

# What is Racism? Racial Discourse and Racial Politics

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## ABSTRACT

One central area of dispute in current racial politics is whether an act, policy, or event constitutes racism. I contend that the core of these debates involves competing conceptions of racism. Using text from a variety of media sources, I examine the different ways in which racism is defined and how claims and counterclaims are contextualized. I also explore how the dynamic nature of racial discourse leads to the emergence of new ways of defining racism as advocates seek advantages in political debate. Finally, I connect the struggle involving racism as a contested concept to two larger racial ideologies: color-blindness and systemic racism.

**KEY WORDS:** racism; racial discourse; color-blind racism, systemic racism; racial politics.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, racial oppression remains a substantial barrier to the exercise of citizenship rights and the pursuit of social justice in the United States. Contemporary American society can be described as a “racialized social system” (Bonilla-Silva 1997), in which social institutions and social hierarchies are profoundly influenced by

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socially defined racial categories. The persistence of substantial economic and social inequality along racial lines is supported by *racial ideologies* – generalized belief systems that explain social relationships and social practices in racialized language (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Fields 1990). Historically, dominant racial ideologies in the United States have served to explain or legitimize conquest and dispossession, enslavement, exclusion, discrimination, and the continuing existence of racial stratification (Doane 2003). Dominant ideologies are in turn challenged by “counterideologies,” which attempt (with varying degrees of success) to redefine and eventually overturn the existing racial order. Consequently, racial ideologies and racial politics are in a state of constant flux, as intellectuals and social movements challenge and defend the status quo.

This political struggle is played out via *racial discourse*, which I define as the collective text and talk of society with respect to issues of race. If racial ideologies can be viewed as global systems of thought, then racial discourse is the arena in which political/ideological struggle occurs. On one hand, discourses shape the mental models, or “common sense” beliefs, through which individuals interpret social reality; on the other hand, they collectively reinforce or transform ideologies. Through racial discourse, individuals and groups “frame” racial issues as they strive for ideological and political advantage. In essence, racial discourse is a form of propaganda (Fields 1990:110–112) in which social actors employ rhetorical strategies in order to make “claims” and promote a particular interpretation of a social issue. Successful “claims making” enables practitioners to mobilize supporters, attract adherents, and neutralize or discredit political opponents. Discourse is not merely communication or “debate,” it is an attempt to influence both the rules of the game and others’ perceptions of social reality.

Racial politics is *not* a pluralistic process, for discourse is inextricably intertwined with issues of power. Dominant groups enjoy disproportionate access to the vehicles of transmission for discourse, including government, educational institutions, and the media (van Dijk 1997). Over the past few decades, well-funded conservative think tanks and foundations have played key roles in shaping public discourse on issues ranging from affirmative action to global warming (Alterman 1999; Cokorinos 2003; McRight and Dunlap 2003; Stefancic and Delgado 1996). Discourses of dominant groups work to legitimize and reproduce dominance by minimizing the extent of inequality, marginalizing claims of subordinate groups, and moving to make dominant group understandings normative for the larger society (Doane 1997). Yet this work does not go unchallenged. Subordinate groups may have a lesser (or even deliberately restricted) ability to influence public discourse, but they can nevertheless

create “counterdiscourses” (van Dijk 1997:20) in an attempt to challenge existing racial structures.

In current US racial discourse, one central rhetorical struggle involves differing and competing understandings of what constitutes “*racism*.” One significant effect of the Civil Rights Movement upon the politics of race in the United States was a decline in the acceptability of *overt* ideologies of racial superiority and inferiority and blatant displays of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Schuman et al. 1997). Discursive expressions of racism tend to be concealed or to occur in private “racetalk” (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Myers 2003). Today, charges of “racism” – or the use of the label “racist” – carry an extremely negative connotation and serve as perhaps the ultimate rhetorical weapon in public discourse on racial issues. Even those opposing racial integration or policies to reduce racial inequality often seek to establish their “non-racist” credentials by using rhetorical buffers or “shields” (e.g., “I am not a racist, but . . .,” Bonilla-Silva 2003; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000). What is generally missing from most discussions of racism, however, is an appreciation of the significance of racism as a “contested concept” (Doane 1996:38–39). While there is a widespread social consensus that “racism” is an extremely negative phenomenon, there is also significant disagreement as to exactly what is “racism.” This is important, for competing definitions of racism have significant strategic implications for racial discourse and for the changing trajectories of racial politics in the United States.

