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# ILLUMINATING SOCIAL LIFE

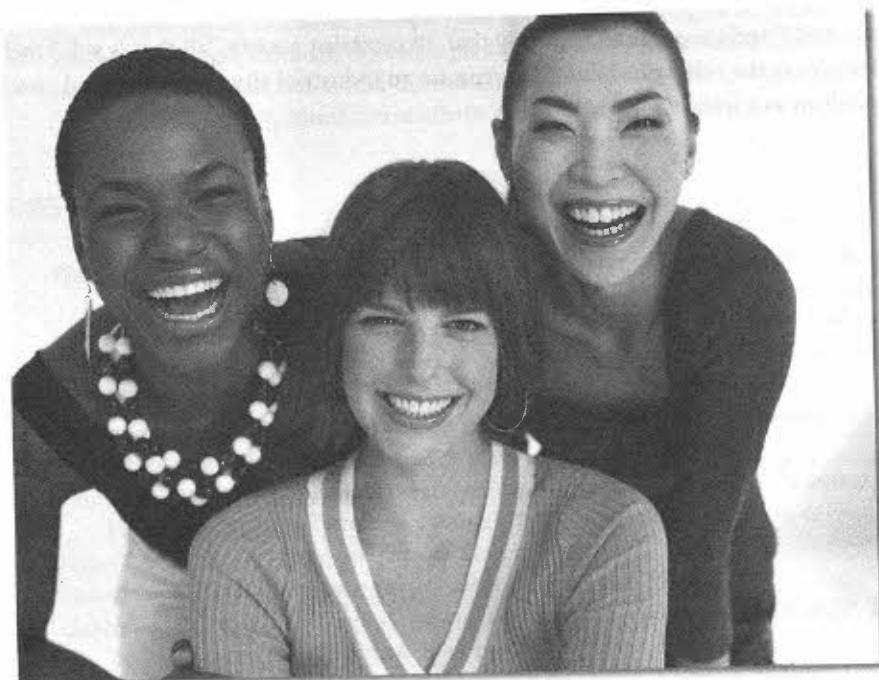## Classical and Contemporary Theory Revisited

### FIFTH EDITION

## PETER KIVISTO

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# Race-Based Critical Theory and the "Happy Talk" of Diversity in America

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## Introduction: Critical Theory and Conventional Social Science

Much sociological research, writing, and theory tries to describe and explain the social world as accurately, completely, and objectively as possible—identifying key

social groups and institutions, documenting norms and cultural beliefs, measuring social forces, mapping relationships and the distribution of resources as well as patterns of continuity and change, and so on. In this vision, the social scientist and social theorist is usually conceived of (or conceives her- or himself) as a detached, objective observer whose goal is to provide a neutral, unbiased picture of how things really are. The information and insight produced by such an approach may (and often does) have broader social value and practical application; nevertheless, it is not the job of the social analyst to ensure that this is the case.

Critical theory has a much different, almost diametrically opposed, orientation and objective.[1] In contrast to conventional social thinking, critical social analysis takes as its starting point the understanding that social scientists are always part of the world(s) they are trying to depict and analyze. Rather than trying to set aside or overcome their particular position and corresponding viewpoints, critical theorists believe it is best to acknowledge their orientation and incorporate it into their analytical vision of the social world. The recognition of one's own positionality is not seen as a weakness but a strength; indeed, it is believed that self-conscious, systematic attention to one's own standpoint provides a clear perspective from which one can better describe, analyze, and apprehend the social world taken as a whole.

A critical theoretical perspective is not just any old point of view, however. At least two characteristics set a critical theoretical perspective apart from the opinions and viewpoints of everyday, ordinary people. One is that it is—or at least tries to be—wholistic or systemic; that is, it strives to be aware of itself and its relationship to others as well as attentive to a vision of society as a whole. Such a vision is, in other words, formulated in the context of the broader social world that it is trying to comprehend and of which it is part and parcel. A critical theoretical orientation is also (and this is the second defining characteristic) explicitly normative, evaluative, or moralistic. In sociology, the ethical orientation most often associated with critical theory focuses on inequality, oppression, and exploitation. But the key point is that a critical theory is guided by a set of principles, a moral vision of what is good, right, and appropriate in society as well as where the problems are and how things might be made better, more equitable, just, or sustainable. Its analysis is, in short, predicated on a comparative moral sense of how things might be different.

As an alternative vision of society, critical social theory regularly breaks with the conscious understanding and awareness of members of society themselves, especially those in positions of power and privilege. This ability to be critical of how things are and how different people in society understand and interpret their own role in the world is one of the defining characteristics and real strengths of social scientific research informed by critical theory. Critical theory also often delves into the silences, commonsense assumptions, or unseen forces and processes that organize, structure, and reproduce the status quo as we know it. It urges analysts to see things that are otherwise taken for granted; see through ideas and arrangements that otherwise seem rational or defensible; and call out claims that perpetuate—often unintentionally—problems, inequalities, and injustices. It isn't afraid, to use Eviatar Zerubavel's (2006) provocative metaphor, to call out the elephants in the room.

