—that is, the extent to which individuals feel they can say what they think and be who they are without risk or sanction. This safety can include a broad sense of “psychological safety”<sup>8</sup> as well as a more particular sense of “identity safety”<sup>9</sup> that makes us feel that our own racial or ethnic identity is welcome in that environment. Second, and possible only in a safe environment, is the extent to which mem-

bers engage in learning behaviors that voice and integrate disparate points of view, allowing the group to move forward, often in new directions.<sup>10</sup> If group members are able to bridge differences related to fundamental group tasks such as setting direction and specifying roles and responsibilities, they may be more likely to undertake the often more difficult task of exploring how race and culture are implicated in their day-to-day work.

Together, the presence or absence of safety and learning behaviors—in both the team and the office—are the foundational features of an *intergroup incubator*, a kind of hatchery. By *intergroup* we refer to the relationships between different racial and ethnic groups. Instead of brooding eggs, therefore, this incubator acts on the team members' individual racial-cultural practices, ultimately determining whether color-conscious leanings are cultivated into a fuller color-cognizant team practice or suppressed, creating a group-level color-blind approach.

Therefore, fundamentally, whether a group delves into race and ethnicity depends as much on its broader dynamics as it does on aspects that could be seen as more obviously race- or culture-related. A team's racial-cultural practice is fully bound up with its larger way of acting in the world.

These micro-level dynamics can get lost in the broader struggle for a more just and equitable society, but they are essential cornerstones of that campaign. As we know, "wicked problems" demand working across a variety of disciplinary, organizational, and sectoral boundaries.<sup>11</sup> But they also require the acumen and expertise of people from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds.<sup>12</sup> Whether we make policy, advocate for social change, create useful products, conduct research, or provide frontline care to people and their communities, we have to not only call for an approach that takes race and ethnicity into account, but be able to enact that every day with our coworkers, clients, and customers. That enactment can't happen unless we talk about the impact of race on our work and our collegial relationships—and those conversations can't happen without an environment that members of all groups find safe and open to learning.

### *Our Own Talking and Learning: The Authors as an Interracial Team*

As an interracial team of scholars—Erica is white, Tamara is African American—we live much of what we write about in this book. Just as these child welfare workers had to make sense of the role of race and ethnicity in their work, just as they had to decide whether and when to raise issues, just as they had to negotiate relationships with colleagues from backgrounds different from their own, we have to as well.

In many ways, we've broken out of the color bind. We are both committed to color cognizance and to talking about race; indeed, teaching and writing

about race are not only a professional responsibility, but a reflection of our personal identity. Yet we had to work through a variety of race-related challenges and dilemmas, including those when we had to overcome a desire to suppress, rather than engage, conflict. We have chosen to write about our practice, briefly here and at greater length in chapter 8, to show that we are subject to the same dynamics we see in others and to attempt the openness that we believe is so critical for learning.

One central dilemma dogged us in our writing, though it took us two book-length drafts before we were able to name and face it. This is odd, because it is fundamentally about our own learning orientation as we wrote this book. We think of this as the dilemma of probity versus generosity.

This dilemma faces many scholars in different forms, but for us it began with color blindness. How should we deal with color blindness? Inspired by probity and rectitude, we would condemn it by pointing out that color blindness, at best, overlooks the impact, value, and richness of race and ethnicity and, at worst, provides a seemingly neutral cover for racism. Motivated by empathy and generosity, we would seek to understand color blindness by exploring the anxieties and confusions that animate the lived experience of race. In fact, we, Tamara and Erica, oscillated between these poles as we wrote this book and even changed roles multiple times, one of us holding probity while the other affirmed empathy and then reversing our positions. As we equivocated, we sometimes criticized ourselves or each other for, on the one hand, not being righteous or scrupulous enough or, on the other, being too severe and judgmental.

It wasn't until we explicitly surfaced the dilemma for ourselves, as we began the third draft, that we saw how we were standing in the way of our learning. Holding, or living with, the tension—rather than judging ourselves for being unable to resolve it—allowed us to see the critical distinction between motivation and consequences or intent and impact.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the motivation for color blindness, however well-intentioned, its consequences are troubling, often devastating. That means we need probity: without the integrity of honest naming, we obscure the impact of color blindness—which prevents awareness and learning. But condemning people who hold color-blind views—whether out of racism, anxiety, confusion, or, most likely, some combination—provides no inducement to growth and development. And, honestly, we are not always righteous ourselves. That's where empathy and generosity come in.

Therefore we have done our best to live with the dilemma as we write about the social workers in this study. We have relatively little data about their intentions, so we try to make generous inferences and give them the benefit of the doubt. Also, because we explore the effects of context at length, we make the point over and over that beliefs and actions are not solely individual creations, but strongly shaped by their environment as well. At the same time, we do not shy away from naming the impact of the workers' beliefs and

actions on their team and its work together. We also don't hold ourselves above scrutiny: in chapter 8, we explore times in the writing when we fell short of our ideals and the consequences of those choices.

