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Anything but racism: how sociologists limit the significance of racism

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva^{a,*}, Gianpaolo Baiocchi^b

^a*Department of Sociology, Texas A&M University, 311 Academic Building,
College Station, TX 77843-4351, USA*

^b*University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, USA*

Abstract

The academic declining significance of race did not begin with William Julius Wilson's work in the late 1970s. In this paper, we take a broad look at the methods mainstream sociologists have used to validate Whites' racial common sense about racial matters in the post-civil rights era. Our general goal is to succinctly examine the major tactics sociologists have used to minimize the significance of racism in explaining minorities' plight. Specifically, we survey how (1) most work on racial attitudes creates a mythical view on Whites' racial attitudes, (2) the various demographic indices used to assess post-civil rights' racial matters miss how race affects minorities today, (3) perspectives on the culture of minorities are based on ethnocentric perspectives that tend to hide the centrality of racially based networks, and (4) the way most sociologists report their results distorts the significance of racial stratification. We conclude by suggesting that work on racial matters will need to be revamped if it is going to have any practical use for those at the "bottom of the well."

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1. Introduction

Mainstream sociological currents on race have historically followed Whites' racial "common sense."¹ Thus, well before Wilson published his immensely popular *The Declining Significance of Race* (Wilson, 1978), Whites had expressed in interviews and surveys they did not believe

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-979-845-5012; fax: +1-979-862-4057.

E-mail address: bonilla@unix.tamu.edu (E. Bonilla-Silva).

racism was a significant fact of life in America, that the plight of minorities was their own doing, and that it was Whites who were suffering from “reverse discrimination,” a view already captured in interviews conducted by Bob Blauner in 1968 for his *Black Lives, White Lives* (Blauner, 1989).² In this essay, we argue that sociologists have followed, rather than enlightened or challenged, Whites’ racial common sense (McKee, 1993; Lyman, 1994), as we examine and criticize the methods mainstream sociologists have used to validate Whites’ racial common sense on racial matters in the post-civil rights era. While we leave to others (Zuberi, 2001) the detailed examination of the mathematical and statistical logic used by sociologists to justify the racial status quo, in this article, we discuss four ways in which sociology helps maintain Whites’ declining of significance thesis. While our choice of areas is neither exhaustive nor our discussion completely thorough, we believe it offers a fair rendering of the status quo and will serve as an important first step in a long overdue conversation in our discipline.³

Our contention is that mainstream sociology has observed racial matters with an inadequate racial theorization, and, hence, has not “seen” the significance of racial stratification in America. The earliest moment in this racial theorization (1920–1950) assumed racism would go away naturally as industrialization and/or modernity advanced or as rational actors brought the market logic to bear in interracial interactions (Becker, 1957).⁴ This version of the theory became untenable in the tumultuous 1960s and alternative interpretations emerged, such as Blauner’s internal colonialism approach or the institutional racism perspective,⁵ forcing mainstream sociology to revise its racial theory. Racism came to be defined as a set of erratic beliefs that may lead racist actors to develop “attitudes” (prejudice) against the group(s) they conceive as inferior which may ultimately lead them to “act” (discriminate) against the stereotyped group(s).

With minor adjustments, this is how mainstream sociology conceives of racism today.⁶ Unlike the earliest non-interventionist stance, the modern-day approach has a clear social policy: educate the racists, who tend to be concentrated in the South and among members of the working class (Adorno, 1950; Lipset, 1963), and racism will be eradicated. Although the new version includes the notion that racism is more than just ideas, it still bounds the problem ideologically and assumes that it is ultimately something that we could manage via education or therapy.