In this article, I will explore the significance of racism as a “contested concept.” The starting point for this analysis will be to examine the competing ways in which racism is defined and how different authors contextualize claims of racism. While these competing conceptualizations are interesting in themselves, a related task will be to examine the *strategic* implications of competing definitions – the ways in which they subtly or overtly shape perceptions and discourses concerning racial issues. From this platform, I will explore links between conceptualizations of racism and broader racial ideologies, particularly color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003). Finally, I will assess the implications of this research for the future evolution of racial politics in the United States.

### **Changing Racial Ideologies: The Context for Discourse**

Racial discourse does not occur in a vacuum: it is shaped by the changing structure of racial conflict and racial ideologies in the larger society. While the analysis of the evolution of systemic racism and racial ideologies in the United States is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief

discussion will provide the necessary context for our analysis. It has become commonplace to characterize the Civil Rights Movement as a “watershed” (Morris and Herring 1996) in racial politics in the United States. For our purposes, what is significant was the broad-based social and political challenge to both the existing racial order and its supporting ideologies and cultural understandings. Among its many effects, the Civil Rights Movement led to a decline in ideologies of racial superiority, a reduction of the most blatant forms of segregation amidst formal legal recognition of “civil rights,” and – according to survey results – an increase in white support for racial equality (Schuman et al. 1997). Socially and politically, changing norms incorporated the *ideal* of racial equality and made the public expression of blatantly racist attitudes increasingly indefensible. During the following decades, continued political and ideological struggle, changing racial and ethnic demographics, and economic and social change continue to restructure the US racial order.

At the same time, much remains unchanged. The more intractable problems of institutional racism, de facto segregation, economic inequality, and everyday racism remain embedded in American society (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967; Feagin 2000; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Feagin and Vera 1995; Massey and Denton 1993; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Shapiro 2004). Survey research has regularly shown that the changing attitudes and seeming embrace of racial equality by white Americans ends abruptly when it comes to policies designed to address continuing segregation and racial inequality. Qualitative studies have repeatedly found major qualifications and contradictions in the supposedly more-inclusive attitudes of white Americans (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Johnson and Shapiro 2003; Myers 2003). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the “problem of the color line” is arguably as significant as when W.E.B. Du Bois (1995 [1903]:54) characterized it as the problem of the twentieth century.

One significant change in the US racial order has been in the *form* of racism, the institutional and cultural practices through which whites strive to maintain their hegemonic position. Throughout US history, challenges to white supremacy have been met by countermobilization (Blauner 2001; Doane 1997; Feagin 2000). The Civil Rights Movement triggered a crisis for white supremacy in that it was clear that there would be ongoing challenges to the social and institutional underpinnings of white dominance. In response, whites began a process of countermobilization that has been characterized as the “racial reaction” (Omi and Winant 1986) or the “racial backlash” (Steinberg 1995). This defense of position was problematic, however, in that historical strategies of overt racial discrimination were no longer politically feasible in the face of the now widely accepted value of “racial equality” (a term which in itself is a

“contested concept” – cf. Omi and Winant 1986:129). What has emerged has been a series of new racial ideologies geared toward the preservation of white privilege and the containment of challenging social movements.

At the core of the white racial reaction has been the recasting of racial ideologies or understandings to defend white advantages while simultaneously acknowledging the value of “racial equality.” The dominant ideology in this endeavor has been “color-blindness” (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003), the assertion that race should not “matter” in public decision making or private interaction and that it is therefore illegitimate to take race into consideration even if the goal is to ameliorate inequality or redress past injustices. This ideology of “color-blindness” has enabled practitioners to claim the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement – judging people not “by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” (King 1992 [1963]:104) – while attacking race-based remedies such as affirmative action and political redistricting as violations of democratic principles (on “abstract liberalism,” see Bonilla-Silva 2001:142–147) and deriding multiculturalism as “identity politics” or “political correctness.” An integral component of the “color-blind” paradigm has been the strategy of *denial* – the claim that racism is a historical phenomenon that is no longer a significant problem in American society. From this perspective, all that remains are the deeds of a few “bigoted” individuals whose actions can then be broadly condemned. In this context, claims of discrimination can be dismissed as “oversensitivity” (Essed 1991), making excuses for personal shortcomings (Blauener 1990), or “playing the race card” in an attempt to gain personal or political advantage.