### *The Structure of Our Argument*

The following chapters bring our study to life, by embedding it in current debates in sociology, psychology, and other fields, by presenting more details about the professional and organizational context of the research as well as our methods, and then by providing extensive, qualitative data from the team members, their superiors, and their meetings about their approach to race and ethnicity.

The next chapter, chapter 2, connects our study with several related cross-disciplinary conversations and describes our research context and methods. We begin with a review of prior research on the models or discourses of color blindness and color cognizance.<sup>14</sup> Work in psychology and sociology names these as the two dominant approaches in the United States today and delves into their impact on individuals, groups, and society as a whole. Perhaps counterintuitively, given the broad dissemination and appeal of color blindness, work across disciplines suggests that color cognizance brings with it a variety of positive consequences, and that color blindness has much more troublesome implications. However, we also know from significant streams of research that a color-cognizant approach is very difficult for a work group to actually manifest. It's unclear what it would actually look like because there are few models; it undermines those in a more dominant position because it brings attention to the very existence of a racial hierarchy, and it requires conversations about the largely taboo topics of race, ethnicity, and culture. Extensive research on diverse teams, however, found in the psychology, organizations, and management literatures, suggests two primary elements that might enable its enactment: safety—or the degree to which members feel safe, comfortable, and welcome—and learning behaviors—the extent to which they are capable of both offering diverse perspectives and knitting them together to form a more complex and elaborated understanding.

The chapter continues with a picture of the professional and organizational contexts of the study. We review the debates within social work and child welfare about the role of race and culture. We then portray the child welfare agency in which the research took place, describing its commissioner and his priorities, change efforts going on at the time, and its particular emphasis on cultural competence. We describe the agency's experiment, involving seven teams, with using a team approach to engaging with families. We end with a summary of our research methodology, designed to build theory on how work groups can overcome the color bind. Data collection included team interviews (interviewing the team as a whole) at three points over about two and a half years as well as interviews with team supervisors and stakeholders.



For four of the seven teams, dubbed in-depth teams, it also included three rounds of individual interviews with all team members and observation of team meetings about every other month. As an intensive, qualitative, longitudinal investigation of seven teams, it explores and documents the complexity of how color blindness and color cognizance are actually lived on the ground rather than simply captured in one-time interviews, surveys, or lab studies. Moreover, these teams embody a broad range of approaches to racial-cultural practice, from color cognizance to virtual silence to a real hostility toward organizational policies that promoted racial and cultural awareness. Therefore, they have a larger story to tell.

Chapters 3 through 7 present the empirical findings of the study. Chapter 3 targets the individual level, providing an in-depth and layered illustration of how color blindness and color cognizance are actually performed day-to-day in the context of one particular profession. It draws on data from participants in all seven teams to illustrate how they individually conceptualized whether and how to use a racial and cultural lens in their work. Three questions guide the discussion: whether workers should engage with families differently based on their race or ethnicity, whether workers should draw on their own racial or cultural backgrounds, and whether workers and clients should be matched by race or ethnicity. We document the variety of their sensemaking, including whether workers see race and culture as constraints or taints to expunge or sources of insight and expertise. We also make a distinction between cultural cognizance, which attends to cultural differences only when working with recent immigrant families, and full color cognizance, which attends to the impact of race and ethnicity more broadly, including African American and white families who have been in the United States for generations. Finally, we draw attention to a phenomenon we call color minimization, a way to characterize the contradictions we often saw participants express. Color minimization constitutes a nod to the importance of race and culture, accompanied by a de-emphasis of them.

We move to the team level in chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7, focusing on three of the four in-depth teams as exemplars of different approaches to addressing race and ethnicity at work. In each chapter, we provide a detailed portrait of one of the three teams. We begin by describing the team's racial-cultural practice, drawn from observing its meetings. This data allowed us to determine how often and how intensively its members discussed issues related to race and ethnicity regarding their cases, their team dynamics, and their office context. Then each chapter investigates multilevel explanations for their particular practice.

This begins with descriptions of individual team members and their singular approaches, including the extent to which they acknowledged the impact of their racial or cultural heritage on their work and the degree to which they adapted their professional approach to work with families from varied backgrounds. This data comes largely from individual interviews. Each chapter continues by describing key features of the team context, drawing on indi-



vidual and team interviews as well as team-meeting observations. It illustrates the team's learning behaviors, including whether it was able to constructively engage conflict, experiment, and reflect on its work. We then look at whether members felt generally safe and welcome on their team, including whether they felt their racial or cultural identity put them at risk or disadvantage. We also introduce relevant data from their office, including the degree of conflict, especially cross-racial conflict. Altogether, we conceptualize the team and office context as an incubator that, acting on individual leanings, ultimately results in teams taking up or avoiding racial and cultural issues.