These two moments in the theorization of racism have functioned as a “discursive formation” (Foucault, 1972) and have kept a more structural (or institutional) view on racism at bay as an explanation for “racial” outcomes. By failing to grasp racism as structural phenomenon, racism has, therefore, been regarded as (1) a disease afflicting certain individuals, (2) a phenomenon that does not affect the social body and its institutions, and (3) a social problem that has to be analyzed “clinically,” that is, by separating the “good” versus the “bad” apples in the population through surveys on racial attitudes (Sniderman & Piazza, 1993; Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

In our review of the state of sociology today, we consider the ways in which sociologists still minimize the structural features of racism as we consider research in a number of substantive areas. First, we discuss how the attitudinal research that shows tremendous levels of ‘racial progress’ reflects, more than anything else, a new racial ideology that protects the post-civil rights racial order. Second, we discuss some of the limitations of various demographic indices to assess post-civil rights’ racial matters. Third, we examine how mainstream social scientists have “seen” minority cultures, portraying them as pathological while hiding the centrality of racially based networks. And fourth, we briefly tackle how the manner in which social scientists report their results tends to distort the significance of racial stratification.

Our goals in this article are sociological as well as political. We challenge the tactics sociologists have used to minimize the significance of racism in explaining minorities' plight and bring to the fore the need for a radical reform on how they conduct research on racial matters, and warn of the dangers of continuing doing business as usual without taking into consideration new patterns of racial inequality. More generally, we hope to force a conversation on the myriad ways in which racial considerations shade the way we do sociology, exposing the façade of objectivity and neutrality of mainstream sociologists while hoping to enthrone other sociologists to join in the criticism from the interstices of the sociological house to produce a more democratic, useful, and politically engaged discipline.

2. There ain't no paradox of Whites' racial attitudes jack!: a critique of mainstream surveys on racial attitudes

Guided by a weak theory that regarded racism as a problem of individual pathology (e.g., affecting workers with an "authoritarian personality"), sociologists examined Whites' racial attitudes in the post-civil rights America. Predictably, they found that racism appeared to be declining in significance. An early group of analysts described the change in Whites' racial attitudes as "revolutionary" (Hyman & Sheatsley, 1964).⁷ Although many researchers have continued endorsing this interpretation of Whites' racial attitudes (Firebaugh & Davis, 1988; Lipset, 1996; Sniderman & Piazza, 1993), nuanced arguments have emerged from other quarters on aversive racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1991), symbolic racism (Sears, 1988), and social dominance (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Nevertheless, one of the most successful books on post-civil rights Whites' attitudes (Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997) has advanced the new consensus among *mainstream*⁸ survey researchers: the idea that there is a paradox in Whites' racial attitudes. The paradox, according to Schuman et al., lies in that Whites support the principles of integration (e.g., agree with equal opportunity for jobs, etc.) but oppose programs to implement⁹ these goals (e.g., affirmative action, etc.), a view long defended by certain researchers (Campbell & Schuman, 1968). In its most current iteration, the view defended is that "[w]e are dealing with a fundamental transformation of social norms and with the issue of what this transformation means at the individual level" (Schuman et al., 1997, p. 306).

Because the normative climate in post-civil rights era has delegitimized the public expression¹⁰ of racially based feelings and viewpoints, however, surveys on racial attitudes have become less meaningful to assess racial practices and have become like multiple choice exams where respondents work hard to choose the "right" answers. For instance, although a variety of data suggest racial considerations are central to Whites' residential choices (Emerson, Yancey, & Chai, 2001; Farley, Steeh, Krysan, & Reeve, 1994), over 90% of them state in surveys that they have no problem with the idea of Blacks moving into their neighborhoods. Similarly, even though about 80% of Whites claim not to have problems if a member of their family brings a Black for dinner (Schuman et al., 1997), research shows that very few Whites (less than 10%) can legitimately claim the proverbial "Some of my best friends are Blacks" and that Whites rarely fraternize with Blacks (Jackman & Crane, 1986).

Notwithstanding that most research on Whites' racial attitudes is based on survey data, we believe it is time to rely more on data gathered from in-depth interviews and mixed-research

designs.¹¹ Conceptually, the focus ought to be on the examination of Whites' racial ideology and ideology, racial or not, is produced and reproduced in communicative interaction (see Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Hence, although surveys are useful instruments to gather *general* information on actors' views, they are severely limited tools for examining how people explain, justify, rationalize, and articulate racial viewpoints. After all, people do not express their positions and emotions about racial issues by answering "yes" and "no" or "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree" to questions. Instead, they express their ideological positions in talk and text. Despite the gallant effort of many survey researchers to produce methodologically correct questionnaires, survey questions still restrict the free-flow of ideas and unnecessarily constrain the range of possible answers for respondents.