Extending from this, critical theoretical work also tends to be oriented toward activism and social change. With the well-known aphorism that social analysis is not

only to understand the world but to change it, the more political, activist side of critical theory's orientation to change is probably what gets the most attention (and both of us have been involved with organizations, initiatives, and movements whose goals are to make the world a better place). But whether or not one is directly involved in making social change, the attention to change as an object of analysis serves a key analytical function. (And both of us have done plenty of this as well—Hartmann wrote a book on African American athletes who contributed to the struggle for racial justice and equality in the 1960s; Bell is writing a book on African American social workers who sought changes in their own professions in the 1970s). Studying movements like these helps us figure out not just how the social world is organized but *why* it is that way—the historical forces and social mechanisms that continue to make and shape the world as it is. Even to theorists who do not see themselves as activists per se, the analytical attention to movements and change provides a fuller, more concrete understandings of the mechanisms, processes, and forces that have made and continue to maintain the social status quo.

In its earliest social scientific manifestations, critical theory was largely focused on the inequalities generated by market-based, capitalist economies. It was, in short, all about class—economic-based exploitation, oppression, and stratification. Indeed, throughout the second half of the 20th century, the phrase "critical theory" was essentially synonymous with Marxism itself, the very term having been invented by German socialist critics such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who had fled Nazi Germany for the United States, where Marxist thought was about as popular as fascism. Despite the fact that early critical theory was inattentive to race, the basic tenets of critical theory began to be expanded and reworked to apply to other forms of social inequality and oppression in response to the social unrest and tumult of the 1960s in the United States and all over the world. Feminist theory, queer theory, postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, and intersectional (race-class-gender) analyses are all examples of more contemporary manifestations of critical theory.

In this chapter, we address one of the major strands of this thought, what we will call *race-based critical theory*. A race-based critical theory can be defined as critical theory that puts race—not just racial injustices and inequalities but racial ideologies and identities as well as racialized ways of thinking about and rationalizing existing social arrangements more generally—at the forefront of its analytic lens onto the social world. It starts from the presupposition that the modern world is organized by and structured through race, both as a principle for the (unequal) distribution of resources and power as well as a mode for thinking about culture and social life in general. It further insists that the racial organization of society and culture is neither just nor inevitable, and that the task of the social analyst is to identify, explicate, and deconstruct the often unseen or misunderstood social processes and cultural beliefs that maintain existing racial formations and inequalities. Its ultimate goals are to better understand the beliefs and processes that reproduce these inequalities and injustices and that would necessarily, then, be the target of challenge.

In what follows, we will further discuss the basic characteristics of this brand of critical theory, along with some of the scholars and scholarly bodies of work that

have contributed to it. We pay special attention to the underlying cultural beliefs and ways of thinking and talking about race that account for the persistence and perpetuation of racial differences and inequalities in an era that often promotes itself as and appears to be thoroughly antiracism. To illustrate and further develop these insights, we will draw upon a recent study we conducted of the seemingly positive and upbeat ways Americans have of talking about diversity in social life. Informed by race-based critical theory and interviews with 150 Americans in four different metropolitan areas, we argue that the discourse of diversity—what we call "happy talk"—obscures the difficulties and deep inequalities associated with race in contemporary American society. It serves these functions, we further suggest, because of the color-blind ideals and white normativity underlying these ostensibly positive ways of thinking and talking. These findings and analyses not only help us understand the racial structure and function of the diversity discourse, they constitute key components of contemporary race-based critical theory.

# Race-Based Critical Theory: Some Basics

Working from the basic definition offered above, we can break down race-based critical theory into four key components or propositions: (a) Race is a defining and foundational feature of modern society; (b) current racial arrangements and relationships are inequitable and unjust; (c) racial differences and inequalities are constructed in social relationships and not reducible to other forms of stratification; and (d) contemporary racial formations are maintained and reproduced through cultural mechanisms and social processes that are subtle and systemic, and often difficult for ordinary, even well-meaning people to appreciate and comprehend.

We will begin with the proposition that race is a fundamental and defining feature of modern social life. The idea here is that race and racism are deeply ingrained in modern world history and contemporary social life, in terms of both how they organize social relationships and the distribution of resources as well as how they structure culture and consciousness and how modern people think about themselves and the world around them. This latter emphasis on race's deep impacts on culture is one of the features that marks race-based critical theory as unique and uniquely challenging among scholarly conceptions of race. For example, the critical race theorists who came out of legal studies programs and law schools in the late 1980s and early 1990s (and helped launch race-based critical theory) argued that racial ideologies were indeed constitutive of American conceptions of the law and social justice. More specifically, they worked to demonstrate that ostensibly meritocratic, universalistic individualist ideals of fairness and ownership were based upon the worldviews and privileges of white male property owners (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Philosophers such as David Theo Goldberg (1993) took the idea even further, arguing that racial ideologies and distinctions actually played a crucial role in the emergence of modernity itself, creating the social justifications for Enlightenment and its social and political conceptions of progress, freedom, rationality, and science.