In chapter 4, we paint a picture of Team North, the only color-cognizant team, which used a racial and cultural lens as a diagnostic tool to help them understand the challenges facing their cases and themselves as a group. We begin by describing the team's racial-cultural practice. We continue by suggesting the characteristics that enabled its color cognizance: the color-conscious approaches of individual members of the team as well as the learning orientation and relatively safe climate that defined the intergroup incubator.

A portrayal of Team East makes up chapter 5. We characterize Team East's racial-cultural practice as *color evasive* because though most individual members manifested not only interest but significant knowledge and skill in addressing race and ethnicity, the team as a whole largely evaded any such discussions.<sup>15</sup> Given the individual expertise on the team, the toxic team and office context seems to be the primary culprit in explaining why the team suppressed conversations related to race and culture.

The third team, Team South, was *color hostile*, as we describe in chapter 6. Its members mostly avoided discussions of race and ethnicity, but the conversations they did have sometimes revealed an animus to affirmative action and the agency's internal caucus for people of color. Its individual members described their practice as color blind, in contrast to the members of Teams North and East, which likely provides part of the explanation for their practice. But features of their incubator—a contradictory one that was learning-oriented in some ways but not in others and safe for many team members but not all—are also implicated.

Chapter 7 provides a schematic, multilevel model, induced from the team-based analyses, which brings together the elements and their interrelationships that can cultivate color-cognizant practice within work groups. The model suggests that the intergroup incubator acts on individual members' racial-cultural practices to produce different configurations of roles and relationships on the team, which then lead to the team's racial-cultural practice. We look at the roles of the team leaders as well as specific team members who seemed to have outsized influence on whether and how the team discusses race and ethnicity. Regarding relationships, we characterize the overall cohesion, or lack of it, within each team.

Chapter 8 explores the role of ambivalence and inconsistency in racial-cultural practice. Despite clear differences among the teams that enabled us

to characterize them as more or less color cognizant, contradictions were rife among study participants. To deepen our examination, we discuss inconsistencies found in two of the teams. Team North delved further into race than any other team, but its members sometimes made insensitive comments and appeared to engage in stereotypes. However, we suggest that flawless conversations about race are impossible and that often that very expectation shuts down discussion entirely. Instead we suggest that Team North is a model of the contradictions that inevitably animate how we grapple with these issues. Team South's hostility to bringing race and culture into its work was palpable. Yet its members were seen as a team that engaged in a strength-based practice dedicated to working with parents to keep their children in the home, removing them only when all other avenues had been explored. One case, which the team and two observers described at length, showed a determination to avoid automatically blaming parents. We suggest that this mindset could perhaps be an opening to reflection on the team's stance on racial and cultural differences.

With these examples in mind, we also discuss some of the conflicts and contradictions the two of us encountered while working as an interracial team to interpret the data and write this book. Although ultimately we came to agreement about the argument presented here, we often disagreed along the way, sometimes heatedly. We share some of those battles to showcase our flaws and inconsistencies. We also use them to illustrate some of the bumps we encountered in our color-cognizant practice and how we worked through them—acknowledging that some are not fully resolved.

Finally, chapter 9 summarizes how our work contributes to both research and practice. First, we add an exploration of team-level dynamics to the continuing scholarly discussion of color blindness and color cognizance in macro fields such as sociology and political science. These literatures often call for racial and cultural awareness, but they often overlook the micro-interactions that would enable this approach to gain a foothold in a given environment. Moreover, we note that this work has explored the impact of these discourses on schools, communities, and participants in lab experiments, but paid little attention to the workplace. Second, research in clinical fields could be enriched by our examination of small groups, given that their work on cultural competence has focused largely on the individual and the organizational context. Finally, we further the management and psychology literatures on diverse teams by undertaking a longitudinal, ethnographic exploration of their dynamics. The quantitative orientation of most team diversity research has enabled cross-study comparison and some accumulation of knowledge, but has its limitations. In particular, while we know that certain characteristics seem to have an impact, we know much less about what these elements actually look like in the day-to-day lives of team members, or about how these various characteristics intertwine and play out in relation to each other.

We also elaborate in chapter 9 the implications for how groups and organizations can cultivate color-cognizant practice. We encourage practitioners

to work at multiple levels—individual, team, and organizational. We point to the importance of leadership in modeling how everyone can take race and culture into account. We also discuss approaches to training that we think could be more fruitful than standard diversity workshops found in many contexts. We end by suggesting that a trade-off between unity and diversity isn't needed; rather, it is possible to attain a unity through diversity, a cohesion that is all the stronger for having been forged from difference.

*Color Cognizance as an Achievement:  
Overcoming the Odds*

The fundamental premise of this book is that color-cognizant practice is an *achievement*.<sup>16</sup> The odds are stacked against a group of employees trying to create a way of working that recognizes and understands the complex, nuanced, sometimes obscure and murky but nonetheless vital role of race and ethnicity. Yet teams and organizations in myriad contexts face challenges that require such explorations. We offer this book as a way to both herald and understand that achievement.