

of two sons, read another story about a Black man's unlucky encounter with a White police officer's deadly force, I am reminded that racism by itself can kill.

NOTES

1. C. O'Toole, "The effect of the media and multicultural education on children's perceptions of Native Americans" (senior thesis, Department of Psychology and Education, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA, May 1990).
2. For an extended discussion of this point, see David Wellman, *Portraits of White racism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), ch. 1.
3. For specific statistical information, see R. Farley, "The common destiny of Blacks and Whites: Observations about the social and economic status of the races," pp. 197–233 in H. Hill and J. E. Jones, Jr. (Eds.), *Race in America: The struggle for equality* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).
4. P. McIntosh, "White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack," *Peace and Freedom* (July/August 1989): 10–12.
5. For further discussion of the concept of "belief in a just world," see M. J. Lerner, "Social psychology of justice and interpersonal attraction," in T. Huston (Ed.), *Foundations of interpersonal attraction* (New York: Academic Press, 1974).
6. For a brief historical overview of the institutionalization of racism and sexism in our legal system, see "Part V: How it happened: Race and gender issues in U.S. law," in P. S. Rothenberg (Ed.), *Race, class, and gender in the United States: An integrated study*, 3d ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).
7. P. A. Wentworth, "The identity development of non-traditionally aged first-generation women college students: An exploratory study" (master's thesis, Department of Psychology and Education, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA, 1994).

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COLOR-BLIND RACISM

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva

This is an edited version of a talk given on March 7, 2001, at a forum on racism at Texas A&M, sponsored by the Multicultural Leadership Forum and the Department of Multicultural Studies.

For most Americans, talking about racism is talking about white supremacist organizations or Archie Bunkers. I anchor my remarks from a different theoretical shore and one that will make many of you feel quite uncomfortable. I contend that racism is, more than anything else, *a matter of group power; it is about a dominant racial group (whites) striving to maintain its systemic advantages and minorities fighting to subvert the racial status quo*. Hence, although "bigots" are part of America's (and A&M's) racial landscape, they are not the central actors responsible for the reproduction of racial inequality. If bigots are not the cogs propelling America's racial dynamics, who are they? My answer: regular white folks just following the racial script of America. Today most whites assert that they "don't see any color, just people"; that although the ugly face of discrimination is still with us, it is no longer the main factor determining minorities' life chances; and, finally, that they, like Dr. Martin Luther King, aspire to live in a society where "people are judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin." More poignantly, and in a curious case of group projection, many whites insist that minorities (especially blacks) are the ones responsible for our "racial problems."

But regardless of whites' "sincere fictions," racial considerations shade almost everything that happens in this country. Blacks—and dark-skinned racial minorities—lag well behind whites in virtually every relevant social indicator. For example, blacks are poorer, earn less, and are significantly less wealthy than whites. They also receive an inferior education than do whites even when they attend integrated settings. Regarding housing, blacks pay more for similar units and, because of discrimination, cannot access the totality of the housing market in any locality. In terms of social interaction, blacks receive impolite and discriminatory treatment in stores, restaurants, attempting to hail taxicabs, driving, and in a host of other commercial and social transactions. In short, blacks are, using the apt metaphor coined by Professor Derrick Bell, "at the bottom of the well."

From the lecture "The Strange Enigma of Racism in Contemporary America," by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. Reprinted by permission of the author.

How is it possible to have this tremendous level of racial inequality in a country where most people (whites) claim that race is no longer a relevant social factor and that “racists” are a species on the brink of extinction? More significantly, how do whites explain the contradiction between their professed color blindness and America’s color-coded inequality? I will attempt to answer both of these questions. My main argument is that whites have developed a new, powerful ideology that justifies contemporary racial inequality and thus help maintain “systemic white privilege.” I label this new ideology “color-blind racism” because this term fits quite well the language used by whites to defend the racial status quo. This ideology emerged in the 1960s concurrently with what I have labeled the “New Racism.” “New Racism” practices maintain white privilege, and, unlike those typical of Jim Crow, tend to be slippery, institutional, and apparently nonracial. Post civil rights discrimination, for the most part, operates in a “now you see it, now you don’t” fashion. For instance, instead of whites relying on housing covenants or on the Jim Crow signs of the past (e.g., “This is a WHITE neighborhood”), today realtors steer blacks into certain neighborhoods, individual whites use “smiling discrimination” to exclude blacks (e.g., studies by HUD and The Urban Institute), and, in some white neighborhoods, sponsorship is the hidden strategy relied upon to keep them white. Similar practices are at work in universities, banks, restaurants, and other venues.

