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Dysconscious Racism Beyond Miseducation: Realizing Category, Intellectual Development, and Implicit Beliefs as a Learning Continuum

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ABSTRACT. Teaching race-related content in higher education remains a persistent challenge, intensified by political polarization and misinformation that foster resistance and self-censorship among educators. Despite these obstacles, addressing racial inequity is essential for preparing students to engage critically with systemic injustice. This study examines the utility of King's (1991) dysconscious racism model, a framework describing uncritical acceptance of dominant social norms, in understanding and mitigating these challenges. Building on Anderson et al.'s (2018) theoretical proposition, we tested whether integrating King's categories with Perry's positions of intellectual development and Dweck's implicit theory of personal attributes provides a more robust explanatory continuum. Using a pre-/post-test design with 110 undergraduates in a Multicultural Family Studies course, we assessed changes in dysconscious racism categories and explored predictors of movement. Results indicate that dysconscious racism persists, with most students initially in Category II (partial understanding of inequity). However, post-test findings revealed significant improvement: Category I responses decreased by over 50%, and Category III (systemic understanding) tripled from 10.9% to 32.7%. Logistic regression confirmed that higher intellectual positions and incremental beliefs significantly predicted changes in dysconscious racism categories. These findings support Anderson et al.'s continuum model, suggesting that cognitive complexity and flexible belief systems are critical for advancing racial understanding. The study underscores the necessity of theory-informed pedagogy and offers practical implications for designing interventions that foster critical consciousness and equity-oriented learning in higher education.

Keywords: college students, dysconscious racism, miseducation, intellectual development, implicit beliefs

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Dysconscious Racism Beyond Miseducation: Realizing Category, Intellectual Development, and Implicit Beliefs as a Learning Continuum

Teaching race-related topics in higher education has long been a complex and demanding task. Faculty often face intellectual and emotional challenges when facilitating discussions on racism, privilege, and systemic inequities (Matias, 2016). These challenges are compounded by students' varying levels of preparedness and resistance to engaging with uncomfortable truths. Bandy et al. (2021) emphasized the need for instructional approaches that develop both cognitive and affective understanding, acknowledging the emotional labor required of educators. Perez (2022) specifically reports that social work educators experience exhaustion and vulnerability when teaching about race, highlighting the persistent difficulty of this work across disciplines. Despite institutional commitments to diversity and inclusion, the act of teaching race requires faculty to navigate curricular constraints, limited institutional support, and student discomfort.

In recent years, the difficulty of teaching race-related content has intensified due to widespread misinformation and the politicization of education. Legislative bans on critical race theory and other equity-focused curricula have created a chilling effect, discouraging educators from addressing systemic racism (Marrun et al., 2024; Morgan, 2024). RAND Corporation studies reveal that nearly half of U.S. principals and a significant portion of teachers report political interference around race and gender as a major source of job-related stress (Woo et al., 2022). This aligns with findings from the UCLA Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, which document increased community-level conflict and harassment of educators attempting to engage students in discussions of racial equity (Rogers & Kahne, 2022). The politicization of race-related instruction not only undermines academic freedom but also fosters an environment of fear and self-censorship among educators. In apparent agreement, Young (2023) explicitly critiques Florida's culture war tactics as counterproductive to educational goals, stating that teaching this course of study "could mean trampling on ... landmines" for many teachers (para. 10).

Despite these obstacles, teachers have a moral responsibility to address probable miseducation. Their efforts are essential for forwarding inclusive learning environments where students can critically examine systemic inequity (Alvare, 2018; Perez, 2021). To accomplish this, pedagogical practices that promote critical consciousness, enabling students to understand and challenge systemic inequities, are essential (Thurber et al., 2019). Rogers and Kahne (2022) support this view, emphasizing that inclusive curricula promote democratic engagement and civic responsibility. Considering these challenges, the urgency to teach race-related topics in higher education simply cannot be overstated. Silence or avoidance in the face of politicization and misinformation only preserves injustice. In an era marked by social division and disputed narratives, students lacking an accurate understanding of the past will have trouble discerning their present (Pinar, 2015). Institutions bear a profound responsibility to uphold academic integrity, foster inclusive learning environments, and prepare students to engage critically with the realities of systemic inequity. By committing to the rigorous and authentic study of race and racism, colleges and universities affirm their role in social progress to prepare students to navigate and influence a diverse and often divided society.

One concept that can deepen this conversation is King's (1991, 2015) concept of dysconsciousness. The term is not synonymous with unconscious but is defined as an unexamined acceptance of social norms. Early work sought to ascertain how student teachers' understanding of persistent racial inequity in America could later affect their ability to address discrimination and inequity in their classrooms (King, 1991; King & Ladson-Billings, 1990). Results indicated that many held immature understandings of contemporary inequity and prejudice and had difficulty imagining alternative views. This early work resulted in the concept of dysconsciousness and, according to

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Broderick and Lalvani (2017), has been reprinted or cited over 900 times. Though it is perhaps better known in educational psychology than family science, it could help educators and students recognize how structural assumptions and implicit biases shape teaching and learning. By naming, identifying, and questioning dysconsciousness, faculty can move beyond surface-level discussions of prejudice toward a critical analysis of the ideological roots of racism, an essential step in cultivating transformative, equity-oriented pedagogy. This study explicitly tests Anderson et al.'s (2018) hypothesis that blending King's categories with Perry's (1999) positions and implicit theory strengthens the explanatory power of the dysconscious racism model. Also, though in a more general sense, this study sought to determine if dysconscious racism could be a meaningful assessment in contemporary family science courses.

Dysconscious Racism Defined

Dysconscious racism (King, 1991, 2015) refers to a habitual, uncritical way of thinking—shaped by assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs—that legitimizes inequality by treating the existing social order as natural and unquestionable. It operates as a subtle form of racism that implicitly upholds dominant White norms and privileges. This results in a distorted perception of race, contrasting sharply with the reflective perspective of critical consciousness. King (1991) is not at all implying that students are racist as the term is typically used, but that limited ways of thinking must be brought to their understanding. Because this habitual thinking can influence awareness and motivation (King & Akua, 2012), one who is naïve of the existing racialized social norms and privileges may, though unintentionally, maintain an unchallenged acceptance of beliefs that sustain racial inequity. It is then more akin to Belluigi et al.'s (2024) “taken-for-granted norms” (p. 6) and even more so to Angulo's (2016) definition of ignorance, as “something that pervades our lives, but we rarely give it a second thought” (p. 1). Dysconscious racism has most often been understood as a product of miseducation (Brandon, 2006; King, 2015; Titone et al., 2014), defined as a compromised education or missed educational opportunities that resulted in indifference (King, 2016) and/or a learned avoidance of controversial social topics in school (Crabtree & Titu, 2022). Consequently, some college students possess casually accepted views that limit their thought and action, perhaps the result of their own (mis)educational experience. Unfortunately, this learning tends to resist deeper, more informed views of prejudice and serves to implicitly support societal inequity (Cross et al., 2018; Kaplowitz et al., 2019).