To a certain extent, this claim that race and racism structure so much of modern life so thoroughly is an ethical proposition, a critical, orientating presupposition on modern history and contemporary social life. But it is also more than that. In fact, it is an empirical claim as much as an ethical assertion, a claim based upon both the facts of history (colonialism and apartheid in the international context; slavery, Jim Crow laws, and segregation on the American side) as well as the realities of contemporary social life, realities that systematically privilege whites over non-whites, Westerners over non-Westerners. On this latter front in particular, critical theory meets up with and draws upon conventional social science, which has clearly and convincingly documented racial inequalities and disparities across a whole range of social domains. In the United States, for instance, researchers have shown that African American men are eight times more likely than their white peers to be imprisoned (Latino men are incarcerated at four times the white male rate). Blacks and Latinos suffer poverty rates nearly three times that of the white majority, with nearly one in three of the children from these groups living in poverty. Individuals from these communities suffer from lower wages and higher rates of unemployment and underemployment, and they have significantly less wealth in their family networks to support their lives and sustain them in difficult times. People of color are far more likely to live in segregated neighborhoods and attend segregated schools. Minority kids also lag well behind their majority peers in terms of academic achievement—whether measured in terms of test scores, grades, performance on standardized tests, dropout rates, graduation rates, or likelihood of college attendance and completion.[2]

The second characteristic of race-based critical theory—that the current racial arrangements are inequitable and unjust—might seem like an obvious and easy point, one that should merit little or no controversy. But this relative absence of contention and debate in the contemporary culture is, in many respects, precisely the problem for the critical theorist. In the aftermath of the successes of the American civil rights movement and the end of colonialism in the 1960s, and the collapse of apartheid more recently, we live in a world that almost universally disavows racism, racial prejudice, and discrimination, and at times almost any form of racial differentiation or distinction. And yet racial inequities and injustices persist and are pervasive in the United States and all over the world. How can this be? The challenge and objective of race-based critical theory is to try to answer this question—to grasp how and why racial inequalities and injustices can be so pervasive in the face of social transformations that eliminated and discredited the most egregious legal systems and institutional structures that had maintained rigid racial hierarchies throughout the world. This paradoxical social context constitutes the crux of the critical theoretical challenge and the heart of the enterprise—and helps explain why race-based critical theory has really exploded as an intellectual force in recent decades.

The starting point for answering the paradox of a world that disavows race and racism, on one hand, and is yet marked so decisively by racial differences and inequalities on the other, brings us to the third core aspect of race-based critical theory—namely, the recognition that racial identities and inequalities are not natural or inevitable but constructed in social relationships and by social forces that

are independent of other forms of social stratification. The idea that race is a social construction is not unique to race-based critical theory; indeed, most racial scholars today are unanimous in the belief that racial categories, identities, and differences are not natural or inevitable but are instead the product of historical forces and social processes (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007). However, several characteristics distinguish the critical theorists' thinking on this topic. One is the basic attention to causation and causal mechanisms.

For all its talk of social construction, and as effective as mainstream social science has been in documenting racial injustices and inequalities, it has not been particularly successful in explaining the sources of these patterns. One of the reasons for this failure involves a relative tendency, often defended under the guise of scientific objectivity, to focus on individual actions and beliefs as the proper unit of sociological data and analysis—to look for overt racial bias and intent, on one hand, and concerted individual action on the other.[3] In the case of race relations, however, such models often overlook the more complicated, insidious, and structural forces behind the production and perpetuation of racial differences and inequalities. For instance, Omi and Winant's (1994) influential racial formation theory highlighted how movements and programs intended to alleviate racial inequalities in American society were often co-opted by more conservative interests and actors in ways that muted their effects or even manipulated them into having effects entirely the opposite of their original intent.

And then there is the challenge of understanding how race is constructed in social relationships. With its emphasis on race relations, sociology has long been a leader in thinking about race as relationships between different groups of people— where questions of inequality always necessarily imply privilege as well as disadvantage, domination as well as subordination. Nevertheless, mainstream sociology too often thinks about race or racial inequality as the problem of a minority or disadvantaged community, rather than the result of a particular set of historical relationships and arrangements that benefits some even as it disadvantages others (Emirbayer, 1997). With its emphasis on critique and attention to oppression, domination, and injustice, race-based critical theory always puts these unequal relationships front and center in thinking about what accounts for racial differences and inequalities (see also Desmond & Emirbayer, 2010).