Clearly, our consideration of the “color-blind” paradigm is but a brief summary of a complex constellation of racial understandings. Moreover, the construction and reconstruction of racial ideologies is an ongoing process, as claims and counterclaims are presented in the course of political struggle and in specific social contexts. Much of this process of articulation and rearticulation of racial understandings takes place in the public discourse revolving around *racial events*, occurrences whose racialized character triggers extensive public discussion and consideration of racial issues. On a national level, this includes events such as the Rodney King beating and the trial of the Los Angeles Police Department officers; the O.J. Simpson trial; the burning of black churches; the racially motivated murder of James Byrd in Jasper, Texas; and the 2003 affirmative action cases involving the University of Michigan. Racial events also occur on a local level, with dialogue triggered by incidents of police brutality, school desegregation debates, elections, and other phenomena that evoke racial divisions. Taken together, these discussions or debates of

racial events constitute the arena in which racial ideologies are presented, challenged, and defended – and are reshaped in the process. It is this discourse that will be the focus of our analysis.

Data for this analysis were collected from various written media (letters to newspapers, public statements quoted in newspaper articles, and letters to public agencies), both directly and using the Lexis-Nexis database. In essence, this process is “tracking discourse” (Altheide 2002:34); that is, examining changes in usage and context. Given the goals of this research – mapping different discursive strategies for defining and contextualizing racism – analytical categories were reflexively derived from the data (on “ethnographic content analysis,” see Altheide 1987) as opposed to a more formal conversational or content analysis (for examples of similar analytical strategies, see Berbrier 1998; Binder 1993; Daniels 1997; Doane 1996).

### **What is Racism? Discourse and Debate**

One key element of racial discourse is the author’s attempt to present a specific interpretation of a racial issue or racial event. In addition to claims-making, authors work to discredit or undermine specific and generalized political opponents. Given the general social consensus that racism violates social norms and the strong negative valuation attached to the “racist” label, charges of racism are a significant rhetorical and political weapon. In the twenty-first century, no one wants to be accused of racism or to be called a racist. How racism is defined, then, becomes an important discursive tactic. Not surprisingly, authors will seek to conceptualize racism – either explicitly or implicitly – in a manner that will both strengthen their claims and weaken those of their challengers. This strategy becomes evident in the following exchanges.

The interpretation of racial events provides an arena in which competing claims come to the fore. For example, in a syndicated article entitled “Ingrained American Racism Killed My Son,” Camille Cosby (1998:C1) presents an interpretation of the well-publicized murder of her son, Ennis Cosby, by a young immigrant. According to Cosby, the murderer “did not learn to hate black people in his native country” (the Ukraine), but instead was influenced by the racism and prejudice that “are omnipresent and eternalized in America’s institutions, media, and myriad entities.” For Cosby, racism is clearly more than a matter of individual hatred as she cites a number of examples of institutional and cultural racism ranging from health studies to the media to voting rights. Included in the essay is a quote from James Baldwin: “The will of the people, or the State,

is revealed by the State's institutions. There was not then, nor is there now, a single American institution which is not racist."

When published in the *Hartford Courant*, this letter evoked a series of responses in the "Letters to the Editor" section of the newspaper. The first correspondent (Cosby response 1) expressed sympathy for the Cosby tragedy, but described the murder as Ennis Cosby being "killed by a man who happened to be white." He characterized Cosby's essay as "racist" and asserted that (emphasis added) "to take out her *hatred* on the founding fathers and great heroes of our country [Cosby had discussed the slave owning status of several major historical figures] is insulting to most Americans." In the same vein, a second letter (Cosby response 2) condemned Cosby's article as "blatantly racist" for "saying that the whole country is racist." The author opined, "Cosby should not allow the racial hatred shown by some Americans (presumably including Ennis Cosby's murderer) to influence her opinion of all Americans" and suggested that (emphasis added) Cosby "get over her *hate* and meet all the Americans who treat others equally regardless of their race."