Early research illustrates this dynamic. King and Ladson-Billings (1990) found that teacher education students were often unaware of their own biases and unprepared to teach learners from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Although these students condemned racial discrimination, their explanations of persistent inequity lacked critical and ethical reasoning, limiting their ability to provide equitable instruction (King, 1991). This absence of deeper understanding reflects what King later termed miseducation, a failure to critically examine racial injustice within a socially stratified society. As a result, future teachers, regardless of intent, risk perpetuating inequities through their classroom decisions. Alvare (2018) echoes these concerns, noting that even well-meaning educators may dysconsciously hold lower expectations for students of color, rely on Eurocentric curricula, or avoid addressing racial issues in meaningful ways. This pattern illustrates how miseducation and dysconscious racism are intertwined: when teachers lack critical awareness, they unintentionally reproduce systemic inequities through everyday practices. Such behaviors reinforce stereotypes and sustain structural injustice over time.

Categories of Dysconscious Racism

King (1991) examined student attributions of racial inequality using comparisons of mortality rates between Black and White children followed by a brief written response to the question, “How did

our society get to be this way?” Students responded in one of three categories. Category I reflected a reliance on historical determinism, with current disparity understood as the lasting result of slavery. This rudimentary explanation tended to diminish Black culture and heritage, which is surely more than the horrific past of slavery, and too often concluded that to be equal, Black individuals and their culture needed to change (King & Ladson-Billings, 1990).

Category II responses shifted causality from slavery to ongoing inequities in opportunity, education, and healthcare, attributing these to persistent prejudice and discrimination (King & Ladson-Billings, 1990). While less one-dimensional than Category I, this perspective still assumed assimilation into dominant norms as the path to equality and failed to critique systemic structures (King, 1991). Both categories offer only partial explanations that rationalize existing social norms, defend White privilege, neglect the ethical dimensions of racial injustice, and fail to establish any cause-and-effect. They illustrate dysconscious racism—not overt bigotry, but an implicit acceptance of racial hierarchy and privilege (King, 1991; Titone et al., 2014).

Category III represents the most critical understanding, locating racial inequity within institutionalized discrimination and systemic racism embedded in American society and education (Waite, 2021). Unlike the first two, this category neither blames African Americans nor portrays racism as exclusively intentional. Individuals in this category are more likely to challenge oppressive structures (Titone et al., 2014). However, Category III responses are rare: in King’s 1991 study, only one student out of 47 demonstrated this perspective, less than 2%. Most students explained inequity as either an unavoidable outcome of slavery or the product of enduring prejudice, without acknowledging systemic forces. In summary, the three categories of dysconscious racism represent a continuum from the least critical understanding to partial explanations and finally to the most critical perspective. Key features and limitations for each category are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Key Features and Limitations for Each Category of Dysconscious Racism

	Core Explanation	Key Features	Limitations
Category I	Historical determinism; Minimal awareness of modern discrimination	Attributes present day inequity to legacy of slavery; Implies cultural deficit of African Americans	Greatly oversimplifies history; Suggests equality requires assimilation
Category II	Attributes inequity to prejudice; Some recognition of an ongoing lack of equal opportunity	Focuses on discrimination in education, healthcare, and work opportunities; Assumes equal opportunity exists if norms are adopted	Ignores systemic structures; Rationalizes dominant social norms
Category III	Racism understood as systemic, structural, and self-replicating	Recognizes institutionalized racism; Challenges oppressive norms; Advocates systemic change	Rare among students; Requires critical consciousness

In 2014, Titone et al. sought to determine if students' understandings had changed since King (1991) and attempted to specifically address dysconscious racism in three courses, Philosophy of Education, Seminar in Education, and Working with Diverse Populations, using formal discussions on racism in education and human service settings, followed by requiring students to interpret systemic racism. Participants (N = 47) again showed very few Category III results at 4%. Although Titone et al. (2014) observed a significant shift from Category I to Category II, they emphasized that this movement did not represent meaningful improvement because systemic understanding remained largely absent. Still, it seems possible that this significant move from Category I to II could have resulted from these discussions and additional multicultural education opportunities for these students. Though miseducation certainly plays an explanatory role, it is likely not the only contributor to the development of dysconscious racism. More sophisticated opportunities of intervention could open as additional processes of dysconscious racism are identified.

Dysconscious Racism and Positions of Intellectual Development

Respecting individual differences in intellectual development may aid in understanding the categories of dysconscious racism. Anderson et al. (2018) theorized a potential association between King's (1991) categories and a student's cognitive ability, using Perry's (1999) positions of intellectual growth in college students. This comparison could be valuable in explaining categorical responses, including the uncommon Category III responses previously mentioned. Building on the work of Piaget, Perry sought to understand developmental shifts when students encounter a diverse, pluralistic college culture, proposing that difficulties in intelligence are not solely a function of academic deficiency or skill. His scheme emphasizes self-examination, reflection, and responsibility, which can be hindered by delay and deflection (e.g., miseducation) and is considered essential for understanding the cognitive growth of college students (Turnage-Butterbaugh et al., 2017). As the positions deepen, becoming qualitatively richer as students distinguish, organize, and evaluate information more completely and with less restraint, King's categories grow progressively more sophisticated. This progression across intellectual positions can be understood as gradual efforts to interpret and make sense of diversity, beginning with attempts to reconcile conflicting and contradictory information (Moore, 2015). Similarly, King and Ladson-Billings (1990) described the categories of dysconscious racism as a continuum, where "some apparently become more critically aware along the way" (p. 23). Thus, Perry's positions offer a cognitive pathway for understanding King's categories, showing how intellectual flexibility is essential for systemic awareness.