Because the tactics for maintaining systemic white privilege changed in the 1960s, the rationalizations for explaining racial inequality changed, too. Whereas Jim Crow racism explained blacks’ social standing as the product of their imputed biological and moral inferiority, color-blind racism explains it as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and presumed cultural deficiencies. Below, I will highlight the central frames of color-blind racism with interview data from two projects: the 1997 Survey of College Students and the 1998 Detroit Area Study. The four central frames of color-blind racism are (1) *Abstract Liberalism*, (2) *Naturalization*, (3) *Biologization of Culture*, and (4) *Minimization of Racism*. I discuss each frame separately.

Abstract Liberalism

Whereas the principles liberalism and humanism were not extended to nonwhites in the past, they have become the main rhetorical weapons to justify contemporary racial inequality. Whites use these principles in an *abstract* way that allows them to support the racial status quo in an apparently “reasonable” fashion. For example, Eric, a corporate auditor in his forties, opposed reparations by relying on an abstract notion of opportunity. He erupted in anger when asked if he thought reparations were due to blacks for the injuries caused by slavery and Jim Crow.

Oh tell them to shut up, OK! I had nothing to do with the whole situation. The opportunity is there, there is no reparation involved and let’s not dwell on it. I’m very opinionated about that!

After suggesting that Jews and Japanese are the only groups worthy of receiving reparations, he added,

But something that happened three Goddamned generations ago, what do you want us to do about it now? Give them opportunity, give them scholarships, but reparations . . .

Was Eric just a white man with a “principled opposition” to government intervention? This does not seem to be the case since Eric, like most whites, makes a distinction between government spending on behalf of victims of child abuse, the homeless, and battered women (groups whom he deems as legitimate candidates for assistance) and on behalf of blacks (a group whom he deems as unworthy of assistance).

Another tenet of liberalism that whites use to explain racial matters is the Jeffersonian idea of meritocracy—“the cream rises to the top.” And whites seem unconcerned by the fact that the color of the “cream” is usually white. For example, Bob, a student at Southern University, explained his opposition to the idea of providing blacks unique educational opportunities in meritocratic fashion:

No, I would not. I think, um, I believe that you should be judged on your qualifications, your experience, your education, your background, not on your race.

Accordingly, Bob opposed affirmative action as follows:

I oppose them mainly because, not because I am a racist, but because I think you should have the best person for the job. . . . If I was a business owner, I would want the best person in there to do the job. If I had two people, and had to choose, had to have one black to meet the quota, I think that’s ridiculous.

Bob then added the following clincher: “I think (affirmative action) had a good purpose when it was instilled (sic) because it alleviated a lot of anger maybe . . . minorities felt that they were getting a foot back in the door, but I think times have changed.” Bob’s argumentative reasonableness is bolstered by his belief that “times have changed” and that as far as discrimination in America [is concerned], “the bigger things are already taken care of.”

Another tenet of liberalism that whites employ to state their racial views is the notion of individualism. For example, Beverly, a co-owner of a small business and homemaker in her forties, stated her belief that the government has a duty to see that no one is prevented from moving into neighborhoods because of racial considerations. Yet, when asked whether the government should work to guarantee that residential integration becomes a reality, Beverly said the following:

(Sighs) It, it just isn’t that important. Where you decide to live is where you decide to live. If you decided to live in and can afford to live in a very upscale house, great! If you’re black and you can afford that, fantastic! I mean, people have choices as to where they live. If they have the economic background or money to do this with . . . I

can't envision . . . 97 percent of the black people saying, "I'm going to live in a white neighborhood 'cause it will make my life better." And I can't imagine 97 percent of the white people saying, "I'm gonna move to a black neighborhood 'cause it will make me feel better." You know, I, I, where you decide to live is your choice.