There are both differences and similarities between the two responses. For the first critic, the murder of Ennis Cosby was unrelated to race (the killer "happened to be white"). In contrast, the second critic seems to accept that the murder of Ennis Cosby was the result of racial hatred, but implies that this hatred is a rather isolated occurrence. More significantly, both critics employ, as a core element of their understanding of the issue, a definition of racism as hatred. This then enables both critics to develop a syllogism that argues: Cosby hates (by criticizing institutions and historical figures, by labeling the "whole country" as racist), therefore, Cosby is a racist. The strategic effect of this discourse is that Cosby's critique of racism in American culture and institutions leads to her being labeled a "racist" and her critique essentially dismissed as "hate speech."

These criticisms of Cosby's essay in turn produced a new round of rejoinders in the *Courant*. At this juncture, the discourse shifted completely from the analysis of the murder of Ennis Cosby to a debate on the nature of racism. One respondent (Cosby response 3) pronounced him/herself "infuriated" by the criticism of Cosby and described a recent college course that opened her/his eyes to "the truth that African Americans and other folks of color have been and often still are disenfranchised in this land of ours," a statement that implies a broader, more structural conceptualization of racism. A second correspondent (Cosby response 4) more explicitly addressed the nature of racism. He criticized the critics of Cosby for the incorrect suggestion that "anti-black sentiment held by whites is racism, just as anti-white sentiment held by

African-Americans is racism.” In contrast, he stated that “for African-Americans, racism in America takes many forms, including obstacles to access to positions of power in government and business, unfair and degrading legislation, lower quality education in predominantly black areas, offensive cultural stereotypes and, sometimes, deadly violence.” While acknowledging that anti-white sentiment exists, he asserted that few examples of anti-white racism “do more than hurt the feelings of those whites involved.” He concludes with the statement, “the word ‘racism’ cannot accurately refer to both social phenomena [racism against African-Americans and anti-white sentiment] because they have different roots and different effects.”

This exchange provides a clear illustration of racism as a “contested concept.” All five authors are talking about racism; however, there are clear lines of conflict between the “color-blind” view of racism as prejudice or hate and the alternative view of racism as a more structural phenomenon embedded in American society. How racism is defined, either explicitly or implicitly, is at the core of the debate over the murder of Ennis Cosby. Finally, once the claim of “racism” is invoked, its effect is so powerful that it essentially transforms the discussion from an analysis of the murder of Ennis Cosby to a debate on the nature of racism in American society and who is or is not “racist.” This is a clear illustration of the power of the “racism” label.

### **What is Racism? Who is Racist?**

One important issue related to the debate over the nature of racism is the question: who is (or can be) racist? Competing definitions of racism lead to different answers to this question. In general, if racism is defined as race-based prejudice or discrimination, then it seemingly logically follows that *anyone* can be racist, including members of both dominant and oppressed groups. On the other hand, if racism is linked to institutional power, then it follows that only members of the dominant group – i.e., whites in the United States – can be racist. This distinction is politically important, for the “racist” label is a potent discursive weapon. The impact of these divergent perspectives is illustrated by the following exchange.

In recent years, many “racial events” have involved issues of police behavior. Some incidents (e.g., the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers, the shooting of Amadou Diallo by New York police officers, deaths of African Americans at the hands of police in Cincinnati) receive national attention, while others evoke debate on a local or state level. As part of an ongoing discourse over police brutality



in Connecticut, a letter in the *Hartford Courant* offered the following interpretation of events (Racism 1):

Finding a solution to the problems of police brutality and racial profiling requires us to deal first with the lingering problem of white racism. Racism is a fundamental feature of American society. Because virtually every white participates in this racist culture, most harbor some racist images or views.

In this text, the writer (identified with academic credentials) is describing racism as embedded in American culture. Although the author does not state explicitly that only whites can be racist, white racism is presented as the core problem underlying racial conflict in the United States.