Of more import yet is survey researchers' insistence on using questions developed in the 1950s and 1960s to assess changes in racial tolerance. This strategy is predicated on the highly questionable assumption that "racism" (what we label here racial ideology) does not change over time. If instead one regards racial ideology as in fact changing, survey researchers' reliance on questions developed to tackle issues from the Jim Crow era will produce an artificial image of progress and miss most of Whites' contemporary racial nightmares. The "paradox" of Whites' racial attitudes is the product of the methodology and the conceptual apparatus used to examine post-civil rights "racism" (racial ideology). Today, most Whites reject the old Jim Crow racial tenets in public discourse,¹² yet endorse new ones that help maintain contemporary White supremacy. Rather than a paradox, this is the post-civil rights way in which most Whites defend the racial status quo (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Brooks, 1990).

3. If the index doesn't fit, you must acquit: how indices that don't mean much help support Whites' racial common sense

Another important strategy to produce what Pinkney (1984) has labeled as "the myth of Black progress" is relying on traditional demographic indices to assess the status of racial minorities. For example, if the goal of researchers is presenting a felicitous image of Blacks (or other minority groups) in the post-civil rights era, they can rely on the index of occupational dissimilarity, or present data on life expectancy, or even use traditional indices to measure residential segregation and compare them to those of the 1940s and 1950s (Farley & Frey, 1994). Although many of these indices are used as if they were sophisticated measures, the reality is otherwise, as they essentially rely on "simple numerical and percentage comparisons of the numbers and proportions of persons in each race/ethnicity group in a population" (Murdock & Ellis, 1991, p. 152). Relying on these indices as the last word is very problematic because the issues presumably grasped by these indices have changed substantially making them less useful and *valid*, in the sociological sense (Carmines & Zeller, 1979).

One example is the index of occupational dissimilarity. After occupations are transformed into values using Duncan's socioeconomic index (SEI), the dissimilarity index is computed based on the following formula:

$$D = 100 \times \frac{S_{1/2}w_i - b_{i1/2}}{2}$$

“where i denotes the i th category of [an occupational] distribution, and w_i and b_i denote the proportions of Whites and Blacks, respectively, in the category” (Fosset & Seibert, 1997, p. 202. See also Murdock & Ellis, 1991). The numerical value of the index can be interpreted as “the minimum percentage of one group (either one) that must change [occupational] categories to make its relative frequency distributions identical to that for the other group” (Fosset & Seibert, 1997, p. 202). Hence, its interpretation is straightforward: the higher the index, the more occupational status convergence among the groups being compared (see Farley, 1984, p. 47).

The problems with this index are multiple and many of them have been discussed by social demographers (see Fosset & Seibert, 1997). For example, because D is not “symmetrically distributed around the point of equality,” it is possible for D to distort totally a situation (Ibid, p. 203). This means that it is possible to produce false negative (or positive) outlooks on occupational status differences between compared groups if one relies on this index. Another problem with this index is that it is usually computed using few census job categories (12–13 categories) which has been shown to underestimate occupational inequality—as compared to when one uses broad occupational categories (513 categories)—by as much as 28% (Ibid, p. 236). Lastly, this index has been used to indicate large changes in *relative* values while ignoring huge differences in *absolute* ones. This was clearly explained by Blalock (1979, p. 116),

[If blacks have been excluded from a profession such as actuaries forever and increase their representation from] 2 to 12, there is a sixfold increase! Suppose this is compared with a white increase of, say, 3,000 to 4,000, a one-third increase. The blacks are obviously gaining ground through this increase of ten actuaries as compared with a thousand whites!

For example, Featherman and Hauser (1978) argued that Blacks had a higher “relative upward shifts in current occupational status than did Whites” and used that finding to suggest structural arguments were inaccurate. Hence, they concluded, “stratification has grown more universalistic” and “more rational” (pp. 225–226). In truth, Whites’ status improved from a score of 39.5 to 42.59 while Blacks improved from 17.7 to 25.76, with Blacks clearly remaining significantly behind Whites. Unfortunately, the reliance of sociologists on this index blinds them from truly looking at occupational differences as they materialize in real jobs. The index becomes a fetish and little analysis is done on how Black and Whites fare in similar occupations; on why is it that if this index has shown tremendous progress, the income differential between Blacks and Whites has not decreased accordingly.