Carol, a student at SU, invoked the notion of individual choice to justify her taste for whiteness. While reviewing her romantic life in response to a question, Carol said:

Um, there really is hardly any (laughs). My romantic life is kinda dry (laughs). I mean, as far as guys go, I mean, I know you're looking for um, white versus minority and. . . I am interested in white guys, I mean, I don't want it to look like a prejudice thing or anything.

After stating her preference for "white guys," Carol had to do some major rhetorical work to avoid appearing racist. Thus, she interjected the following odd comment to save face: "if a guy comes along and he's black and like I love him, it's not gonna, I mean, I, it's not, I don't think the white-black issue's gonna make a difference, you know what I mean?"

Naturalization

The word "natural" or the phrase "That's the way it is" is often interjected when whites use this frame to normalize events or actions that could otherwise be interpreted as racially motivated (e.g., residential segregation) or even as racist (e.g., preference for whites as friends and partners). For example, Mark, a student at MU, acknowledged that: "most of my close friends don't . . . (I) also don't have that many close black friends." Mark reacted immediately to his potentially problematic confession (no black friends) by saying,

Um . . . I don't know, I guess that circles are tight. It's not like we exclude, I don't feel like we exclude people. I don't think that we go out of our way to include people either, but it's just kinda like that. It seems like that's just the way it works out almost . . .

Later in the interview, Mark, a business major, revealed that most of the students in the business school are white males. When asked if he thought the way things were set up in the business school was racist, Mark answered the following:

I don't really think it's racist. I just think . . . I don't know if it's a perfect example, I just think it's an example . . . or just things aren't set up in such a way where I wouldn't say it favors whites. That's just the way that happens um . . . in the business school. That's all.

Ray, another student at MU, naturalized the fact that he had no minority associates while growing up because, "they lived in different neighborhoods, they went to different schools" and "It wasn't like people were trying to exclude them . . . It's just the way things were." Hence, his response to a question about whether blacks self-segregate or are made to feel unwelcome by whites was the following:

I would say it's a combination of the two factors. Um . . . and I don't think that . . . I don't . . . I think it's fair it's, uh . . . it's not necessarily fair to read prejudice into either half of the bargain. Um . . . I think it's just, 'em . . . I think it's like what I was saying earlier, I think people feel comfortable around people that they feel that they can identify with.

After struggling rhetorically with the implications of his argument, Ray stated that: "Ah um . . . I think, yes, things are somewhat segregated, but I think it's more, I think it's more about just people . . . feeling comfortable around each other than it is about active discrimination."

Detroit whites also used this frame widely. For instance, Bill, a manager in a manufacturing firm, explained the limited level of post 1954 school integration as a natural affair.

Bill: I don't think it's anybody's fault. Because people tend to group with their own people. Whether it's white or black or upper-middle class or lower class or, you know, upper class, you know, Asians. People tend to group with their own. Doesn't mean if a black person moves into your neighborhood, they shouldn't go to your school? They should and you should mix and welcome them and everything else, but you can't force people together. . . . If people want to be together, they should intermix more.

Int: OK. Hmm, so the lack of mixing is really just kind of an individual lack of desire?

Bill: Well, yeah individuals, it's just the way it is. You know, people group together for lots of different reasons: social, religious. Just as animals in the wild, you know. Elephants group together, cheetahs group together. You bus a cheetah into an elephant herd because they should mix? You can't force that [laughs].

The Biologization of Culture

Modern racial ideology no longer relies on the claim that blacks are biologically inferior to whites. Instead, it has biologized their presumed cultural practices (i.e., presented them as *fixed* features) and used that as the *rationale* for explaining racial inequality. For instance, Karen, a student at MU, agreed with the premise that blacks are poor because they lack the drive to succeed.