Another, subtler reason for the inability of conventional social science to fully grasp and explain the social construction of race in contemporary social life has to do with the tendency to see race as "epiphenomenal," the by-product of other social forces or inequalities such as class or nationalism. Many scholars from a variety of theoretical traditions (critical and otherwise) have attempted to explain the power and persistence of race and racial inequalities in terms of their connection with other forms of injustice and exploitation—seeing race and racism as a function of class-based inequities, for example, or the product of power differentials between nations where the racial order of societies has been unfortunately mapped onto the history of national expansion all over the world. Such perspectives are important. Race and racism are, indeed, related to and often interrelated with other forms of inequality and oppression (class, nationalism, gender), but they cannot be reduced to these forms and forces. Racialized patterns need to be analyzed, explained, and

understood in ways that do not reduce racial inequalities to the by-product of other social forces as well as ways that grapple with the often unseen and invisible forces that reproduce them. Thus, the point is to figure out the unique mechanisms and processes that collude and cohere to create racial differences and inequalities as unique and irreducible social phenomena.

This brings us to the fourth and arguably most important point about contemporary race-based critical theory in the contemporary world—that racial formations are reproduced in ways and through processes that are subtle and systemic, yet difficult for ordinary, even well-meaning people to see. This point harkens back to the insistence that a critical orientation is especially important in the post-civil rights, post-colonial, post-apartheid context. In the so-called absence of legal de jure inequality, it is essential to understand the social mechanisms and forces that account for the continued perpetuation of racial injustices and inequalities. In the context of national and global cultures that appear to no longer be tolerant of unequal racial arrangements, it is critical to focus on mechanisms of production and reproduction, especially those that escape the attention and understanding of the agents themselves who act them out. Indeed, this is precisely why we got interested in the strange way in which so many Americans seemed to be talking about difference and diversity in American culture in such seemingly positive and optimistic ways. We became suspicious of such empty positive language about difference in a society that we see as at least partially founded and structured on racial inequality.

A key point in all of these elements is that racial hierarchies are not just reproduced in the contemporary world by old-fashioned prejudice and discrimination (where prejudice can be defined as beliefs about racial difference and inferiority, and discrimination involves activities and behaviors that produce and reproduce racial inequalities). Rather, racial inequalities are maintained and reproduced within institutional structures and cultural ways of thinking that allow race and racism to be reproduced whether or not individuals see it (see Table 8.1).

## Mechanisms of Racial Reproduction

Probably the most typical, mainstream explanation for persistent racial inequalities and injustice has to do with overt prejudice and explicit discrimination—the persistence of overt racial biases against people of certain races and behaviors that translate into differential treatments and behaviors and thus eventually disparate outcomes. To be sure, prejudice and discrimination still exist. However, they cannot fully explain the persistence of contemporary racial formations. The problem with these traditional explanations for accounting for race in the contemporary world is twofold. On one hand, it appears that many of the most blatant forms of prejudice and discrimination have declined precipitously and are no longer legally or socially acceptable. On the other hand, to the extent that older, more traditional forms of prejudice and discrimination live on—which they do—it is difficult to collect data and information to verify and analyze them. For example, it has been noted that it is difficult to measure prejudice on attitudinal surveys (Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997). People know how to respond to such

**Table 8.1**   Key Contributors to Race-Based Critical Theory

| Body of Work | Core Insights | Key Theorists |
|---|---|---|
| Critical race theory | • Race is central to U.S. law and policy<br>• Racial inequalities are reproduced in and through strict adherence to individualist, universalistic standards of fairness<br>• Interest is in studying and transforming race/racism and standards of justice | Derrick Bell, Kimberle Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, David Theo Goldberg, Neil Gotanda, Cheryl Harris, Ian Haney Lopez, Patricia Williams |
| Racial formation theory | • Race is socially constructed and continually reproduced<br>• The content and importance of racial categories are determined by social, economic, and political forces<br>• Social programs are often co-opted and rearticulated by forces of status quo | Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) |
| Color-blind racism framework | • Adherence to color-blind ideals gets in the way of clear thinking and social policy addressing contemporary racial inequalities<br>• Racism in the post-civil rights era is increasingly covert and expressed through an ideology that purports to be race neutral | Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2003), Leslie Carr (1997), Charles Gallagher (2003) |
| Critical whiteness studies | • Whiteness is normalized in U.S. culture in a way that masks the real sources of inequality and maintains white privilege<br>• White people are the beneficiaries of racial privilege | Joe Feagin (2006), Ruth Frankenberg (1993), Henry Giroux (1997), George Lipsitz (1998), Peggy McIntosh (1989), Toni Morrison (1992), David Roediger (1991, 2002) |

questions now, in ways that are socially acceptable. Folks won't admit to or acknowledge their biases in polite public company, much less the company of liberal researchers. In other words, precisely because the most direct and traditional forms of racism have been socially discredited, they have gone underground. This is where some basic, critical thinking comes in to much standard research on racial inequalities.