Perry's (1999) work has long informed college student development research, and recent brain science supports the premise that learning involves progressive cognitive complexity shaped by experience (Zull, 2004). Although his scheme includes nine positions progressing from concrete thinking to identity, ethical reasoning, and morality, most scholarship emphasizes three critical positions, dualist, multiplist, and relativist, viewing other levels as transitional (Moore, 2015; Turnage-Butterbaugh et al., 2017). Most traditional first-year college students perceive information as right or wrong, never better or worse. This is Perry's dualism. King's (1991) Category I is comparable, as the history of slavery satisfactorily explains contemporary racial inequity, and the individual looks no further (Anderson et al., 2018). This failure to consider alternatives also fits Brandon's (2006) description of dysconscious racism as "a way of thinking that is also a way of not being able to think" (p. 197). With the instructor as the authority and a working answer unquestioned, there is no perceived necessity to ask why; King's Category I and Perry's dualist thinking describe a common cognitive event (Anderson et al., 2018). The dualist perspective of invariable truth typically weakens with time and

experience, and the learner becomes progressively more aware of multiple viewpoints, becoming less satisfied with narrow thinking as tolerance increases (Foubert et al., 2005).

As learners move beyond dualism—where answers are seen as either right or wrong—they begin to acknowledge legitimate uncertainty, a profound departure from the dualistic perspective (Moore, 2015). This may be uncomfortable. This position, termed multiplism, is sometimes misinterpreted as “anything goes,” but is better understood as respecting disparities before definitive answers are known. Cognitively and morally, this shift parallels King’s (1991) continuum from Category I to II, as students become more adept at considering multiple explanations for racial inequity beyond slavery (Anderson et al., 2018). Perry’s progression from dualism to multiplism mirrors King’s movement from Category I, which attributes racism primarily to historical roots, toward Category II, which recognizes multiple causes such as persistent inequality in education, health care, and employment. From a multiplist perspective, inequities are increasingly viewed as the result of enduring discrimination involving multiple factors. This aligns with Category II, where individuals recognize additional feasible explanations for inequity but still fail to grasp its systemic nature. Nevertheless, many learners at this position lack the contextual flexibility needed for Category III, which requires understanding inequity as embedded within the social order. Only at Perry’s relativist position, where learners assume complexity and interpret knowledge contextually, does the cognitive capacity emerge to grasp Category III, which views inequity as embedded within social structures.

With consistent challenge and appropriate learning opportunities, multiplist thinking progresses beyond simply acknowledging different interpretations to intentionally comparing varied, but related, perspectives (Moore, 2015). At the relativist level, knowledge is now seen as progressively more speculative and uncertain, and requiring interpretation. As learners grow to utilize context more effectively, most “assume complexity as a general state and then discover simplicity if it happens to be there” (Perry, 1999, p. 113). Moore described this as the most important transition within Perry’s scheme, marking a significant shift from viewing the world as rigidly dualistic—defined by absolute rights and wrongs with occasional exceptions—to understanding that judgments of right and wrong depend on the context in which decisions are made. Conceivably, relativism, understood as the inclination and ability to accept the complexity of uncertainty, is required to recognize the systemic nature of inequity in Category III (Anderson et al., 2018). Thus, Perry’s cognitive positions provide a developmental lens for understanding King’s (1991) categories: dualism reflects the simplicity of Category I, multiplism parallels Category II’s acknowledgment of multiple causes, and relativism aligns with Category III’s systemic perspective.

Dysconscious Racism and the Perception of Others

Relatable work concerning individual beliefs about the permanence or malleability of personal attributes can also help explain student placement within King’s (1991) categories. Beliefs shape human behavior, whether accurate or uninformed, and the concept of race is particularly significant because it encompasses a wide range of beliefs, many of which can lead to serious negative consequences for individuals and society (Musolino et al., 2023). People hold varied implicit theories that explain motivation, outcomes, self-regulation, and the ability to grow. These consist of two distinct theories: entity and incremental (Dweck, 2000; Dweck & Molden, 2018). Progression between these two perspectives, described by Jamieson (2018) as cognitive lenses, forms a meaning system readily comparable to Perry’s (1999) “unfolding views of the world” (p. ix). These perspectives influence not only personal judgments but also responses to prejudice, making them relevant to understanding dysconscious racism.

Like Perry's (1999) positions and King's (1991, 2015) categories, implicit theories also form a continuum that shapes how individuals interpret diversity and respond to inequity. Entity theorists view attributes like intelligence and morality as fixed, creating a predictable social world and reinforcing stereotypes, which can lead to judgments of others as permanently inferior (Dweck, 2000; Dweck & Molden, 2018). Incremental theorists see such qualities as malleable and therefore more open to more abstract reasoning (Leith et al., 2014). This growth-oriented perspective not only fosters this cognitive flexibility but also supports moral engagement.

As with the positions of intellectual development described above, implicit theories may offer insight into why students fall into specific categories of dysconscious racism. For example, Rattan and Dweck (2010) suggested a direct link between implicit beliefs and willingness to confront prejudice. Specifically, those with an incremental bias were found to be more likely to speak up in the presence of discrimination. Schuman et al. (2014) agreed, reporting that observations of lower achievement from an incremental view could lead to greater willingness to engage in compassion or empathy. Those with entity bias, believing others were not likely to change, were less motivated to challenge prejudice, maintaining negative conclusions about disliked or threatening others (Bain, 2004; Leith et al., 2014). So, implicit theory and dysconscious racism share a developmental logic. Entity theorists resemble dualistic thinkers and those in Category I, as both assume fixed truths and limited change. Incremental theorists parallel Perry's relativist position and King's Category III, embracing complexity and systemic understanding. Multiplism and Category II represent transitional stages, acknowledging diversity but lacking full contextual integration. Together, these frameworks illustrate how intellectual and moral growth support deeper engagement with equity and justice.

Purpose of the Study

The primary aim is to empirically evaluate whether integrating cognitive development and implicit beliefs with King's (1991) categories provides a more robust framework for understanding dysconscious racism (Anderson et al., 2018). Though miseducation has historically been viewed as the primary contributor to uncritical acceptance of racial inequity, emerging scholarship suggests that cognitive development and implicit belief systems may also play significant roles. To explore this possibility, the study examines how King's categories of dysconscious racism intersect with Perry's (1999) positions of intellectual development and Rattan and Dweck's (2010) implicit theory of personal attributes. By conceptualizing these frameworks as an interrelated continuum, the research seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of why students hold views of racial inequity and how developmental and cognitive factors influence their capacity for critical consciousness.