Some early works in the discipline, interestingly enough, avoided these problems. Reuter (1938), in his book *The American Race Problem: A Study of the Negro*, analyzed the job structure of Blacks and Whites using traditional indicators (labor force participation, occupational representation, etc.) but also included data on how inequality operated in various jobs such as those in the agricultural sector. In Harris’ (1926) study of the Black population in Minneapolis, he analyzed the macro and micro determinants of Blacks’ depressed economic conditions in a manner that is seldom surpassed even by today’s standards (see Cherry, 2001; Shulman & Darity, 1989). Drake and Cayton’s (1993/1945) *Black Metropolis* makes use of statistical indicators in interesting ways. While they did make use of some demographic techniques, they warned us of the importance of the interconnection between physical segregation and related processes that made up “the color line.” The book contains significant descriptions and

ethnographic examination of these processes, including the informal networks that maintained physical segregation, and the types of substantive segregation that took place *even when there was physical proximity between groups*. Importantly, Drake and Cayton are critical of positions that equate physical contact with substantive integration, calling it “doubtful, however, whether [such contact can] play a dominant part in shifting the line of color” (1993, p. 126). They also call for attention to the context of these racial contacts, warning that in reality, “[s]uch contacts do little to create goodwill among White people, but they do leave a residue of resentment among Negroes” (1993, p. 126).

With the advent of computing power since the 1950s, and principally in the 1970s and 1980s, studies of segregation have relied on ever more sophisticated models based on various indices and statistical techniques (Duncan & Duncan, 1955; Farley, 1984; Massey & Denton, 1985). Many students of urban segregation, however, have ignored the insights of Drake and Cayton and have simplistically relied on, and even fetishize, indices of physical separation, that is, regard physical proximity as a proxy of substantive integration.¹³

Here we propose something different and quite heretical from the point of view of mainstream sociology, namely, that such indices may not mean much by themselves and need to be complemented with other types of studies and indicators for them to acquire significant meaning. Dissimilarity indices are derived from Duncan and Duncan (1955) and are permutations of the formula offered above. The index measuring evenness, which is the one usually discussed in analyses of residential segregation, is

$$D = \frac{1}{2} \left(\sum [b_i/b - w_i/w] \right)$$

where b_i and w_i are the number of Black and White persons living in an area i , and b and w are the total number of Blacks and Whites in the city, respectively.

Scholars have pointed to the problem of unmeasured segregation because of the scale of census tracts (James & Taeuber, 1985). In recent times, urban theorists have also pointed to types of physical segregation that are not visible through this metric, such as gated communities, which have been becoming more common in recent years with the economic restructuring of cities (Graham & Marvin, 2001). More fundamentally, however, we suggest that “racial contacts” *do not* mean substantive integration, since there are significant forms of racism compatible with “physical closeness.” The apparent “integration” some scholars have noted in some settings (Farley & Frey, 1994) may have to do with poverty and falling incomes of poor Whites, or simply the restructuring of urban space.

This index belies a weak theorization of racism as it reduces it to a phenomenon of physical separation. A stronger theorization of racism—one that understands its structural features—necessarily calls into question racial practices, such as those that deny access to resources, in *different* types of separateness (physical and social). This would require more comprehensive approaches that include ethnographic and systematic within-tract studies of socio-spatial interaction between racial groups. The studies carried out by DeSena (1994) highlighting the role of informal networks in maintaining residential segregation are examples of what needs to be done. Statistical approaches can be useful too. Alba, Logan, and Stults (2000), for instance, in studying the types of “more integrated” neighborhoods that middle-class Blacks live in found that they tended to be lower middle-class neighborhoods, with the class standing of Whites

in the neighborhood being significantly lower than that of Blacks in it. While some of these neighborhoods may appear to be integrating according to various segregation indices, a closer look shows that Blacks still pay a significant “penalty,” a fact obscured by aggregate indices.¹⁴