One response to this on the part of researchers has been to ask questions about race designed to reveal and expose more deeply rooted racial prejudices, biases, and stereotypes. For example, social thermometer scales, where respondents are asked about how warm or cold they feel toward different groups of people, or questions about racial intermarriage for one's kids, measure how different or far away from various groups an individual feels and can serve as a proxy for underlying bias. A related methodological response is to pit the ideals of majority white respondents against their support for social policies or programs. In this line of research, analysts ask not only about beliefs about racial others but also about respondents' willingness to support social programs based on their own stated principles or ideals. For example, in the 1980s, researchers such as Larry Bobo (1988) asked respondents questions that gauged their support for affirmative action as a proxy for underlying racial stereotypes or attitudes. More recently, Bobo and his colleagues (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997) interpreted blasé attitudes toward public policy as a kind of laissez-faire racism, stemming from an unwillingness to support social programs that would make good on their expressed ideals as well as subtle, unspoken, anti-black biases and sentiments. In many ways, such methods are predicated upon critical theories about race—an analysis that assumes that persons with no bias or prejudice would not exhibit racialized patterns. Thus, when such attitudinal patterns do emerge, we are presented with empirical data that give us evidence of deep-seated, group-based stereotypes or biases.

Another body of work that contributes to our understanding of racial mechanisms of reproduction is research on what is called institutional racism or institutional discrimination. The explanation for persistent racial inequalities in this tradition has less to do with underlying biases and beliefs and more to do with historical and existing social arrangements—in other words, how racial disparities are embedded in historical artifacts and current institutional arrangements. For example, as the work of William Julius Wilson (1987) and others have described, many racial minorities in the United States live in fairly depressed, segregated urban areas where they and their children lack access to public goods such as good schools, well-paying jobs, and quality health care. The absence of these resources stems, of course, from a variety of historical forces and factors associated with America's own history of slavery and segregation. But today, these conditions have taken on lives of their own and persist not so much because of overt prejudice and discrimination but because of the combined institutional effects of segregation, poverty, underfunded public policy, and the like. Racial inequality, in this case, is perpetuated in historical arrangements and institutions that continue to produce racial inequality even in the absence of overt prejudice or intentionally discriminatory treatment. Again, the point here is to see the attention to mechanisms and the often unrealized or underappreciated critical foundations of these approaches in the sense that these explanations and analyses break with the usual rationalistic, individualistic descriptions and accounts of social arrangements in modern society.

Whereas this research seeks to expose the underlying biases and institutional practices that perpetuate racial inequalities, more recent critical race theories add to these by digging deeper into cultural ideologies that maintain and reproduce racism and racial injustice. A key insight of these more culturally orientated critiques is that

of a racialized society where racism and racial stratification are so entrenched that they seem natural, normal, and commonsensical. In this context, critical race theorists have focused on the "ideas, ideals, ideologies, and discourses that are not fully understood or consciously recognized by their advocates and adherents and that, in their unthinking embrace, serve to mystify, misconstrue, and ultimately legitimate the realities of race in the U.S." (Hartmann, 2007, p. 56). Although critical theorists in the sociology of race have written about a multitude of ways in which racial inequality is embedded in social structure and culture, we want to discuss two specific mechanisms here: color blindness and white normativity.

*Color Blindness.* The color-blind critique starts from the proposition that some of America's highest ideals and principles about individualism, meritocracy, and race neutrality are actually at the core of the American inability to recognize the persistence of racial inequality and injustice in the United States. The color-blind ideology, to put it somewhat differently, rests on the assumption that race should not be important in contemporary society and that today, it is most important to move beyond color and deal with people as individuals, not groups. However in the context of a racialized social structure characterized by white supremacy, the color-blind ideology works to mask racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). The color-blind ideology makes it difficult, if not impossible, for social actors to recognize persistent racial inequalities and injustices as anything other than the result of poor decisions and actions on the part of disadvantaged people themselves. The color-blind ideology has no room for a larger structural analysis. Ideals get in the way of reality. As such, any attempts at explaining inequality within this framework end up blaming the victim. In this way, not only does it blind people to existing racial inequalities and injustices, it also legitimates and justifies the racial status quo and existing inequalities by explaining them in terms of deficiencies (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Carr, 1997; Crenshaw, 1997). Here it is important to stress that the ideal (or dream) of a color-blind society that has moved past race and transcended racial inequalities and injustices may be a noble one; however, it is quite far from an accurate depiction of contemporary social life, and as such a deeply problematic conceptual frame for trying to make sense of the realities that are in place.

*White Normativity.* In recent years, there has been an explosion of the study of white culture and identity (Doane & Bonilla Silva, 2003; Fine, Weis, Powell, & Wong, 1997; Frankenberg, 1997; Hill, 1997; Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriguez, & Chennault, 1998). One of the key points is the relational point that understanding race and racial inequity is a matter of understanding not just inequalities and disadvantages, but also privilege and advantage. The study of white culture and identity locates the focus of racial analysis on the group empowered and advantaged by existing racial hierarchies and relationships. Critical whiteness studies focus their thought and analysis on majority white culture and consciousness, arguing that it is especially the attitudes, beliefs, and activities of the dominant group—about racial minorities but also about itself—that allows for the continued perpetuation of contemporary racial formations. Whiteness, in the critical conception, is not just a

matter of political authority or material power but also a cultural vantage point so deeply privileged and culturally ingrained that it is able to disavow its own social privilege and cultural specificity (Goldberg, 2002). The idea behind the concept of white normativity is that there exists an assumption that the way of thinking, acting, and being in the world of the dominant group is not only acceptable but normal—the cultural mode to which everyone else must accommodate and aspire. Moreover, this centering of whiteness affirms the dominant social and cultural position of whites, of whiteness.