I think, to some extent, that's true. Just from, like looking at the black people that I've met in my classes and the few that I knew before college that . . . not like they're—I don't want to say waiting for a handout, but to some extent, that's kind of what I'm like hinting at. Like, almost like they feel like they were discriminated against hundreds of years ago, now what are you gonna give me? Ya' know, or maybe even it's just their background, that they've never, like maybe they're first generation to be in college so they feel like just that is enough for them.

Although many white respondents used this frame as crudely as Karen, most used it in a kinder and gentler way. For example, Jay, a student at WU, answered the question on why blacks have a worse overall standing than whites as follows:

Hmm, I think it's due to lack of education. I think because if they didn't grow up in a household that ahhh, afforded them the time to go to school and they had to go out and get jobs right away, I think it is just a cycle (that) perpetuates things, you know. I mean, some people, I mean, I can't say that blacks can't do it because, obviously, there are many, many of them (that) have succeeded in getting good jobs and all that . . .

Although Jay admitted "exceptional blacks," he immediately went back to the cultural frame to explain blacks' status.

So it's possible that the cycle seems to perpetuate itself because it, I mean, let's say go out and get jobs and they start, they settle down much earlier than they would normally if they had gone to school and then they have kids at a young age and they—these kids have to go and get jobs and so (on).

Detroit respondents used this cultural frame too, but, in general, used it in a more crude fashion than students. For instance, Ian, a manager of information security in an automobile company in his late fifties, explained blacks' worse status compared to whites as follows:

The majority of 'em just don't strive to do anything, to make themselves better. Again, I've seen that all the way through. "I do this today, I'm fine, I'm happy with it, I don't need anything better." Never, never, never striving or giving extra to, to make themselves better.

Minimization of Racism

Although whites and blacks believed that discrimination is still a problem in America, they dispute its salience. In general, whites believe that discrimination has all but disappeared whereas blacks believe that discrimination—old- and new-fashioned—is as American as cherry pie. For instance, Kim, a student at SU, answered a question dealing with blacks' claims of discrimination in the following manner:

Um, I disagree. I think that um, I think that it even more like . . . it's uh . . . I mean, from what I've heard, you pretty much have to hire, you know, you have to (hire) everyone, you know? They have quotas and stuff . . .

When asked if she believes the reason why blacks lag behind whites is because they are lazy, Kim said:

Yeah, I totally agree with that, think that um, I mean, again, I don't think, you know, they're all like that, but I mean . . . I mean, I mean . . . it's just that . . . I mean, if it wasn't that way, why would there be so many blacks living in the projects? You know, why would there be so many poor blacks? If, if they worked hard, if, if they just went out and went to college and just worked as hard as they could, they would, I mean, they, they could make it just as high as anyone else.

Detroit whites were even more likely than students to use this frame and to use it in a direct and crude manner. Sandra, a retail salesperson in her early forties, answered the question on discrimination as follows:

I think if you are looking for discrimination, I think it's there to be found. But if you make the best of any situation, and if you don't use it as an excuse I think sometimes it's an excuse because, ah, people felt they deserved a job, ah whatever! I think if things didn't go their way I know a lot of people have a tendency to use . . . prejudice or racism as—whatever—as an excuse. I think in some ways, yes there is . . . umm . . . people who are prejudiced. It's not only blacks, it's about Spanish, or women. In a lot of ways there (is) a lot of reverse discrimination. It's just what you wanna make of it.

The policy implications of adopting this frame are extremely important. Since whites do not believe that discrimination is a normal part of America, they view race-targeted government programs as illegitimate. Thus, Henrietta, a transsexual school teacher in his fifties, answered a question on reparations as follows:

As a person who was once reversed discriminated against, I would have to say no. Because the government does not need those programs if they, if people would be motivated to bring themselves out of the poverty level. Ah, [coughing] when we talk about certain programs, when the Irish came over, when the Italians, the Polish, and the Eastern European Jews, they all were immigrants who lived in terrible conditions too, but they had one thing in common, they all knew that education was the way out of that poverty. And they did it. I'm not saying . . . the blacks were brought over here maybe not willingly, but if they realize education's the key, that's it. And that's based on individuality.