4. The children of Sánchez in the inner city: echoes of the culture of poverty in recent social capital approaches

Another way of minimizing the effects of racial stratification is by portraying the effects of poverty as the causes of poverty; specifically, by focusing on the “culture of the natives” as the problem. While it is Lewis (1968) who is credited with making the “culture of poverty” argument, and Patrick Moynihan with making it part of the broader discourse on the poor, the argument dates farther back. The notion that the cultural inadequacy of “natives” is what holds them back in America is already present in the functionalism of the Chicago School that decried the lack of work values and co-operation within the city’s slums (Zorbaugh, 1929). The “culture of poverty” refers to the values and behaviors of the poor that keep them poor from generation to generation. The culture of poverty had a number of components: lack of participation by the poor in major institutions; awareness of, but not living by middle-class values such as stable marriages; low levels of community organization; absence of childhood as an extended period; and feelings of marginality, helplessness, lack of ambition, and inferiority (Lewis, 1968, pp. 189–192). While these arguments were originally developed in the context of the urban poor in the ‘third world’ and were vigorously contested (Eckstein, 1977), culture of poverty arguments became particularly influential in the 1960s and 1970s.

While the culture of poverty thesis has fallen out of fashion and most scholars today distance themselves from explicitly supporting it, the crux of the thesis still exerts significant influence: the culture of the poor (and generally non-White poor) is inadequate for modern society and is the primary reason responsible for their social pathology. A historical analysis of studies of Black family life in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, for instance, showed that culture of poverty arguments were the single dominant analytic lens through which it was seen (Vasilikie & Demos, 1990). The understanding of underclass ways of life as pathological and causing the reproduction of poverty itself continues to be a central idea in social policy circles and among scholars, and has deviated little from the original culture of poverty language in some quarters (Murray, 1999). Myriad studies in the areas of education, health, and social welfare implicitly hold up “pathological” minorities to the yardstick of mythical middle-class values: ambition, trust, and “believing in the system.”

The idea that inner-city minorities perpetuate their own situation through self-defeating cultural values and practices—such as crime, lack of trust, lack of family values and role models, remains starkly influential. It is implicit in Wilson’s description of the ‘tangle of pathology’ that besets the underclass; for Wilson, the departure of middle-class Blacks from the inner city contributes to a lack of role models and proper values and contributes to the deviant behaviors that perpetuate poverty (Wilson, 1987). In *Code of the Street*, Anderson (1999) differentiates between “decent” and “street” families that negotiate the unpredictability, violence, and poverty of the inner city. “Decent” and “street” are differing responses, based on whether they have regard for middle-class values, societal institutions, and the law.

The “code of the street” is depicted as a deep pathology that emerges from experiencing exclusion from the wider social world; it is a culture of alienation, disrespect for the law, selfishness and mistrust, pathological family structures, and lack of self-respect (1999, p. 32).

The intellectual legacy of the culture of poverty thesis can be seen in the recent boom in social capital studies. Whereas the culture of poverty focused on the failings of the pathological culture of the poor, social capital focuses on the other side of the coin: it idealizes a kind of community life in which virtuous citizens take care of each other and enforce community norms. In the view currently in vogue, social capital refers to collective stocks of “trust, norms, and networks” in certain communities (Putnam, 2001). Communities that have such stocks of “social capital” are ones in which people work together, and buffer the effects of inequality or social need through community action. Social capital in this view has been used to explain a number of outcomes, such as health outcomes (Hawe & Shiell, 2000), violence prevention (Kennedy, Kawachi, & Prothrow-Stith, 1998), school achievement (Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994), adolescent behavior and juvenile delinquency, and others. This perspective, which minimizes the insights of network analysts who have studied social networks as something to which individuals have differential access (Portes, 1998; Smith, 1998; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Waldinger, 1995), also minimizes structural inequalities. Whereas culture of poverty arguments implied certain kinds of interventions in the inner city, however, social capital implies a scaling back of government intervention at all (Muntaner, Lynch, & Smith, 2000).