This letter evoked several strong responses. One author (Racism 2) directly challenged the first writer's perspective on racism:

Racism is not a white problem alone. In the Los Angeles riots of 1992, Koreans seemed to be the objects of discrimination and racism as blacks attacked and looted Korean businesses. This is not to say that only blacks or only whites harbor racist views, but that some people, regardless of race, still profess archaic and stereotypical views about those who are different from themselves . . .

The only solution for racism is for both sides to cooperate in abolishing stereotypes. Racism never functions one way; it manifests itself in both the oppressed and the oppressors, and who is to say which group is which, as everyone is constantly accusing anyone but themselves for all of their problems.

This author claims that racism (archaic, stereotypical views of others) is not limited to whites, but that it is evident among all groups (and cites an example of "black racism" to buttress his position). Moreover, given this "universal" view of racism (i.e., the position that all groups can be racist), the author claims that it is difficult in the United States to distinguish between the oppressor and the oppressed. Different definitions of racism result in differing conceptions of who can be racist.

A parallel discourse emerged around a second racial event: a controversy surrounding a proposal for a course entitled "White Racism" to be offered at the main campus of the University of Connecticut. The debate over the course, which was finally approved by the University, received extensive coverage in the local media (Farrish 1995), which in turn triggered public commentary in the letters to the editor column. One critic of the course (White Racism 1) charged that the use of the term "white racism" was an example of racism:

By its very nature, the title of the University of Connecticut course offends me. It in itself is racist. A sociology course entitled "Colonialism and its

Racist Ramifications” or one titled “Racism: Its Causes and Effects” might be worthy of consideration.

Will UConn offer another course to balance this one, titled perhaps “Black Racism,” with special attention to the Rev. Al Sharpton and Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, or “Asian Racism” focusing upon the xenophobia of the Japanese? To be truly politically correct, nonjudgmental and egalitarian, such diverse offerings should be made available to all students. However, since we live in a climate with double standards, such will obviously not be the case.

This author makes several interrelated claims. The course is “racist” because it is unbalanced and nonegalitarian in its treatment of different racial groups. While racism is not explicitly defined, the implicit definition is that it entails unequal treatment on the basis of race or prejudicial attitudes toward other groups. Finally, in the interest of fairness (vs. the “climate with double standards”), the discussion of white racism must be balanced by consideration of “black racism” or racism on the part of other racial minorities (note the specific examples provided).

In contrast, a defender of the course (White Racism 2) commended the faculty member for offering a course “in which students can actually learn the truth.” Her support is based upon a dramatically different claim:

Being in a country that has been built upon racism, a country in which racism has been rooted, we can’t assume that it will just disappear. We just began to confront the problem 30 years ago. What form of racism can be more evident than white racism? From the Trail of Tears to the Holocaust on down to Sheff vs. O’Neill [a school desegregation case involving Connecticut schools], our past and present show us that white racism has been the primary cause of social dysfunction.

For this author, racism, while not directly defined, is seen as a fundamental (“rooted”) aspect of society as opposed to individual attitudes and behavior. Racism is seemingly, but not explicitly, linked to power, which leads to the conclusion that *white* racism is the major cause of social problems.

### **Shifting Meanings: Redefining Racism**

Thus far, I have framed the conflict as being between individual and more institutional or structural conceptions of racism. While this is the major division in contemporary racial discourse, the dynamic nature of discourse creates space for the emergence of new understandings of racial

issues – and new interpretations of what constitutes racism. This realignment was evident in a debate over desegregation or “racial balance” of elementary schools in a suburban Connecticut community. During the course of this debate, letters to the editor in a local newspaper presented a new perspective on racism.

The first author (West Hartford letter file 39) claimed that:

Proponents of the [racial balance] plan fail to see that their position is firmly rooted in racial stereotypes . . . Are they saying that the racial and ethnic mix of students determines the quality of a school? While they certainly won't say that, it is the logical implication of their position. And that my friends is a racist position.

From this vantage point, supporters of racial balance/desegregation are being labeled as racists for implying that the racial and ethnic composition of a school is an important consideration.

