

Paving the Way for Future Race Research: Exploring the Racial Mechanisms Within a Color-Blind, Racialized Social System

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Abstract

In a day when many are fatigued with discourse on racism, discrimination, and inequality but others face a socially and politically trenchant White backlash against the gains of the civil rights movement, race scholars are faced with the complex scenario in which they must simultaneously articulate (1) what, when, and where racism operates to exercise both deleterious and advantageous effects on differently racialized actors and (2) exactly why and how racism (especially its “color-blind” variant) functions toward the reproduction of the racialized social system. While scholarship on the former is well rehearsed, we see this special issue as a clarion call for new scholarship to interrogate the precise mechanisms by which color-blind racism and the racialized social system operate. New work on mechanisms gestures (at the least) toward the three directions laid out in this issue: the axiological (the study of values), ontological (the study of being), and epistemological (the study of knowledge) dimensions of social life. Race scholars would be well served to illumine how color-blind racism and the racialized social system hold specific properties and processes by which values, being, and knowledge function intimately and integrally.

Keywords

color-blind racism, racialized social system, mechanisms

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The “Racialized Social System” and “Color-Blind Racism” Paradigm

Since Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s (1997) *American Sociological Review* publication of “Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation,” the social scientific study of race has scrutinized, debated, and largely embraced an understanding of racism as a material and structural phenomenon, rather than merely a set of outmoded or ignorant beliefs, attitudes, and ideas. Accordingly, and in taking the lead from Bonilla-Silva’s structural emphasis, many researchers now focus on six key dimensions of a racialized social system: (1) racism is a normal feature, and result, of racialized societies; (2) racism is not static and varies in both form and location to befuddle longitudinal analysis of either “decline” or “improvement” in racial animus; (3) racism is not viewed as irrational or ignorant but as rational elements on which racialized systems of stratifications are built and rationalized; (4) racial inequality is not a historical residue of a racist past but a complex weave of historical and contemporary social practices; (5) racism is not simply an ideology but is embedded in networks of interactional relationships; and (6) racism can be overt and direct just as much as it can exist in subtle, indirect, and “color-blind” fashion.

Expounding on the latter point of “color-blind racism,” the 2001 publication of *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* and the 2003 publication of Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (now in its fourth edition in 12 years) have delved into the ideological edifice that protects and rationalizes structural racial inequality and racism in an age increasingly hailed as “postracial.” But “color-blind racism” is not a one-dimensional ideology. Rather, Bonilla-Silva identifies four mental models or “frames” in which it manifests. First, “abstract liberalism” relies on ill-formed notions of “equal opportunity” to explain the racial status quo. The use of the “language of liberalism,” exemplified by the assertion “I am all for equal opportunity, that’s why I oppose affirmative action,” allows people to argue against all measures to eradicate de facto racial inequality, while seeming reasonable and moral.¹ Second, “naturalization” is a strategy employed to explain away the current state of racial inequality as “just the way things are”; the frame is used to rationalize segregation and inequality as a natural, and thus a supposedly “nonracial,” occurrence. Third, the “cultural racism” frame, illustrated in the comment “Blacks have too many babies,” explains the status of non-Whites as a product of cultural deficiencies such as a lack of morals and values or the inability to delay gratification and thus not as the result of White racism. Last, the frame of “minimization,” reflected in comments such as “It’s better now than in the past” or “There is discrimination, but there are plenty of jobs out there,” downplays the significance that race continues to play in the slow march of progress toward equality that people of color in the United States experience. Together, these frames (and other dynamics of “color blindness”) provide ideological legitimation for both a range of racialized practices and the persistence of racial inequality.

Growth and Limitations

Over the past two decades, an explosion of scholarship theoretically anchored by the concepts of “racialized social system” and “color-blind racism” has done well to examine the supposedly “color-blind” strategies employed to rationalize and legitimate the continued second-class status of people of color, particularly African Americans. This work has captured scholarly attention—on par with Omi and Winant’s (1994) famous “racial formation” thesis, Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith’s (1997) conception of “laissez-faire racism,” Feagin’s “systemic racism,” or Tarman and Sears’s (2005) work on “symbolic racism”; see also Carr’s work on “colour-blind racism.” *Racialized social system* and *color-blind racism* have emerged as the crown jewels of Bonilla-Silva’s paradigm; by early 2014 a Google Scholar search of the terms returns over 130,000 and 21,000 results, respectively, and *Racism Without Racists* has been cited over 2,000 times.