Portes (1998) has pointed to the lack of precision in social capital arguments, and the slippage between its use as an individual attribute and as a collective attribute. Others have pointed out the circular nature of social capital arguments when referring to communities—communities that have “good social capital” are successful communities because they have “good social capital.” Well-functioning communities, the argument goes, possess this collective good that is equally available to all. In these communities, concerned citizens become involved in solving collective problems and enforcing norms. In the context of economic inequality and the rollback of the welfare state, communities that possess social capital are believed to be able to buffer negative impacts. Therefore, much of the current discussion on public policy and poverty has now turned to the question of how to generate bonds of trust in these deficient communities, because it is the lack of social capital—and not structured inequalities—that accounts for undesirable outcomes.

From our vantage viewpoint, the missing link in social capital theory is the following: in societies in which resources are distributed partly along racial lines, social networks (social capital) will also be racialized. Social networks and norms of social behavior are often mobilized to defend racial exclusion in a racialized society. Blee’s (2001) study of women in White supremacist movements found the women to be involved in the life of their community, and found them to be recruited *through* social networks. Similarly, DeSena (1994) discusses the role of community women in gate-keeping and maintaining the homogeneity of certain White neighborhoods, while Waldinger (1995) discusses how social capital in ethnically based job networks help exclude other ethnic groups. Second, individuals in a racialized society do not have equal access to networks, and networks themselves are racialized. Disadvantaged youths, for example, experience differential access to networks along racial lines, and African Americans suffer labor market disadvantages by virtue of segregated networks (Smith, 1998).

Third, the assumption that social capital leads to certain virtuous norms of behavior is both untenable and confusing of causes and effects. The vision that a community in which there is civic involvement is one in which crime and deviant behaviors are inhibited and it is possible to “walk outside at night” (Portes, 1998, p. 3) commits the same error that culture of poverty arguments make: it is not possible to abstract norms or cultural values from the context in which they exist and assign them causal status without seriously confounding causes and effects. More importantly, it is not possible to explain deviance or crime as result of lack of participation or trust in a community that then spiral to perpetuate a community’s poor standing. Rather, such behaviors take place in definite social contexts marked by inequality and structured along racial lines. To think otherwise and attempt to explain these outcomes by lack of social capital, culture of poverty, or another mechanism that obfuscates structural inequalities is to seriously minimize the impact of racism.

5. When reporting findings reproduce racialized readings of reality

The ways most sociologists report results and structure their statistical analyses reproduce racialized readings of the world. Sociologists routinely fail to explain that the “race effect” presented in their findings is the outcome of “racism” or “racial stratification.” This leads their audiences to interpret “race effect” findings as embodying truly *racial* effects (“There must be something wrong with Blacks if they are three times more likely than Whites to participate in crime!”). Therefore, reporting results on crime, marriage arrangements, or a host of other matters without properly informing the public of the myriad ways in which racial stratification is at the core of these findings helps support racist readings of Black–White inequality (Dumm, 1993).

One example of this problematic way of reporting findings is Christopher Jencks’ (1972) work on the fixity of Black–White test scores gap. However, he and his colleagues still claim that “Neither differences between the schools that Blacks and Whites attend nor differences in their socioeconomic status suffice to explain why Blacks learn less than Whites with similar initial skills” (Jencks & Philips, 1998, p. 257). Furthermore, the same authors claim they controlled for “fixed effects” (Jencks & Philips, 1998, p. 255; racial/socioeconomic mix, per pupil expenditure, and curriculum) and thus suggest the net gap may be a pure “race effect.” What is lacking in Jencks’ analysis and data is “controlling for” *within* school’s differential impact on its Black and White students (e.g., school tracking, school differential treatment by teachers and school administrators, etc.). Failing to acknowledge that children in “integrated” schools have radically different experiences helps Jencks and his audiences believe the Black–White test score gap is a “race effect” rather than a “racism effect.”