The larger interpretative frame for this perspective is articulated by a second author (West Hartford letter file 43) who stated

Now it is clear that our School Board's agenda goes beyond equitable distribution of our town's educational resources. Their agenda categorizes us, the people of the town of West Hartford, the pigment of our skins, by the amount of money that we make, by the language our parents speak, and then gerrymanders our school districts to create their misguided version of what is meant by equal access – homogenized ratios.

To some of us who believe that people should be judged on their strength of character, and who believe that racism will not be eliminated until our nation, states, and towns become color blind, this agenda is repugnant.

Here the definition of racism is clear. In the context of “color-blind” ideology, racism is to be conscious of race either on the individual or institutional level. It is to employ racial categories for presumably any purpose.

This position was extended further in an “op-ed” column by radio commentator Judy Jarvis (1997:A13) in which she criticized the inclusion of racial and ethnic questions in the 2000 United States census:

But discrimination is no longer the worst problem we face in trying to get along and get ahead on our diverse country. The constant focus on our differences is. Children are being taught that they have more that divides them as Americans than unites them: from the Census Bureau's adding racial and ethnic categories, to universities' obsession with segregated dorms and social clubs; from state laws that ask employers to count color, to disastrous bilingual programs that ensure failure for so many students who are placed in them.

Why don't we cry out against these bigoted policies? Why don't we tell the politicians who support them that more harm than good comes from well-intentioned programs based on color, sex, and ethnic counting?

For Jarvis, racism (bigotry) is not only to take race into consideration in policy making, but also even to *count* by race or ethnicity. Moreover, this type of racism is, in her opinion, a more serious problem than discrimination.

This claim that the use of racial categories was "racist" foreshadowed more recent developments in US racial politics. In 2001, Ward Connerly and the American Civil Rights Coalition initiated a campaign to promote a California state ballot initiative, Proposition 54, which if passed would forbid California state and local government agencies (with a few exceptions) from classifying citizens by race, ethnicity, color, and national origin. When he introduced this campaign, Connerly (2001) claimed that:

Race classifications have never helped anyone. The Holocaust, South African apartheid, India's caste system – every time a country has adopted these divisive race classifications they have only served to suppress the group out of favor. It is time California learned this history lesson and became truly colorblind.

Other supporters of Proposition 54 echoed this argument. During the final days of the campaign, one op-ed writer (Custred 2003) argued that:

Passing Proposition 54 will be the beginning of the end for the racial classification system that has plagued this country since its founding. Beginning in the 17th century, the government divided citizens by race to perpetuate slavery. In the 19th century, America was torn apart in a war to determine how much say the government had over a person based on his skin color . . . Every time the government has recognized our skin color, it has led to evil consequences. Proposition 54 is a chance to end this historical stain and take the first, measured step toward a colorblind government that has no place for race in American life or law.

In both cases, the emerging definition of racism is race consciousness or the use of racial categories, a conception that represents the ultimate application of "colorblind" racial ideology and the claim that race doesn't "matter." While Proposition 54 was defeated by California voters in October of 2003 (in part due to counterarguments that data collection is necessary to measure and to combat discrimination), the issue of banning racial categories remains alive. Connerly has announced plans to propose a similar ballot initiative in Michigan and a revised initiative in California (Schevitz 2003). Moreover, banning and non-compliance with racial data collection is becoming increasingly widespread (Jenkins 1999). This has significant political implications. If the collection of racial data is eliminated, then it will become difficult, if not impossible, to provide

credible evidence of patterns of discrimination or even to assess the relative degree of racial inequality. Without such evidence, white advantages will become unassailable – a position made possible by a discourse employing the language of “color blindness” and antibigotry.

### **Racism as a Contested Concept: Implications**

The discursive examples presented above illuminate the role of racism as a “contested concept.” What is important to emphasize, however, is that the differences are not merely “semantics” or problems of communication; they reflect fundamentally opposite views of the US racial order. Furthermore, the contested nature of “racism” plays a significant role in recasting the politics of race and in reproducing white hegemony. In this section, I will explore the implications of current racial discourse for the evolution of racial politics in the United States.