This approach also reflects the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning's (SoTL) need to move beyond purely descriptive accounts toward theory-informed explanations of student learning. Educational theory strengthens SoTL by offering frameworks that guide interpretation (Adams et al., 2012; Yin, 2014), and this study sought to demonstrate how multiple models, dysconscious racism, position of intellectual development, and implicit beliefs can intersect to generate new insights. Ultimately, the findings could have practical implications for designing curricula and interventions that challenge dysconscious racism and promote equity in higher education. To address these aims, the study investigates the following research questions:

1. Does dysconscious racism persist in undergraduate education, and if so, are the percentages in each category like those reported by King (1991) and/or Titone et al. (2014)?
2. Does the distribution of students across King's categories at the beginning of a Multicultural Family Studies course change at the end of the semester?

3. If there are changes in dysconscious racism, to what extent do students' positions of intellectual development (Moore, 2015) and/or their implicit worldview (Lin-Siegler et al., 2016) predict changes in their categories of dysconscious racism?

Methods

A case study design was used here as descriptive research of a single theoretical concept, dysconscious racism. Because case studies can sometimes be challenging to interpret, and to ensure that findings are not dependent on any single measure, a multimethod-multimeasure process of data triangulation was used (Bishop-Clark & Dietz-Uhler, 2012). This involved exploring the three theories mentioned above to expand the understanding and applicability of dysconscious racism. A single-group pre-/post-test design was utilized to moderate selection bias and better support internal validity as students were compared only to themselves (Gurung & Wilson, 2013).

Sample

This study included 116 undergraduate students enrolled in three sections of a Multicultural Family Studies course ($n = 40, 40, \text{ and } 36$), offered across two semesters (two in fall, one in spring). Of these, 110 students completed all required measures. The lead author instructed all sections to ensure consistency. Among participants, 109 identified as female and 1 as male. Most students were of European descent (76.4%) and classified as juniors (40.0%) or seniors (54.5%). The demographic profile aligns with typical enrollment patterns for Human Development and Family Science programs at Illinois State University. See Table 2 for more detailed descriptions.

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Participants ($N = 110$)

	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Female	109	99.1
Male	1	0.9
Ethnicity		
African Descent	9	8.2
Asian Descent	3	2.7
European Descent	84	76.4
Latinx	10	9.1
Middle Eastern Descent	4	3.6
Class Standing		
Freshman	1	0.9
Sophomore	5	4.5
Junior	44	40.0
Senior	60	54.5

Procedure

Following IRB approval (Illinois State University, #1111943-1), students were informed of the study during week two and provided written consent. Participation was voluntary, confidential, and had no impact on grades; no incentives were offered. During week two, participants completed three instruments: (a) a written response assessing dysconscious racism categories using King's (1991) method (pre-test), (b) the Learning Environment Preferences instrument (Moore, 2000), and (c) the Kind of Person–Implicit Theory–Other inventory (Dweck, 2000). Post-test measures for dysconscious racism were administered during the week preceding final exams. Students reviewed and revised their original written response as they deemed necessary. All assessments were conducted face-to-face using paper-and-pencil formats without time limits.

Measures

Dysconscious Racism Assessment

To determine the category of dysconscious racism, participants took part in a short lecture followed by a small group discussion concerning past and present comparisons of mortality rates between Black and White children; the same method used by King (1991) and Titone et al. (2014). This was followed immediately by a brief written response to the question, “How did our society get to be this way?”

Position of Intellectual Development - Learning Environment Preferences (LEP)

The LEP instrument (Moore, 2000) was purposely created for assessing intellectual development in alignment with Perry's scheme and has demonstrated robust construct validity. It considers student responses across five content domains: view of knowledge and learning, role of the instructor, role of the learner, classroom atmosphere, and the role of grading. Each domain consists of 13 statements, ranging from simple to complex, rated on a 4-point Likert scale. Results indicate one of the following positions.

1. Basic dualism is an absolute view of truth with no gray area.
2. Pre-multiplism, transitioning from dualism to multiplism, involves early attempts to account for uncertainty.
3. Multiplism, where opinions may appear equal, as one's own perspective becomes more important than ambiguity. Uncertainty is now valid.
4. In pre-relativism, opinions are no longer equal and need supporting evidence.
5. Relativist learners examine ideas in a complex process of questioning, rejecting some, and finding a contextual basis for their conclusion.

The LEP's Cognitive Complexity Index (CCI) has identified developmental progression from freshman year to senior year and demonstrated consistent reliability and validity across multiple studies, indicating its usefulness for assessing intellectual development (Alis et al., 2015; Moore, 1989, 2000; Wilder, 2022). Subsequent applications of the LEP in diverse educational contexts have reinforced its validity. Moore (2000) further reported suitable reliability for internal consistency and test-retest with scores ranging from .63 to .84 using Cronbach's coefficient alpha across all five domains; a later study indicated a test-retest correlation of .89. In 2015, Alis et al. reported a high overall validity coefficient of .948. The LEP has also been employed in ethical development research, where it effectively captured baseline intellectual development (Wilder, 2022). These findings collectively support the LEP's utility as a valid instrument for exploring cognitive and ethical development in higher education settings. Upon completion, the LEP is returned to the Center for the Study of Intellectual Development for scoring (Moore, 2000).

Kind of Person - Implicit Theory – Other

Dweck's (2000) "Kind of Person" Implicit Theory-Other scale was used to determine the judgments people make about others, specifically, whether they thought other individuals or groups were limited in acting upon their current situation to bring about positive change. More importantly, here it has indicated an individual's willingness and motivation to confront prejudice. The scale demonstrates high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .90 to .96, and test-retest reliability over a two-week interval reaching $r = .82$. It has also shown high internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$) and test-retest reliability ($r = .82$ over one week; $r = .71$ over four weeks), confirming its strength in measuring beliefs about the malleability of personality traits. More recently, Howell (2016) supported the scale's construct validity, emphasizing a predictive power for psychological outcomes such as resilience and personal growth. Lastly, Yeager et al. (2014) reported that students with incremental beliefs reported better academic performance, supporting the scale's value in educational contexts. Collectively, these findings affirm the scale's reliability and utility. Questions utilized a 6-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly agree to (6) strongly disagree. Responses were averaged, with lower scores indicating more of an entity bias and higher scores indicating a more incremental bias.