An example of this strategy appeared recently in the pages of the *American Sociological Review*. In a paper entitled, “The Significance of Socioeconomic Status in Explaining the Racial Gap in Chronic Health Conditions” (Hayward, Crimmins, Miles, & Yang, 2000), the authors seek to disentangle the “race” from the “class” effect in chronic health conditions between Blacks and Whites. After showing that the “race effect” remains, net of education and health behaviors, the authors introduce the magic bullet of “class” (socioeconomic status) and find that, “Of the 10 health conditions for which Blacks and Whites differ significantly in terms

of incidence, the race effect is reduced to non-significance for 7 conditions after measures of socioeconomic circumstances are included” (Ibid, p. 925). Hence, they are dismissive of work that suggests racism is central to explain Black–White health differences (Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997) and point that “these differences are rooted in the fundamental social conditions of life” (Hayward et al., 2000, p. 927).

The problem with their argument—and the statistical strategy that it entails—is that *class is not independent of race* (these authors did not even bother to check for multicollinearity). Even Erik O. Wright, probably the most renowned American academic Marxist, acknowledges in his *Class Counts* that Blacks are exceedingly over represented in the working and underclass categories and states that “By a large margin, the America working class now predominantly consists of women and racial minorities” (Wright, 1985, p. 69; see also Horton, Allen, Herring, & Thomas, 2000). Hence, Wright points out that “race, therefore, seems to have a bigger overall effect on access to privileged class locations than does gender” (p. 69).¹⁵ Even the authors of the article in question admit, “Blacks and Whites are differentially channeled into socioeconomic circumstances over the life cycle in a way that deprives Blacks of good health relative to Whites” (Hayward et al., 2000, p. 927).

Our argument here on the thorny race versus class debate is not that race is more important than class. What we want to point out is that if race—and racial stratification—shapes everything in the social system, the debate should not be over whether it is race or class that affects Blacks’ (or Whites’) life chances. Instead, we believe the debate should be about specifying the independent and combined effects of these two forms of social stratification on social actors.

Researchers of segregation sometimes also separate racially structured patterns from racial structures, in effect “controlling for” supposed non-racial factors and diminishing the impact of racism. For instance, a group of scholars have defended the position that it is the presence of economic factors that solely explain segregation, a position largely discredited by counter evidence (Clark, 1992; Galster, 1988; Massey & Fischer, 1999). Other scholars have argued that Whites’ neighborhood preferences that seem like “racial” choices are not so. Specifically, Harris (1999, 2001) has argued that race is a “proxy” used by Whites to choose neighborhoods that are better served by the state, have better schools, lower crime rates, higher property value, and so on. The implicit theory that informs Harris’ approach is that racial factors are *independent* from non-racial factors and, therefore, that it is possible to assume non-racial factors account for segregation. Most research on contemporary racial matters, however, has documented that discussions on crime, schools, government, etc. are highly racialized (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Emerson et al., 2001; Kinder & Sanders, 1996).

6. Conclusions

We are not the first ones to challenge the sociological project regarding race (Lardner, 1973; Lyman, 1994; McKee, 1993) or even the methods sociologists use to investigate racial matters (Stanfield & Dennis, 1993). What we hoped to have shown in this paper is that (1) mainstream sociology is fundamentally connected to Whites’ common sense on racial matters and (2) that the theory, methodologies, research strategies, and even writing style used by

mainstream sociologists in the post-civil rights era bolster Whites' "declining significance of race" thesis.

To make our case, we examined some of the ways in which sociology contributes to the reproduction of Whites' contemporary racial common sense. First, since the mainstream theory of racism conceives of it as irrational "ideas" that individuals hold, attitudinal research has been at the core of the "race relations research agenda." We argue this is misguided because it fails to understand how racial ideologies work in the post-civil rights era. Second, we examined two widely used demographic indices (index of occupational and residential dissimilarity) and pointed out their limitations. Overall, we suggested these indices are less appropriate to study how racism affects the United States' racial polity today. Third, we argued that work on culture of minorities is still often bounded by "culture of poverty" concerns and shades the way mainstream sociologists interpret the plight of poor minority communities, including new work on social capital. And fourth, we argued that the way analysts report their findings and their reliance on the statistical technique of "controlling for" helps reproduce racialized readings of reality.