As demonstrated above, the key division in the debate over the nature of racism is between the definition of racism as individual attitude or behavior (hatred, stereotyping, unequal treatment) and the view of racism as a set of systemic and institutional practices. Defining racism in individual terms both reinforces and is reinforced by the “color-blind” frame, which holds that racism in the United States is no longer a significant problem, but has been reduced to the isolated acts of “bigots” or racial supremacists. This has implications for everyday life. For individual whites, it is possible to attempt to inoculate oneself against charges of racism by contrasting oneself with white supremacist groups, by asserting that “I am not a racist,” and by pointing to individual affiliations (“my best friend”) or non-racist actions (Culp 1993). Defining racism as individual acts or attitudes also creates a double bind for victims of racism. Charges may be difficult to substantiate, especially when denials or alternative explanations are given equal or greater weight (Essed 1991). In addition, persons making charges of racism – as shown above in the case of Camille Cosby – may be open to being labeled “racist” for allegedly exhibiting hatred or unequal treatment. To the extent that individual definitions of racism become dominant, what emerges is a social world in which it is difficult to challenge or even envision institutional racism.

While color-blindness has been described as the dominant racial ideology, it does not stand uncontested. As we have seen above, it is opposed by a counterideology that views racism as a set of social and institutional practices, a frame that I would call the *structural or systemic racism* perspective. The cornerstone of this ideological position is that racial oppression has been and remains at the core of American society. From the

structural racism perspective, individual prejudice and discrimination are but symptoms of larger structural problems, racial inequality is a pervasive aspect of everyday life and the normal functioning of institutions, and the ultimate solution to racial oppression involves far-reaching changes in social institutions. While this “structural racism” perspective does have a significant number of proponents, particularly in academic and intellectual circles, it is clearly *not* the dominant frame for discussing racism in the United States.

The conflict between individual and structural definitions of racism leads to important differences with respect to policy implications for addressing racism. If racism is defined as a set of institutional and social practices, then the logical policies would include structural change, vigilant enforcement of civil rights laws, race-based remedies, and significant changes in cultural practices. On the other hand, if racism is viewed as a problem of *individual* attitudes and behavior, then the logical response is to condemn and punish individual acts of prejudice and discrimination, or to combat racism by “educating” the next generation to be more tolerant of differences. I believe that these different policy implications explain the seeming ascendancy of “color-blindness.” Individual definitions of racism have no “cost” to white Americans other than a vague commitment to “tolerance.” In contrast, adopting a systemic racism framework entails recognition that the ultimate solution to racial inequality involves major changes in social institutions and sharing resources and power.

The debate over “who is (or can be) a racist” also has important political implications. As I have indicated elsewhere (Doane 1996), the “racist” label has a powerful negative valuation – such that to employ the term “racist” often leads to a series of claims and counterclaims regarding the use of the label and deflects attention from the original issue. If racism is viewed as rooted in institutional structures, then – as several authors claimed above – *white racism* would logically be viewed as the most significant social problem and the onus of change is placed squarely on the shoulders of white Americans. On the other hand, if racism is merely a matter of *individual* hatred, stereotyping, or unequal treatment, then it would logically follow that *anyone* can be racist. Such a perspective has substantial political advantages for white Americans in that charges of racism on the part of whites can be countered by claims of “black racism” (e.g., one of the authors cited above invoked Louis Farrakhan and Al Sharpton) or racism on the part of other oppressed racial groups. If, as one author advocated, equal standing is given to both forms of racism, then “black racism” can be invoked to neutralize challenges to the existing racial order and to undermine the historical and institutional pervasive-

ness of white racism and discussions of racism are reduced to a series of claims and counterclaims (on the use of the storyline “they are the racist ones,” see Bonilla-Silva 2003:63–66).

To the extent that the “individual” definition of racism is gaining ascendancy – and I believe that it is – the overall effect of the rhetorical struggle is to solidify the dominance of “color-blind” racial ideology. In contemporary US racial discourse, the political role of “color-blind” ideology is to defend white advantages while taking what is claimed to be an antiracist (“color-blind”) position. Within this context, the claim that racism is a characteristic of *individuals*, who can be from either the dominant or a minority group, obscures the existence of institutional racism and supports the denial of racism. Further, by simultaneously placing racism at the margins (the acts/attitudes of a few) and universalizing it (asserting racism as a characteristic of all groups), this discourse places whites on a par with peoples of color as perpetrators and victims and provides a platform from which to refute claims of racism and calls for redress of racial inequality.