One version of this line of thinking is contained in Joe Feagin's (2006) concept of the white racial frame. Feagin defines the white racial frame as "an organized set of racialized ideas, emotions and inclinations, as well as recurring or habitual discriminatory actions, that are consciously or unconsciously expressed in and constitutive of the routine operations and racist institutions of US society" (p. 23). The white racial frame serves as a master frame for understanding race in the United States—a frame that "centers whiteness and a white perspective, thereby normalizing and justifying both white superiority and black inferiority" (Moore & Bell, in press). "Whiteness," in the critical frame, is therefore not so much about white culture and identity, but about how white culture and identity function to promote and preserve white privilege and the racial status quo. It is a whole set of ideologies, discourses, and identities that serves to produce and perpetuate existing racial hierarchies and white domination more specifically.

# A Critical Analysis of American Diversity Discourse

To illustrate and further develop these ideas about the cultural mechanisms that contribute to the reproduction of racial injustices and inequalities in the context of contemporary American society, we will draw upon a recent study of American discourse on diversity that we conducted in four major metropolitan areas across the United States (Bell & Hartmann, 2007). The data for this study were drawn from 166 in-depth interviews conducted in Atlanta, Boston, Los Angeles, and the Twin Cities of Minnesota as a part of the American Mosaic Project, a multiyear, multimethod study of race, religion, and multiculturalism in the contemporary United States (see Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006). The interviews were designed to follow up, probe, and provide context for key issues that emerged from the telephone survey and fieldwork. Interviews lasted between 1½ and 3 hours, and one section of the interview focused specifically on understandings of diversity. Interviewees were recruited from three specific institutional locations in each city: neighborhood organizations, interfaith religious initiatives, and ethnic cultural festivals. Both rank-and-file members and persons in positions of leadership were interviewed. About a third of our sample was drawn from each setting. Two-thirds of our respondents were white; the sample was gender balanced, and respondents ranged from 20 to 75 years old.

It is important to emphasize that the interview population was not a random sample of Americans (as was the case with the telephone survey) but rather a purposive one, targeted to respondents who were actively and self-consciously grappling with issues of difference in their lives and who were thus both well-informed and articulate about diversity. We talked with them at length about their understandings of the term *diversity*. We asked about this term, on one hand, because few words in the current American lexicon related to race are as ubiquitous and ostensibly uplifting as diversity. At the same time, we became convinced that actual meanings and functions of the term are difficult to pinpoint and potentially quite a bit more problematic than that. The use of in-depth interviews, open-ended questions, and strategic probing allowed us to explore *why* people held certain beliefs about diversity; *how* certain experiences affected them; and what implications all of this had for understandings of race, racism, and inequality in contemporary American culture and society.

Some of our initial findings and results were fairly basic and straightforward. We discovered that Americans were very positive, proud, upbeat, and optimistic about diversity; however, we also found that they sometimes found it difficult to define what diversity really was, offering general platitudes or a laundry list of differences it was purported to include. Our respondents found it especially difficult to explain *why* they believed that diversity was positive and important. This inability became especially interesting to reflect upon as we realized that many of our respondents grew quite animated in talking about the problems of diversity and difference in American culture. Indeed, they were far more willing and able to talk about problems than they were about benefits.

Analyzing their responses more carefully, we saw that there were several reasons for this. For one thing, there is a tension in American culture between understanding difference as an individual status or as a group-level phenomenon. In other words, our respondents mostly wanted to assert each person's right to individuality as expressed in any multitude of identities, but had difficulty affirming group-level differences of experience or identity based on things like race.[4] More than this, as we pushed our respondents to give examples and stories that illustrated their own conceptions of diversity and the problems of difference that they had encountered, we found that the vast majority of these stories and anecdotes were about race. Race, in other words, completely dominated and even overdetermined American conceptions of and attitudes about difference and diversity. Indeed, in the vast majority of cases, we would suggest that diversity was actually used as a synonym for talking about race.

In and of itself, there is nothing necessarily or inherently wrong with substituting the language of diversity for the rhetoric of race. The more we critically analyzed how this language functioned, however, the more we came to realize that it overshadowed the very real problem of racial inequality. In other words, even though the diversity discourse was largely informed by understandings of race, it did not allow respondents to deal directly and explicitly with race itself. This was especially clear when it came to the inequalities and injustices we know to be associated with racial difference in the United States.