Data Analysis

Because searching for meaning in coding work is highly interpretive, deductive content analysis was applied (e.g., Bishop-Clark & Dietz-Uhler, 2012). Using pre-existing material, in this case the shared descriptions of dysconscious racism categories of King (1991) and Titone et al. (2014), a rubric was created (Anderson & Bejda, 2019) and used to code the pre-test essays. Points of disagreement were discussed for clarification, and the rubric was refined accordingly (see Appendix). Two authors then coded pre- and post-essays independently, assigning categories of dysconscious racism to participant responses. Intercoder reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa, with values >0.70 being acceptable and >0.80 indicating excellent agreement using the intra-class correlation coefficient function of SPSS v.26.

Descriptive statistics summarized demographics and baseline measures. Chi-square tests were used for preliminary checks (e.g., differences across course sections). Ordinal changes in dysconscious racism categories were analyzed using Friedman's ANOVA and Kendall's W. Binary logistic regression examined predictors of category shifts after collapsing responses into two groups (0 = no change, 1 = change), with intellectual development (Cognitive Complexity Index) and implicit theory scores as predictors. Effect sizes and confidence intervals were reported for all analyses. To investigate predictors of category shifts, binary logistic regression models were estimated with intellectual development (Cognitive Complexity Index) and implicit theory scores as independent variables. Effect sizes and confidence intervals were reported for all analyses. Analyses were performed using SPSS (Version 26).

Results

Findings from qualitative coding and quantitative measures converged, supporting validity through triangulation of all three theoretical frameworks (King's categories, Perry's positions, and Dweck's implicit theories).

Research Question 1

Does dysconscious racism persist in undergraduate education and, if so, are the percentages in each category like King (1991) and/or Titone et al. (2014)? Pre-test results ($k = 0.741$) indicated that dysconscious racism is indeed still present. As expected, most participants were in Category II, followed

by Category I, and the fewest in Category III. However, more were reported at Category III than observed in previous work (e.g., King, 1991; Titone et al., 2014). See Table 3.

Table 3

Categories of Dysconscious Racism Across Four Samples

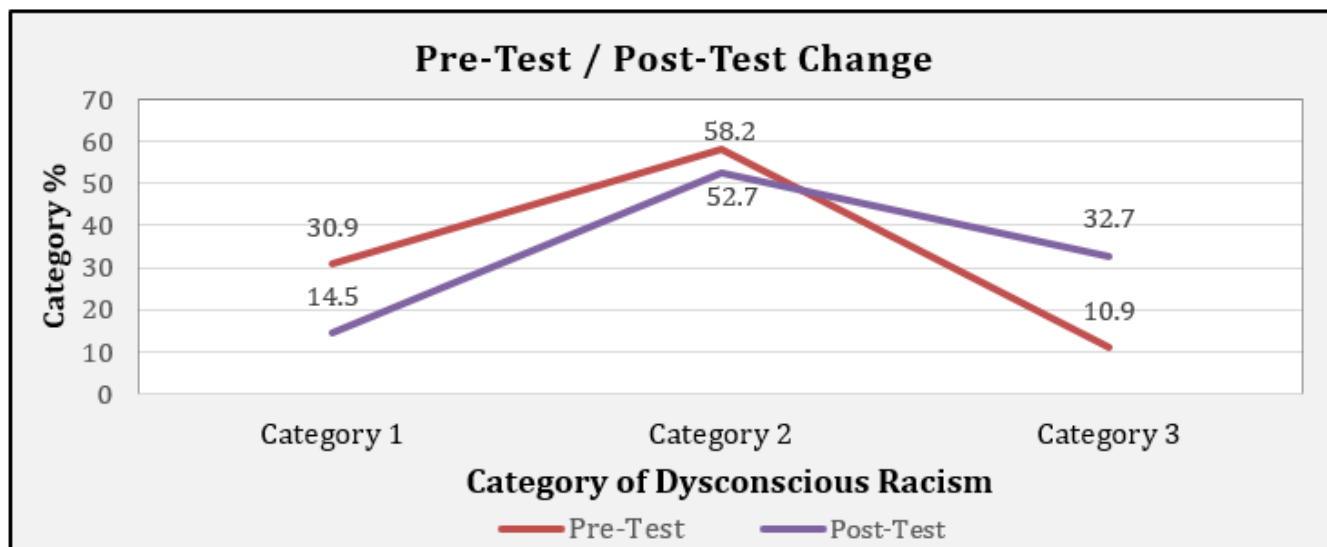
Samples	Category I	Category II	Category III
King (1991) Sample 1	45.4%	50.0%	4.0%
King (1991) Sample 2	31.4%	68.6%	0.0%
Titone et al. (2014)	13.0%	83.0%	4.0%
Pre-test Current Study	30.9%	58.2%	10.9%

Research Question 2

Does the distribution of students across King's categories at the beginning of a Multicultural Family Studies course change at the end of the course? Post-test results ($k = 0.801$) indicated significant improvement. Again, most participants remained in Category II, but Categories I and II decreased while Category III increased. Specifically, participants at Category I decreased from 30.9% ($n=34$) to 14.5% ($n=16$) while those at Category II decreased from 58.2% ($n=64$) to 52.7% ($n=58$). Category III tripled from pre-test to post-test, from 10.9% ($n=12$) to 32.7% ($n=36$). Figure 1 illustrates these changes.

Figure 1

Pre-test and Post-test Change in Results



Note. Category 1 – Historical determinism of slavery; Category 2 – Continual discrimination and lack of opportunity; Category 3 – Racism is systemic.

There were 38 students (34.6%) who moved “up” at least one category of dysconscious racism from pre- to post-test, 68 students (61.8%) did not change at all, while four students (3.6%) went “down” a category. Given the categorical nature of dysconscious racism data, non-parametric tests for related samples were utilized to answer the research question, “Is there a change in the student’s category of dysconscious racism following a Multicultural Family Studies class?” Both Friedman’s two-way analysis of variance by ranks ($n = 110$, $t = 27.524$, $df = 1$, asymptotic significance $<.001$) and Kendall’s coefficient of concordance ($n = 110$, Kendall’s $W = .250$, $t = 27.524$, $df = 1$, asymptotic significance $<.001$) showed statistically significant results. Thus, we can confidently reject the null hypothesis that the pre- and post-test scores of dysconscious racism will remain the same.