Racism as a “contested concept” can also be linked to emerging new claims regarding racial issues. In the context of “color-blind” racial ideology, individualistic definitions of racism and the assertion that anyone can be racist provide a logical foundation for a “white as victim” discourse (Doane 1996; Gallagher 1994). Within this framework, it is claimed that “minority racism” exists alongside white racism and that whites are equally or even more likely to be targets of racism. In contemporary racial politics, it is the logical corollary of claims of “reverse discrimination” and the existence of a racial “double standard,” except that the “victim” status of whites is deliberately highlighted. Politically, casting whites as victims provides a strong base for neutralizing minority claims for racial justice and for activating white countermobilization for the defense of racial advantages – where the defense of white privilege is now claiming the antiracist (color-blind) mantle and cast as fighting for equal treatment.

There are also important linkages between contested definitions of racism and white supremacist discourse. On the one hand, this is ironic in that white supremacists are often used as exemplars of racism/racists, with the implication being that those who are not white supremacists are then not racist. Yet as several writers (Daniels 1997; Gabriel 1998) have noted, white supremacist rhetoric echoes many of the same themes as “mainstream” racial discourse, often providing important political cover for more sanitized versions of the same ideas. As Mitch Berbrier (1998:437) observed, the “normalization” of racism – the claim that everyone is a racist – has led to racism being redefined by white supremacists in positive

terms as a sense of group pride and cultural preservation (whites are merely engaging in the same practices as members of oppressed groups). Similarly, the claim that white “racism” is just one of many forms of racism and the emergence of a “white as victim” discourse resonates with white supremacist propaganda that whites are now the oppressed racial group in the United States. If past practices are any barometer, these themes will become more prevalent in the future.

### **Conclusion: Racial Discourse and Racial Justice**

In this article, I have examined the role of definitions of racism in contemporary racial discourse. Vocabularies and discursive frames reflect ideologies and cultural understandings. More significantly, they shape our interpretations of racial events and condition our perceptions. Politically, code words and catchphrases serve as important weapons in the ongoing struggle for political power and social and economic resources. Racial ideologies serve to challenge or defend the existing system of racial oppression in the United States.

Substantively, I have outlined how individualistic and universal conceptions of racism resonate with “color-blind” racial ideology. Defining racism as *individual* hatred or discrimination creates a phenomenon that can be condemned by all, while at the same time eliminating the need for structural changes to address institutional racism. The claim that racism is *universal* – that anyone can be racist – removes from whites the burden of responsibility for past and present racism and even enables assertions of white victimization. In general terms, the effect of this racial discourse is to reinforce white domination in the United States by reducing or marginalizing challenging perspectives. Carried to its extreme – the claim that it is “racist” to use racial categories – this discourse creates a one-dimensional context in which it becomes increasingly difficult to conceptualize, let alone challenge, the continuing significance of institutional racism – much in the manner that the government of Oceania in George Orwell’s *1984* (1961 [1949]) sought to eliminate “thought crime” by eliminating any challenging vocabulary. Ironically, the claims that “race no longer matters” are being used to promote the persistence of racial inequality.

Finally, this examination of popular discourse uncovers both a sobering reality and a challenge for progressive and antiracist sociologists. While academics and other intellectuals have developed increasingly nuanced understandings of racism, it appears that academic discourse is relatively marginal to the popular understanding of racial issues. Recasting



what constitutes racism has become a powerful weapon in the arsenal of those who oppose the movement toward racial justice and who are willing to accept (and benefit from) the status quo. At the same time, the persistence of a “structural racism” counterideology (and the academic roots of several quotes cited above) suggests that academic work can have an influence. If this evolution of racial discourse is to be challenged, then antiracist academics must challenge color-blind racial ideology not only in the classroom, but also in community forums and in the popular media. Without such challenges, the ideological underpinnings of American racism will become stronger and the struggle for racial justice will become immeasurably more difficult.

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