When we tried, explicitly and directly, to get our interviewees talking about inequality or injustice in the context of these discussions about diversity, our conversations often quickly ground to a halt. Folks just got so confused or agitated or angry that we had to shift the topic of conversation altogether or risk ending the interview. This was particularly striking for us because many of our respondents were actually quite political and articulate on issues of inequality in other settings and on other topics. Yet somehow, we came to realize, the language of diversity made it difficult, if not impossible, for them to talk about inequality and race at the same time.

These Americans mostly preferred this more abstract, and ostensibly more optimistic, uplifting language when discussing the issue of race. All of this, in our view, made it more difficult to recognize and grapple with problems of race. In short, the diversity discourse seems to mystify and obfuscate rather than illuminate issues of racial inequality. When asked what he thinks the general public thinks diversity is, one of our more enlightened respondents said,

> Well you know, it's a word that's in vogue, it's overused. Most of them don't know what they're talking about. But other than the fact that, you know, it conjures up ideas of the workplace or the community, that, where, you know, women have a place and men have a place and ethnic minorities have a place and somehow that the melting pot is working and everything's and everybody's happy ever after. And that's what the—that's happy talk, yeah.

His analysis of the function of the diversity discourse is that it almost serves as a euphemism for race. This idea is certainly echoed throughout the interviews we analyzed.

Our critical analysis of this happy talk led us to conclude that in talking a certain way about diversity, Americans are actually missing or misunderstanding racial inequalities and, moreover, allowing themselves to accept and even celebrate existing racial arrangements. Of course, the real analytical challenge, then, became to explain how and why Americans can adopt and perpetuate such ways of thinking and talking. This is where the race-based critical concepts of color blindness and white normativity became so useful, taking us deeper into understanding these discourses and ideologies.

In terms of the concept of color blindness, we found that the diversity discourse reflects the color-blind ideology in that it sees race only to the extent that race is an element of individual identities that should be tolerated, perhaps even celebrated, but not as the basis for complaints about inequality or group-based interests. For example, one of our respondents, Alice, a white Midwesterner in her 50s, felt that diversity was positive because it "reflects the values and traditions, and ethnicity, and religious backgrounds, skin color of everybody and it welcomes them, makes them feel that they're part of the group, that they're welcome." When discussing the positives of diversity, she talked about people as individuals, but

when Alice talked about the drawbacks of diversity, her language switched to group-level differences:

> You have to constantly be thinking about if you're, I see it mostly, I think, when you're doing, like if you want to do the best summer reading for 2004, your instinct is to list all the top authors, and they're, surprise, all white. And oh my goodness, we didn't pick up any minorities, or any nonwhite people, we have to go back and do this and make sure we include them. And I think it's unfortunate that they are just right there to begin with, that we have to target out, we have to categorize our brains that way.

Ideally, for Alice, a commitment to diversity would make people feel welcome despite their various differences, but group-level differences—those that cause us to "categorize our brains"—can create problems.

Second, we turned to the question of white normativity. In our conception, once again, white normativity refers to the "reality of the racial structure of the United States in which whites occupy an unquestioned and unexamined place of esteem, power and privilege" (Bell & Hartmann, 2007, p. 907). Our analysis suggests that the diversity discourse rests on a white normative perspective and as such masks white privilege and racial inequality. We identify two elements of the diversity discourse that point to white normativity: the existence of assimilationist expectations, and that whiteness is centered within the discourse.

In terms of the first element, many of our respondents conditioned their positive assessment of diversity with appeals to cultural assimilation. For example, Melissa, a white southerner, talked about needing to "respect one another's differences and backgrounds . . . and be tolerant of one another." But she continued to say,

> But by the same token, you know, there has to be a defining thread somewhere whether it be, you know, political, whether it be a language that unifies us, you know. Because, you know, without . . . just a few strongholds of the nation, it's like that diversity is not gonna . . . work, you know.

Her sentiment was echoed by several other respondents, many of whom also referred to language as a necessary common thread. In this way, we find that behind an initial acceptance of diversity, there remains a call to conformity to the dominant culture in the United States.

Connected with and underlying this assimilationist sentiment is the assumption that the diversity discourse also has an implicit white center. During our analysis, we noted that when talking about diversity, people often used the language of "welcoming people from different backgrounds" or "respecting people who are different" and were forced to ask "different from what?" What gets left unspoken is who is doing the welcoming, who is doing the respecting. This language gives agency—the ability to welcome or respect or tolerate—to an undefined, but implied, "we." We make the case that this presumably neutral "we" is

anything but neutral. In fact, one of our respondents, Jill, names this generally unnamed center by saying this:

> I don't know. I mean, it's almost like out of this sense, it's going to sound terrible coming out . . . almost like a sense of because I am in this privileged state of having a white skin, ah, but in a regard I have privilege, a perceived privilege as therefore obligating me to make sure that other, to extend to others regardless of their skin color, the same benefits and privileges that I have. But it puts, I mean, it's almost like I'm in the host or hostess position. And that's terrible, it's terrible to think of people who are black and brown as you know, having to be guests. Because basically nobody should be, um, I mean I wish it were, I wish that the reality were that it really didn't matter.