That corpus of work is an array of interdisciplinary social scientific scholarship. Such work, among other tasks, implicitly sets color-blind racism as inextricably linked to modern racial discrimination and inequality. This approach provides a theoretical description of color-blind racism’s role in the reproduction of a larger system of racial inequity—a racialized social system. For many, both the “racialized social system” and “color-blind racism” feed the deep and dark forest that is the continued significance of race and racism. However, while it is important to see that forest, we should not miss the trees that constitute it. Thus, ironically, while attention has been paid to the interlocking and mutually reinforcing structure of racial inequality and color-blind racism, fewer scholars have empirically investigated the *operation* of the supposed causal social, political, psychological, institutional, economic, and/or ideological mechanisms that mediate the relationship between the frames of “color-blind racism” and the material realities of the “racialized social system.”

While we now possess a view of *who* is more or less likely to employ the frames of color-blind racism (e.g. Hagerman, 2014; Neville, Worthington, & Spanierman, 2001; Vargas, 2014), *when* color-blind strategies assist in the (re)production of the racialized social system (e.g. Burke, 2012; Neville, Coleman, Falconer, & Holmes, 2005; Stoll, 2013), and *where* the frames of color-blind racism exist in relation to a racialized social system (e.g., Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008), we possess less clarity as to *why* and *how* this supposed causal relationship (between color-blind ideology and racially unequal material conditions) exists.

The theoretical mapping of color-blind racism has far outpaced the empirical investigations for how and why color-blind racism possesses its supposed causal power (cf. McDermott & Samson, 2005). And empirical investigations have often applied the theory, post hoc, to racialized dynamics (cf. Carr, 1997; Quiroz, 2007; Wise, 2013). Hence, an important criticism of “racialized social system” and “color-blind racism” involves the empirical and causal grounding on which the claims are made (cf. Hartmann, Gerteis, & Croll, 2009; Neville, Awad, Brooks, Flores, & Bluemel, 2013; Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000) and how color-blind racism may intersect with other indices.² This problem cuts two ways. On one hand, the lack of concrete

supporting evidence and analysis of the argument of causality allows skeptics to easily dismiss the scholarship as either ideologically driven or sloppy, resulting in the work's marginalization from the sociological mainstream. Simultaneously, data limitations and the problem of measurement-by-proxy that engulfs concepts such as "color blindness" mean that many supporters lean too heavily on the crutch of theoretical assumptions. Together, this Scylla and Charybdis threaten to impede the ability the field of race and ethnicity to clarify and extend the claims advanced by Bonilla-Silva (1997, 2001, 2013). Hence, this dilemma leaves us with the question: What are the racial mechanisms that mitigate the relationship between color-blind racism and the racialized social system?

The Search for Explanatory Racial Mechanisms

Sociology is an attempt to answer the fundamental problems of action and order—why do people act in certain ways and why do their actions exhibit certain patterns? Accordingly, the sociologically grounded theory of color-blind racism implicitly sets itself up as the answer to the problem of racial inequality. Why is there racial inequality (or "racism without racists") in a "postracial" society? The answer: Because people employ one or more color-blind frames (e.g., "abstract liberalism," "naturalization," "cultural racism," "minimization") to rationalize, legitimate, and thereby (re)produce a social order of stratification based on race.³ If we infer causality, then the theory seems to fit an array of data, from recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions (Walsh, 2004) to employment discrimination (Berry & Bonilla-Silva, 2008) to religious practice (Hearn 2009). But that arrangement is not enough. While color-blind racism might appear to walk hand in hand with the racialized social structure, we have not yet reached closure on empirically delineating *how* or *why* color-blind racism might (or might not) direct human action and order toward the (re)production of racial inequality. Additionally, how might the structural arrangements of inequality create the ideological contours of color-blind racism? Moreover, might the relationship between color-blind racism and racial inequality exist as a kind of Meadian "feedback loop" (Lundgren, 2004) in which one reproduces the other as semiautonomous? Lack of answers to these questions necessarily gestures toward the importance of specifying the precise *mechanisms* that operate within the relationship between color-blind racism and racial inequality. But such a claim begs the question: What is a mechanism?