Research Question 3

If there are changes in dysconscious racism, to what extent does the student’s position of intellectual development (Moore, 2015) and/or their implicit worldview (Lin-Siegler et al., 2016) predict students’ change in categories of dysconscious racism? Most participants were in position 3, multiplism ($n = 40$, 36.4%), position 4, transitioning out of multiplism ($n = 31$, 28.2%), or position 2, transitioning into multiplism ($n = 19$, 17.3%). Only five students (4.5%) were in position 1, with three students (2.7%) in position 5, relativism. Several preliminary analyses were performed to rule out potential confounds such as the course section in which a given student was enrolled. Chi-square analysis revealed no differences in the distribution of dysconscious racism categories across the courses ($\chi^2 = 3.221$, $df = 4$, asymptotic significance = .522). ANOVA results testing for section differences in intellectual position were also non-significant ($F = .355$, $df = 2$, $p = .702$). ANOVA results for implicit theory by class section were significant ($F = 7.377$, $df = 2$, $p = .001$). Upon investigation, the largest difference in the mean score between sections was .55. While there was a significant difference between sections, the size difference between course means (3.76, 3.21, 3.48), all slightly incremental ($M = 3.48\%$), on this scale is not necessarily meaningful. Given these preliminary analyses and contextual variables (e.g., same teacher, same room), we chose to use statistical procedures that do not account for nesting effects based on the classroom.

Where dysconscious racism is an ordinal variable, that is, there is a clear rank between the categories, and it cannot be assumed that the difference between the rankings is equivalent. It would be inappropriate to use a raw change score as a dependent variable in a standard regression. We explored the possibility of using an ordinal regression with these data; however, 58.5% of the cells (i.e., dependent variable levels by observed combinations of predictor variable values) had no data present, rendering any results of an ordinal regression highly unreliable. Thus, the change in dysconscious racism categories was collapsed into a binary category with 0 = “no-change” ($n=68$) and 1 = “change” ($n=42$) in preparation for running a binary logistic regression. It is important to note that “change” represents any change from pre-test, including the four students who went “down” a level. Of the data available, ethnicity was included in the analysis as a potential control variable, as was student rank (e.g., 1=freshman, 2=sophomore, 3=junior, 4=senior) as a proxy for age. Where intellectual positions are of an equivalent range of scores (Moore, 2000), the raw data were collapsed into their respective position for the analysis as well as for ease of interpretation. Logistic regression results can be found in Table 4.

Table 4*Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Change in Dysconscious Racism*

	B	S.E.	Wald	Df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Intellectual position	.451	.197	5.234	1	.022	1.570
Implicit theory	.887	.344	6.631	1	.010	2.427
Ethnicity	.146	.508	.083	1	.773	1.158
Class Rank	-.207	.332	.389	1	.533	.813
Constant	-3.990	1.695	5.539	1	.019	.018

Note. Intellectual position was broken down as follows: 0=Position 1 (200-240), 1= Position 2/3 Transition (241-284), 2=Position 3 (285-328), 3=Position 3/4 (329-372), 4=Position 4 (373-416), and 5=Position 4/5 Transition (417-460), and 6=Position 5 (361-600). Ethnicity was a binary variable [0=European Descent ($n=86$), 1=Person of Color ($n=24$)]. Class Rank was included as a proxy variable for age with 1=Freshman, 2=Sophomore, 3=Junior, and 4=Senior.

For every unit increase in intellectual position (e.g., a move from Position 3 to 4), there is a 57% increase ($p = .022$) in the odds that there would be a change in dysconscious racism scores. Similarly, a one-point increase in Dweck's Kind of Person - Implicit Theory – Other scale corresponds to a 143% increase ($p = .010$) in the odds that there would be a change in dysconscious racism scores. Ethnicity and class rank variables were non-significant.

Discussion

Dysconscious Racism at Pre-test

Pre-test results indicated that dysconscious racism is indeed still present in college classrooms. In 2014, Titone et al. reported significant positive movement from Category I to Category II over the two decades following King (1991). Although challenges and attacks on race consciousness in education are perhaps more common today (Marrun et al., 2024), results here show improvement over Titone et al. (2014). Like both previous studies, most participants here understood contemporary racial inequity at Category II, followed by Category I. Category III again had the fewest responses, but noticeably more here ($M = 10.9\%$) than the two previous studies ($M = 3.8\%$). What could explain the increase in Category III responses?

Perhaps this rise could be attributed, at least in part, to students' greater awareness of racial issues. Today's college students have increased exposure to diverse campus environments, expanded curricula, and evolving social discourse. A growing awareness of racial microaggressions has also influenced campus climates, prompting institutions to address subtle forms of discrimination that can affect students' sense of belonging and academic engagement (Harper & Patrón, 2025; Solórzano et al., 2000). Moreover, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives are central to much higher education practice, with many universities implementing programs that foster inclusion and reflection on both race and privilege (Secules et al., 2024). These combined efforts have resulted in a generation of students who are more informed and prepared to recognize and challenge racial inequities. Coursework also offers a possible explanation. The current sample of Human Development and Family Science majors

have certainly taken relevant courses, beyond the one previously mentioned, required for their degree program. For example, lifespan human development in social context, current trends in family science, and public policy. It is plausible that this academic background influences dysconscious racism categories.

Dysconscious Racism at Post-test

Post-test results showed positive change in dysconscious racism categories. Although most responses remained at Category II, approximately one third of the participants moved up a category. Category III increased significantly, surprisingly surpassing Category I, indicating that more students better understood the ongoing systemic elements of racial inequity. As with the degree program potentially influencing pre-test scores, the class where data was collected here could have influenced post-test scores, perhaps relatable to King's (1991) description of some students becoming more critically aware during the process. Indeed, research indicates that student beliefs about racial inequality shift significantly during college when they are exposed to discussions about systemic racism (Littleford & Jones, 2017).

Titone et al.'s (2014) work is also relevant here. Following an educational intervention focused on students' understanding of systemic racism, they reported a sizable decrease in Category I responses and far more at Category II, indicating that more students better identified economic and social discrimination. However, unlike their deliberate attempt to address dysconscious racism, the class where data was collected here was not specifically designed to be an intervention. Neither were post-test scores here intended to assess the efficacy of the class, but only to indicate if higher positions of intellectual development were more likely to change the category of dysconscious racism.