In seeing whites as "the hosts" and people of color as "the guests," Jill exposes that the diversity discourse is not race neutral. When we understand this discourse, not in an abstract sense, but in its actual context—referring to the racial reality of society structured by white supremacy—it becomes much clearer that this way of doing race affirms the centrality of whiteness and its ability to obscure racial inequality. As Estrada and McLaren (1993) explain, "Those who occupy privileged positions in our society forge a universalized, sanitized and naturalized 'we' that prevents the 'they' from speaking for themselves" (p. 29). We argue that ideas about "different" cultures, languages, and values simply cannot be separated from a cultural context in which whites occupy a place of higher power, prestige, and social esteem.

## Conclusion: Critical Theory and Racial Change

In the sociological tradition, critical theory has served as a counterpoint to traditional social theory, one that seeks to not only describe the world as it is, but to capture the world in a way that provides a critical lens on how things are and how they might be different. In his classic treatise on critical theory, Max Horkheimer (1937/1982) describes this two-fold aim of critical theory with the following:

> The aim of [critical theory] is not simply to eliminate one or other abuse, for it regards such abuses as necessarily connected with the way in which the social structure is organized. Although it itself emerges from the social structure, its purpose is not, either in its conscious intention or in its objective significance, the better functioning of any element in the structure. On the contrary, it is suspicious of the very categories of better, useful, appropriate, productive, and valuable, as these are understood in the present order, and refuses to take them as nonscientific presuppositions about which one can do nothing. (p. 207)

In other words, critical theory presupposes that oppression is central to the social structure and, as a result, offers a critique of social structure in such a way to

expose the inherent inequality in society. Furthermore, critical theories, in their challenges to oppression and social inequality, either explicitly or implicitly point to the need for change. In these ways, critical theory aims to illuminate the underlying ideas, cultural formations, and structural realities that create, maintain, and reproduce unequal power relations in society.

The fact that our research on diversity is informed by critical theory helps us to reveal that race informs much of our American thinking about diversity, yet it is also clearly limited in understanding and often simply misunderstood. Taking a critical perspective allowed us to analyze the language of diversity in a way that took into consideration the larger racialized structure and culture of the United States. In other words, it was important to use the larger frames of race-based critical theory to analyze the words that were being spoken. From a more mainstream, less critical point of view, we could have written a very different paper—one that said that people mostly like diversity and that diversity is really about accepting everyone. But as critical theorists, it was essential that we deconstructed taken-for-granted notions and underpinning cultural ideologies that serve to perpetuate and maintain existing power relations and inequalities.

Whereas the journal version of this research focused mostly on exploring the discourse itself and its problematic relationship to race and equality, we end this chapter with a call to reform the way we think about and practice diversity. To the extent that diversity is a central racial project in the 21st century, and we think that it is (see Hartmann & Gerteis, 2005), we were interested in giving some guidance to how we could change it.

One point, which we have not been able to develop in depth here, is the need to understand the independent, irreducible force of race in the modern world but also begin to see and understand how race also maps onto and interacts with other forms of stratification and inequality. The pitch here is for the more intersectional type of critical theory advocated by Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Margaret Andersen (2001), and others in recent years. But at the root of both these critiques and race-based critical theory is that all of our thinking about difference and diversity needs to be situated in a structural context, one that emphasizes the social inequalities and disparities associated with many forms of differentiation in the modern world. This is a second key point. We must pay attention to how these inequities are constructed and who they benefit. We must, in short, understand how diversity and equality are and must be interrelated.

And here is where some of our respondents did give some guidance. As Maryanne, a 75-year-old white Bostonian, said, "Well, I think diversity is kind of an unusual term in that equality is a better way of looking at it. No matter how different you are, you have the same rights as anybody else has. . . . I think equality is almost better than diversity." Maryanne and the other critics in our respondent pool help us to understand the limitations of the current diversity discourse and the extent to which it needs to be transformed. In this way, we conclude that we must both celebrate difference and recognize, for the purpose of dismantling inequalities, the unequal realities of race in the United States.

# Notes

1. This brief, schematic overview is inspired by and draws upon many different sources, chief among them Craig Calhoun's (1995) thorough treatment of classical and contemporary critical theory.

2. Although a full accounting of the facts of racial inequality and injustice are well beyond the scope of this chapter, some selected sources include Western (2006) and Pager (2003) on arrest and imprisonment, Oliver and Shapiro (1997) or Conley (1999) on wealth, Massey and Denton (1993) on segregation and poverty, and Neckerman (2007) or Oaks (2005) on education.

3. For studies of conventional social scientific work on race, see Niemonen (1997) and Hartmann, Croll, and Guenther (2003). For more developed methodological criticisms, see Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008) and Zuberi (2001).

4. In *On Toleration*, in fact, Michael Walzer (1997) argues that the central problem of contemporary American culture is not between diversity versus unity, but the diversity of groups versus the freedom of individuals.

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