What Exactly Do Social Scientists Mean by "Mechanism?"

Following Hedström and Ylikoski (2010), we understand a "mechanism" as the constellation of properties and actions of entities and activities that are organized to regularly bring about a particular type of outcome, and by which we may explain an observed outcome by referring to the precise and specific interactions that occur. A mechanism is the structure (micro, meso, or macro) that links the *explanans* and *explanandum*. It sounds simple enough, but a great deal of scholarship avoids this quest.⁴ Perhaps still reeling from the Parsonian shadow of yesteryear, much of the

application of concepts in the sociology of race and ethnicity rests on the describing and predicting a phenomenon rather than explaining it. Accordingly, our approach should not be confused with a narrow focus on describing or predicting a chain of events that proceed from one situation to another.

We have an observed relationship between color-blind racism (C) and racial inequality (R). To explain the relationship between them, we search for a mechanism (M), which in the presence of C generates R as the outcome. Drawing from Hedström and Swedberg (1998) social action and order proceed from how “macro-level events or conditions affect the individual (Step 1), how the individual assimilates the impact of these macro-level events (Step 2), and how a number of individuals, through their actions and interactions, generate macro-level outcomes (Step 3)” (pp. 21-22). Bonilla-Silva’s work (1997, 2001, 2013) aligns with this approach, in that he established how macro-level events (structural racial inequality) affect the individual (stratification through privilege and discrimination) and a general trend in how individuals assimilate the impact of these events (color-blind ideology) which then rationalizes and, hence, reproduces the macro level outcome (structural racial inequality).

Explaining Explanatory Mechanisms

Now on the heels of an important decade and a half of scholarship that has mapped the contours of covariation between C and R (description) and intellectual labor that has employed models to calculate how likely it is that R, given C, will occur (prediction), we now stand at the frontier of new ground that remains fertile with explaining *why* and *how* C and R remain linked.⁵ As Merton (1968) professed in *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1968), part of the goal of sociology is to identify how mechanisms “come into being, so that we can also explain why the mechanisms do not operate effectively or fail to emerge at all in some social systems” (p. 43).

We are not naive in our call for a focus on explanatory mechanisms. Given the complexity of social behavior, this has always been a challenge for sociology. In the case of the relationship between color-blind ideology and racial inequality, the search for solid explanations is fraught with problems given the collective denial that race matters—which is ironically a problem for both observation and data collection and the very phenomena of “color-blind racism” that is the topic of inquiry. Moreover, the positivism of American sociology has engendered what may be a fool’s errand to retrieve definite causal variables of human action and order. Hence, in *What’s Wrong With Sociology*, Cole (2001) writes,

What is to be observed and understood is a meaning system and its implications. Most of the “brute facts” that are subject to enumeration in positivistic social science gain their force because of the cultural/social meanings in which the subjects of social science participate . . . Explanation in the causal sense must give way to, or be embedded in, hermeneutic unveiling and interpretation. (p. 132)

That is, what will be an adequate explanation for some will not be adequate for others, simply because an explanation is a triadic relation in which A explains B to C (cf.

Martin, 2011). The criteria for an adequate explanation depend on what sort of knowledge we are after. It is one thing if we want a theory about who, when, and where color-blind racism and a racialized social system are preconditions of one or the other. But we now request to know more about *why* and *how* color-blind racism relates to a social system based on race.⁶ Ignoring specific social mechanisms necessarily leads to vague or erroneous causal models. Too much work has inferred causality without specifying the mechanisms at work. Given that specificity is the sine qua non of effective policy recommendations, practical implementation, and a pillar in the temple of social science, the work within this issue of *American Behavioral Scientist* provides both an overview of explanatory mechanisms and a blueprint for new and future research in the study of racial ideology and racism in the United States.