Dysconscious Racism, Intellectual Position, and Implicit Beliefs

Participants' higher intellectual position (Perry, 1999) enables higher, more informed categories of dysconscious racism. This association of intellectual development and new learning with greater consideration of diversity confirmed Anderson et al.'s (2018) idea that as thinking develops, so can the individual's ways of interpreting racial inequity. Likewise, any movement toward more incremental, growth-centered thinking was clearly related to a rise in the category of dysconscious racism, also confirming Rattan and Dweck's (2010) finding that those with higher levels of incremental thinking were more likely to consider prejudice and counter negative social beliefs. This perspective indicated more process-oriented thinking and a less stereotypical interpretation of another's character (Jamieson, 2018) and therefore, more prone to empathy (Schumann et al., 2014). Only at Category III do students identify the critical cause-and-effect relationship between unchallenged social norms and systemic racial inequity. This more developed ability to consider abstract ideas requires more adaptable beliefs (Lin-Siegler et al., 2016) and greater comfort with uncertainty, which is necessary for Category III.

Theory Integration produced a Continuum of Learning

This continuum operationalizes the theoretical integration proposed by Anderson et al. (2018). As theory challenges the complacency of thinking, feeling, and acting in familiar patterns, it makes reimagining how we approach complex issues, like dysconscious racism, more possible. A recognized taxonomy for SoTL inquiry identifies several categories of questions: those that explore existing conditions ("what is"), examine effectiveness ("what works"), envision future possibilities ("what if"), and those that aim to create new theories or conceptual models (Hutchings & Huber, 2008). This study addresses the latter by proposing an expanded conceptual framework to stimulate new ways of thinking about dysconscious racism. Developing such a framework has the potential to enable generalization and

transfer across related concepts, broadening theoretical understanding and offering fresh insights for educational practice. Although theory is sometimes bypassed in educational research (Adams et al., 2012), a tendency particularly evident in SoTL where quick application often dominates (Divan et al., 2017), there is compelling evidence that case studies and classroom-based inquiries are strengthened when grounded in theory (e.g., Anderson, 2019; Anderson & Cudney, 2025; Anderson et al., 2022). Theory provides explanations for outcomes and articulates assumptions about why phenomena occur, yet SoTL research frequently narrows this approach to focus on a specific concept rather than broader theoretical development. In this case, the concept of dysconscious racism provides a focal point for inquiry, aligning with SoTL's tradition of applying theory to deepen understanding of teaching and learning (e.g., McKinney, 2007).

A continuum model is not new to educational theory. In their earliest work with dysconsciousness, King and Ladson-Billings (1990) described a categorical continuum in which some students become more informed over time and through experience. Similarly, Perry (1999) conceptualized intellectual development as a continuum, emphasizing not only what knowledge is but also how individuals think about diversity and others. Dweck and Molden (2018) extended this notion through implicit theories of intelligence, illustrating how movement from entity to incremental thinking produces a comparable evolution of perception, from viewing the world as fixed and predictable to embracing flexibility and inclusivity. Collectively, these three perspectives - category, intellectual development, and implicit beliefs - readily establish a progressive mode of understanding that offers multiple points of intervention for educators. Thinking in terms of this three-part continuum provides a richer set of tools for addressing dysconscious racism in educational contexts.

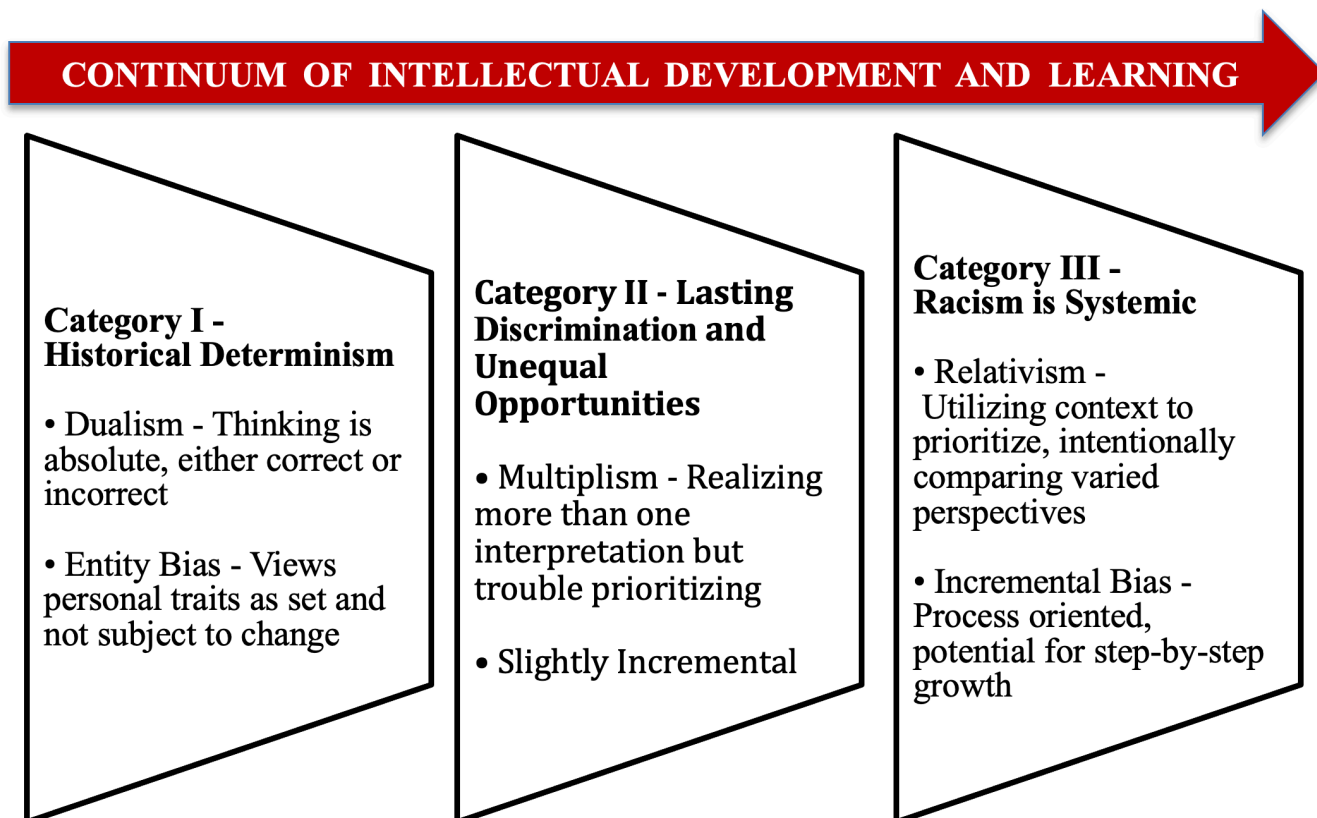
Building on this theoretical foundation, this study describes this continuum as a new conceptual model for understanding dysconscious racism. The continuum is grounded in three complementary theoretical lenses: (1) categories of dysconscious racism (King, 1991), (2) positions of intellectual development (Perry, 1999; Moore, 2015), and (3) implicit theories of intelligence and learning (Dweck, 2000; Rattan & Dweck, 2010). These lenses operationalize the continuum and directly address the challenges identified earlier. First, King's categories illuminate the continuing difficulty of addressing race-related issues by revealing how uncritical acceptance of dominant norms perpetuates systemic inequity. Second, learners' progress from dualistic thinking toward more complex, contextualized understandings is increasingly difficult today as the subject becomes more polarized. Third, implicit theory research underscores the importance of teaching these topics now, emphasizing how beliefs about the malleability of understanding shape whether individuals view racial learning as possible and worthwhile.