If this is the state of affairs, what can be done? We believe demographers, ethnographers, social psychologists need to continue trying to measure inequality, observing social life, and surveying Americans on their "racial attitudes." But we urge sociologists to undertake a number of steps to correct the dominant biases of our discipline. First and foremost, sociology must engage in a serious debate on its dominant theories of race and racism. Continuing endorsing weak theories—or paying lip service to, for example, the social constructionist approach—will no longer do the trick. Although one of the authors has proposed a particular theorization (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, 2001), we believe the discipline at large would be much better off if any serious structural or institutional theorization replaces the dominant theorization. Second, we urge demographers to incorporate historical and ethnographic concerns in their attempts at gauging how race affects the social landscape. This will lead to mixed-research designs and new methodologies, such as the ethno-survey developed by Massey to measure immigration, and implementing the insight of ethnographers on the manifestation of "everyday racism" (DeSena, 1994; Eliasoph, 1999). In our quest for these research methodologies, as we have shown, we are fortunate in our discipline to have pioneering models that provide us with rich insight: the work of Drake and Cayton, Du Bois, and others. For instance, a typical summary table in *Black Metropolis*, in addition to providing some statistical measures, compares segregation in Chicago with that of the American South along *thirty* different dimensions including the social definition of children of mixed marriages, patterns of office-holding, access to professional associations, and ability to enter theaters and restaurants (Drake & Cayton, 1993, p. 331).

Third, we challenge sociologists not to reify methods, indices, or strategies as if "racism" and its manifestations can be studied "one way." Rather than struggling to be "methodologically correct," we ought to struggle to accurately report how racial stratification affects those at the "bottom of the well" as well as those drinking the clean water at the top of the well. This will force social analysts to seriously think on how to examine racial matters rather than jumping into research with prefabricated formulations and data sets. And fourth, the myth of objectivity and neutrality espoused by mainstream sociologists needs to be exposed. On this, the methodological observations of analysts as different as Gouldner (1961), Mills (1959), and

Myrdal (1944) ought to suffice. Taking as a given that all knowledge has a political foundation, we urge sociologists to explicitly join in the more complex project of challenging the racial common sense and racial structures in the post-civil rights era.

Notes

1. This is not a new trend. Park (1950) argued that race contacts went through “race cycles” that ended in racial assimilation.
2. See also Caditz (1976).
3. The authors, along with Hayward Horton (SUNY—Albany), are working on a book manuscript on the various ways in which social scientists have diminished the importance of racism, tentatively titled *Anything but Racism: How Social Scientists Limit the Significance of Racism*.
4. Interestingly, as in all discursive fields, there are always alternatives. In *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (Dollard, 1957), John Dollard developed a holistic and materialist analysis of racism.
5. See Chapter 2 of Bonilla-Silva (2001).
6. Despite the theoretical break that the “racial formation” perspective (Omi & Winant, 1986), this perspective runs the risk of being co-opted as it focuses too much on the ideological aspects of racism as well as on the “racial projects” of certain elites. See Bonilla-Silva (2001).
7. See also Chapter 9 in Brink and Harris (1963).
8. We wish to separate them from radical survey research, such as that carried out by Jackman (1994).
9. The more sanguine interpretation assumes that even this opposition has nothing to do with race (see Sniderman & Piazza, 1993; Lipset, 1996).
10. Although survey researchers believe surveys are private forums, survey have become public forms of communication and, thus, less reliable means to assess people’s views on sensitive matters.
11. For instance, the methods already used by Du Bois and Eaton (1899) could be used as a model.
12. Social scientists have very little systematic data on what Whites believe and say about minorities in private, though anecdotal and ethnographic research suggests many Whites have a double racial life. (Cose, 1993; Otis-Graham, 1995).
13. A clear example is the patterns of segregation in Brazil. Brazilian Blacks on the whole have many more apparent racial contacts than United States Blacks (Telles, 1995), but are much worse off in terms of income differences and labor market position, child mortality, life expectancy among other indicators (Lovell, 1999).
14. Similar cases could be made about how indices of residential segregation or health (life expectancy) do not tell the full story (index of residential dissimilarity) or flat out distort the racial picture (life expectancy). We explore these in the book manuscript.
15. The position we take here is distinct from Wright’s, however. See his perspective on race in *Classes* (Wright, 1985), particularly pp. 96–98.

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