Providing a Blueprint for Future Race Research

In his 2001 book, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Bonilla-Silva challenged race scholars to empirically test his “racialized social system” theoretical framework, specifically the mechanisms that inform the political, economic, ideological, psychological, and social realms of our social world. Although Bonilla-Silva partly answered his own challenge with his follow up research on color-blind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2000, 2003; Bonilla-Silva & Ashe 2014; Bonilla-Silva & Lewis 1999), there is still much work to be done, particular in the other contours of American life.

This issue is organized by coverage of three specific areas: (1) everyday discourse, (2) identity formation and interaction, and (3) the practice of science, genomics, and racial bias. We picked these three areas based on the extant scholars who are presently conducting research on color-blind racism and/or the racialized social system and these areas and to cover three different forms of social relationships.⁷

Overview of Articles in This Issue

Leading off this special issue, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva presents an overview of his theorization on racial matters, specifically his work on “new racism,” “color-blind racism,” and the “racialized social system” theoretical framework. Central to this article is the argument that sociology (and specifically sociology on race and ethnicity) has up until the 1990s lacked a systemic, structural understanding of the existence of a “racial regime” in post-civil rights America (that is useful to scholars and laypersons alike) for examining or contemplating current or past race matters—for example, recent race riots in Ferguson, Baltimore, and elsewhere as a result of the systematic killing of Brown and Black bodies by the police. This has left many Whites, and even some minorities, thinking that racism is merely a matter of individual prejudice. The dangers in that assumption mean that structural racism often gets overlooked or underexamined. Thus it becomes really easy for race matters in America to get explained away as something else—see, for example, Bobo et al.’s (1997) research on Laissez-Faire Racism. The reality of the matter is that rather than going “beyond race” in the 21st

century, race and racism in the United States are just as prevalent today as during Jim Crow apartheid.

The first section of this issue, *Racial Attitudes and Racial Discourse*, begins with two seemingly different research articles that both explore notions of color-blind racism: on the Internet and with regard to student attitudes. Everyday discourse relates to the synthesis of the micro and macro levels of society through language and attitudes. By examining the relationship between the structures of text, talk, language use, and verbal interaction or communication and how social, political, or cultural macro structures and patterns are reproduced or contested, we can gain purchase on the precise discursive styles, procedures, and axiological mechanisms that underlay the operation of color-blind racism. Daniels's article provides insight on three distinct ways in which color-blind racism shapes everything about the Internet from the human composition of the tech industry to the way that the Internet is used and even how the Internet is studied. Contrary to the idea that the Internet is color blind or that the tech industry tends to be more progressive on race issues, Daniels provides evidence to suggest contrary. Similarly, the idea that today's youth represent the most progressive, tolerant, and open-minded generation to date is put to the test in Forman and Lewis's article. They find that contrary to previous research that suggests that racial prejudice has declined in the past several decades, they suggest, building on earlier works on color-blind racism, that subtle forms of prejudice have become more prevalent than their overt counterparts.

In the second section, *Interactional Identity Formation*, our contributors examine the relation of ontology via *identity* and *interactional expectations* to color-blind racism, interrogating how claims to being—that is, how the expectations and accountabilities of membership in particular racial identities—exert structural force on those that claim particular racial identities. Moreover, this block of articles examines how the ontological ascription of race still leaves open how individuals can respond to racial categorization by ignoring race in “color-blind” fashion, by adopting or shunning cultural practices that supposedly correspond to a racial identity, or by mobilizing identity to challenge racial oppression or reproduce it. Douglas, Saenz, and Murga highlight how contemporary immigration policies and practices serves as racial mechanisms in a racialized social system. Specifically, they note that in a color-blind racial society, overtly racist language has been replaced by “code words” that serve as proxies to highlight *others* who have no place in this society. Words such as “immigrants” or “undocumented illegals” give voice and power to the majority group (White) while allowing social and even legal justification for discrimination toward minority groups. As McDermott argues in her article in this issue, although there may be variations in how Whites identify themselves (e.g., claiming “White” as an *ethnic* identity), at the end of the day the ways in which they think about race and engage in color-blind racism are similar.