Empirical evidence supports this integration. Consistent with Anderson et al.'s (2018) theoretical model, higher intellectual positions were associated with greater likelihood of movement to more critical categories of dysconscious racism. Incremental beliefs about others' ability to change were correlated with higher categories of dysconscious racism, consistent with prior research linking growth-oriented beliefs to greater willingness to confront prejudice and engage empathetically (Rattan & Dweck, 2010). This finding aligns with research showing that individuals with more incremental beliefs are more likely to recognize prejudice and respond with compassion and empathy (Schumann et al., 2014). King's (1991) categories can therefore be understood as outcomes shaped by intellectual position and incremental changes in implicit beliefs. While King's concept of miseducation likely accounts for some diluted or lost educational experiences and entity beliefs, it is not the sole explanation for lower categories of dysconscious racism. Taken together, these insights reinforce the continuum as both a theoretical and practical framework for guiding interventions that promote equity and deeper learning.

Figure 2 illustrates this continuum, showing how these theoretical strands converge to form a generative model with the potential to connect theory to practice.

Figure 2

Progression of the Three-Model Continuum



As critical and abstract thinking matures, so too do the ways individuals understand their world (Leith et al., 2014). Indeed, position of intelligence (Moore, 2015; Perry, 1999) was strongly predictive of the category of dysconscious racism, with a greater chance of categorical change with each higher position achieved. Similarly, an expanding, incremental belief in another's ability to change positively influenced dysconscious racism and was also associated with a significant increase in the chance of a categorical change. This appears immediately relatable and in agreement with Schumann et al. (2014), who found that those with more incremental beliefs are more likely to recognize prejudice and react with compassion and empathy. King's (1999) categories could then be perceived, at least in part, as the outcome of intellectual position (Moore, 2015; Perry, 1999) and incremental changes in implicit beliefs from which to interpret the attributes of others. That being the case, and although King's miseducation is responsible for some diluted or lost educational experiences and entity beliefs, it is not the only explanation for lower categories of dysconscious racism (Anderson et al., 2018).

Conclusion

All three frameworks, racial understanding, intellectual development, and implicit worldview, describe development from simplicity to sophistication, from unquestioned assumptions to critical reflection, and from passivity to purpose. Therefore, viewing King's (1991) categories as part of a three-part continuum offers educators multiple points of intervention to promote critical consciousness and

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equity-oriented thinking and provides a practical framework for designing interventions that move students toward systemic understanding. Although dysconscious racism remains a challenge, the evidence from this study illustrates that growth is possible when cognitive complexity and flexible belief systems are intentionally supported in the classroom. Taken together, these findings support Anderson et al.'s (2018) postulate, suggesting that dysconscious racism is not static but evolves through interconnected processes of intellectual development and belief revision.

Future Research and Application

Future research should explore targeted strategies for meaningfully advancing the progression through Perry's (1999) positions. Examples could include structured debates, reflective journaling, jigsaw groups, biographical studies, and case-based learning activities that challenge students to identify implicit beliefs (e.g., stereotypes), question assumptions, and reconstruct flawed understandings. Students' Learning Environment Preferences (LEP) profiles (Moore, 2000) could be beneficial in creating adaptive teaching strategies. For instance, dualist learners might benefit from guided questioning that exposes contradictions in their reasoning, while relativist learners could engage in complex case analyses requiring contextual interpretation (Bain, 2004). Longitudinal studies, though challenging, could assess whether sustained exposure to continuum-based interventions accelerates enduring movement toward critical insight. These efforts would not only advance SoTL theoretically but also provide practical tools for educators committed to equity and justice in higher education.

Next, and beyond its empirical contributions, this study demonstrates the need for SoTL to expand theoretically and illustrates how such expansion can be accomplished. By integrating multiple theoretical perspectives - King's categories, Perry's positions of intellectual development, and Dweck's implicit theories - into a modified conceptual model, this research moves SoTL beyond descriptive accounts toward theory-informed explanations of student learning. Educational theory strengthens SoTL by guiding interpretation and application, and this study exemplifies how intersecting models can generate new insights. Ultimately, this work provides a foundation for future research and practice aimed at fostering critical consciousness and advancing equity in higher education.

Lastly, King's (1991) concept of dysconsciousness was originally studied in relation to race; it could be applied to other systemic inequities relative to Family Science, such as ableism, sexism, ageism, classism, colorism, and heteronormativity. Each of these involves uncritical acceptance of dominant norms that marginalize certain groups, making dysconsciousness a useful theoretical tool for uncovering implicit biases and structural barriers. For example, Broderick and Lalvani (2017) extend King's original framework to disability studies, introducing the notion of dysconscious ableism to analyze how teacher candidates could maintain exclusionary practices without recognizing their ideological roots. This adaptation demonstrates the potential for applying dysconsciousness across multiple valued identities to foster critical consciousness and inclusive pedagogy. The continuum model could also be extended to these other forms of bias by mapping categorical responses and cognitive positions to targeted interventions. Future work could also explore faculty development programs that use this model to design inclusive curricula, anticipate student resistance, and foster empathy through intentional, affective learning strategies.

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