Conclusions

I have illustrated the four central frames of color-blind racism, namely, abstract liberalism, naturalization, biologization of culture, and minimization of racism. These frames are central to *old* and *young* whites alike. They form an impregnable yet elastic ideological wall that *barricades* whites off from America's racial reality. An impregnable wall because they provide whites a safe, color-blind way to state racial views without appearing to be irrational or rabidly racist. And an elastic wall—and, hence, a stronger one—because these frames do not rely on absolutes ("All blacks are . . ." or "Discrimination ended in 1965"). Instead, color-blind racism gives room for exceptions and allows for a variety of ways of using the frames—from crude and direct to kinder and indirect—for whites to state their racial views in an angry tone ("Darned lazy blacks") or as compassionate conservatives ("Poor blacks are trapped in *their* inferior schools in *their* cycle of poverty. What a pity.").

Thus, my answers to the strange enigma of racism without "racists" is the following: America does not depend on Archie Bunkers to defend white supremacy. Modern racial ideology does not thrive on the ugliness of the past, on the language and tropes typical of slavery and Jim Crow. Today there is a sanitized, color-blind way

of calling minorities “niggers,” “spics,” or “chinks.” Today most whites justify keeping minorities out of the good things in life with the language of liberalism (“I am all for equal opportunity; that’s why I oppose affirmative action!”). And today as yesterday, whites do not feel guilty about minorities’ plight. Today they believe that minorities have the opportunities to succeed and that if they don’t, it’s because they do not try hard. And if minorities dare talk about discrimination, they are rebuked with statements such as “Discrimination ended in the sixties, man” or “You guys are hypersensitive.”

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SMELLS LIKE RACISM

Rita Chaudhry Sethi

When I started my first job after college, Steve Riley, an African American activist, asked me: “So, how do you feel being black?” I confessed, “I am not black.” “In America,” Steve responded, “if you’re not white, you’re black.”

U.S. discourse on racism is generally framed in these simplistic terms: the stark polarity of black/white conflict. As it is propagated, it embraces none of the true complexities of racist behavior. Media sensationalism, political expedience, intellectual laziness, and legal constraints conspire to narrow the scope of cognizable racism. What remains is a pared-down image of racism, one that delimits the definition of its forms, its perpetrators, and, especially, its victims. Divergent experiences are only included in the hierarchy of racial crimes when they sufficiently resemble the caricature. Race-based offenses that do not conform to this model are permitted to exist and fester without remedy by legal recourse, collective retribution, or even moral indignation.

Asians’ experiences exist in the penumbra of actionable racial affronts. Our cultural, linguistic, religious, national, and color differences do not, as one might imagine, form the basis for a modified paradigm of racism; rather, they exist on the periphery of offensiveness. The racial insults we suffer are usually trivialized; our reactions are dismissed as hypersensitivity or regarded as a source of amusement. The response to a scene where a Korean-owned store is being destroyed with a bat in the 1993 film *Falling Down* (a xenophobic and racist diatribe on urban life)¹ reflects how mainstream America/American culture responds to the phenomenon of anti-Asian violence:

There was, in the theater where I saw the film, a good deal of appreciative laughter and a smattering of applause during this scene, which of course flunks the most obvious test of comparative racism: imagine a black or an Orthodox Jew, say, in that Korean’s place and you imagine the theater’s screen being ripped from the walls. Asians, like Arabs, remain safe targets for the movies’ casual racism.²

The perpetuation of the caricature of racism is attributable to several complex and symbiotic causes. First, Asians often do not ascribe racist motivation to the discrimination they suffer, or they have felt that they could suffer the injustice of