Our last section, *The Practice of Science and Genomics*, examines the epistemological contours of color-blind racism and bias in the practice of science, particularly in the developing field of genetics. Specifically, how and why are reports of specific racial differences in genetic bases of disease or phenotype often correlated with social

implications as if they are natural and objective facts? Joseph Graves's article, "Why the Nonexistence of Biological Races Does Not Mean the Nonexistence of Racism," heads this section with an overview of the nature of human biological variation. His main argument is that while human biological variations have nothing to do with racial discrimination faced by minorities in the United States, there are still real biological consequences for being a member in a socially defined racial category. Williams's article highlights the fact that color blindness ideology has significantly affected research in the field of science and genomics. He notes the dangers of scholarship in which racial assumptions are made in terms of the projects that scientists choose to take on and even the methods and knowledge they employ in their research. Finally, Dovidio, Gaertner, and Saguy review the literature on implicit racial biases and discuss the connections between color-blind racism and Whites' racial attitudes.

Where Do We Go From Here? The Challenge for Race Scholars and Race Scholarship

In a day when many are fatigued with discourse on racism, discrimination, and inequality but others face a socially and politically trenchant White backlash against the gains of the civil rights movement (cf. Hughey, 2014), race scholars are faced with the complex scenario in which they must simultaneously articulate (1) what, when, and where racism operates to exercise both deleterious and advantageous effects on differently racialized actors and (2) exactly why and how racism (especially its "color-blind" variant) functions toward the reproduction of the racialized social system. While scholarship on the former is well rehearsed, we see this special issue as a clarion call for new scholarship to interrogate the precise mechanisms by which color-blind racism and the racialized social system operate.

New work on mechanisms gestures (at the least) toward the three directions laid out in this issue: the axiological (the study of values), ontological (the study of being), and epistemological (the study of knowledge) dimensions of social life (cf. Machamer, Darden, & Craver 2000). This means, drawing from the philosophy of science, that we see the field taking on what Elster (1989) proposed:

To explain an event is to give an account of why it happened. Usually . . . this takes the form of citing an earlier event as the cause of the event we want to explain . . . [But] to cite the cause is not enough: the causal mechanism must also be provided, or at least suggested. (pp. 3-4)

Hence, race scholars would be well served to illumine how color-blind racism and the racialized social system hold specific properties and processes by which values, being, and knowledge function intimately and integrally.

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Notes

1. Bonilla-Silva's reference here is to classical or Enlightenment era "liberalism" with its emphasis on individual liberty, universal rights (which were not extended to racialized minorities), and "free" markets.
2. As Bonilla-Silva (2015) himself remarks,

On this, the empirical work of Nakano-Glenn (1992, 2002) and the methodological observations of McCall (2005) may prove pivotal in shifting directions and forcing all of us to dig deeper theoretically so that we can make predictions about when, where, and why X category will be more salient than Y and Z. (p. 83)

3. In his 2003 book, *Racism Without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva outlines four central racial frames that are commonly used to make sense of the social world in which they live. Although Bonilla-Silva limited his research on color-blind ideology to these four frames, it is also important to note that he never suggested that these were the *only* racial frames that Whites (and some minorities) employed in a racialized social system. Rather, these four frames represent major patterns that he uncovered in the data sets he examined at the time of publication (i.e., Detroit Area Study and Survey of Social Attitudes of College Students).
4. More to the point, many race (and other) scholars fail to adequately explain what they mean by *mechanism* in their research. Instead, such scholars assume that readers will make sense of how they are using the term even if the term is misused or the author fails to adequately explain a racial phenomenon beyond that of making predictions about how and why race matters in our lives.
5. Many argue that once the proportion of variance in the dependent variable (X) is "explained" by the independent variable (Y ; the R^2 approaches 1.0), then the relationship between X and Y is well explained. However, we follow John Levi Martin (2011) who writes,

The basic understanding of what it means to explain is formally parallel to the thinking denounced by Marx and Engels: first variables are made out of people, and then the actions of the people are 'explained' on the basis of the variables. This is no explanation at all. (p. 326)

6. Wesley Salmon (1984) argues that causal processes, causal interactions, and causal laws provide the mechanisms by which the world works; to understand *why* certain things happen, we need to see *how* they are produced by these mechanisms.
7. We recognize that these areas represent only a fraction of research yet to be discovered and that meets the scope and fit of what we have outlined in this special issue. However, given the limitations we had to work with, we wanted to showcase areas we felt were hot topics or largely underrecognized.

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