The Social Construction of Whiteness: Racism by Intent, Racism by Consequence

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Abstract

The discipline of Sociology has generated great contributions to scholarship and research about American race relations. Much of the theorizing on American race relations in America is expressed in binary terms of black and white. Historically, the study of American race relations typically problematizes the "othered" status, that is, the non-white status in America's racial hierarchy. However, the sociology of race relations has historically failed to take into account both sides of the black/white binary paradigm when addressing racial inequality. In other words, in the case of race, it becomes difficult to see the forest for the trees. Thus, in Sociology, we find less scholarship about the role "whiteness as the norm" plays in sustaining social privilege beyond that which is accorded marginalized others. In order to examine the historical black/white binary paradigm of race in America, it is important to understand its structuration. This article extends the applicability of sociologies of knowledge (Thomas Theorem, social constructionism) and Gidden's structuration theory to inform a postmodern analysis of America's binary racial paradigm.

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"America is inherently a "white" country: in character, in structure, in culture. Needless to say, black Americans create lives of their own. Yet as a people, they face boundaries and constrictions set by the white majority. America's version of *apartheid*, while lacking overt legal sanction, comes closest to the system even now . . . reformed in the land of its invention."

(*Hacker* 1992:4)

Introduction

Sociology engages in studies of racial inequality, however, the sociology of race relations has historically failed to observe and report on the social construction of both sides of America's black/white binary paradigm (Perea 1997) when addressing racial inequality. In other words, in the case of race, it becomes difficult for many to see the forest for the trees. Thus, in Sociology, we find less scholarship about the role "whiteness as the norm" plays in sustaining social privilege beyond that which is accorded marginalized others. The question raised by the black/white binary paradigm is: to what extent has sociology participated in knowledge creation that results in preservation or normalization of America's racial hierarchies?

This paper focuses on the social construction of "race" with a special attention to the social construction of *whiteness*; the political significance of "race" and *whiteness* in America; and, the implications of both as intervening structural barriers in social interaction patterns and in formal and informal social organization in American society. Conventional theoretical approaches (functionalism, conflict, and interactionist theories) to the study of American race relations fail to take into account the historical *conscience collective* of "whiteness as social norm."

Sociologies of knowledge inform my approach to the relevance of "whiteness and race" in American society (Mannheim 1985). In examining the connections between the process of social construction and the social construction of *whiteness*, I rely on W. I. Thomas' (1928, 1923) emphasis on definition of the situation, Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theory of social reality construction and Giddens' (1984) structuration theory to analyze the emergence of whiteness as a socially significant structure that mitigates life chances in American society. Research in the specialty area of whiteness studies examines the social, economic, and

political significance of *whiteness* and its connection to the persistence of racism in American society (Bhabha 1998; Bonnett 1998, 1996; Delgado 1995; Feagin 1991, 2000, 2001; Feagin and Vera 1995; Frankenberg 1993; Ignatiev 1996; Kincheloe 1999; Montagu 1952; Perea 1997; Roediger 1991; Stanfield 1985; van den Berghe 1967). In contrast, conventional approaches to the study of "race" in America tend to ignore "whiteness" by treating it simply as a given, and even as a benign factor in "race" relations. Such scholarship tends to problematize the "other" in relation to *whiteness*. Alternatively, post-structuralists and critical theorists tend to problematize *whiteness* in relation to the "other."

An archaeology of knowledge (Foucault 1972) about race and *whiteness* provides a useful strategy for uncovering ways in which symbolic meaning systems, (e.g., "race" and *whiteness*) define, legitimize, and reproduce themselves across generations. Over the past 400 years, scholarship on "race" and *whiteness* has produced "*human traces.*" "What people do, how they behave and structure their daily lives, and even how humans are affected by certain ideological stances can all be observed in *traces* people either intentionally or inadvertently leave behind" (Berg 1989:85). This analysis investigates sedimentary traces of socially constructed knowledge about "race" and *whiteness*.

Sedimentary traces of socially constructed knowledge about "race" and *whiteness* have been documented in America's history of slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, and discrimination based on the ascription of some measure of social de-valuation imposed on non-white peoples and normatively defined as racial characteristics. Under these conditions, one could argue that many Americans have been negatively affected by 'racism by intent.' Racism by intent operates at the level of the individual and is manifested as racial prejudice and discrimination toward non-white individuals. This argument, however, looks at the consequences of 'racism by intent.' Here, I examine the extent to which racism by intent produces structural consequences in the social milieu. Such a focus reveals that the idea and conception of whiteness derives from the dynamics of racism by intent, a type of racism that is founded upon custom and tradition, but shatters against social scientific principles.

Racism by consequence, operates at the macro level of society, and represents an historical evolution. It constitutes a gradual shift away from a conscious, almost personalized conviction of the inferiority of an "othered" "race." Such conviction expresses itself in attitudes of prejudice and is acted out in discriminatory behavior. In its place follows social practices that are essentially depersonalized through institutionalization. As a result, racial prejudices may decline overtime, yet more subtle patterns

of discrimination persist, supported by the inertia of custom, bureaucratic procedure, impersonal routine, and even law. The result of racism by intent has overtime informed institutional cultures and practices that rest on assumptions of white superiority over non-white ethnic groups. At the institutional level, racism by consequence tends typically not to be recognized by 'white' Americans, and may not necessarily be triggered by intent. Racism by consequence then is reflected in differential educational opportunities, economic differentials between whites and non-whites, residential segregation, health care access, and death rate differentials between whites and non-whites.

With the foregoing assumptions in mind, types of otherwise unasked questions posed by critical theorists regarding American "race" relations include: what is race; what is *whiteness*; what is non-*whiteness*; how are these ascriptions linked to the social and political significance of "race" and *whiteness*? How is it that 143 years after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), American society remains stratified by the boundaries of *whiteness* and non-*whiteness* (Bennett 1988:469)? The aforementioned questions trigger "the sociologist's call to arms" in the construction of knowledge as presented by Berger and Luckmann who suggested that:

> . . . the sociology of knowledge must first . . . concern itself with what people 'know' as 'reality' in their everyday . . . lives. In other words, common-sense 'knowledge' . . . must be the central focus for the sociology of knowledge. It is precisely this 'knowledge' that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society could exist. The sociology of knowledge therefore, must concern itself with the social construction of reality. (Berger and Luckmann 1966:15)

Given this 'call to arms,' basic questions on the social construction of knowledge about "race" and *whiteness* must be taken into account. These questions take various forms although their substance is quite similar. We can ask, what is social construction? What is racism? What does *whiteness* have to do with either "race" or racism? Does American society, or merely one set of its constituents, benefit from the ascriptions of *whiteness* and the practice of racism? Sociologically, the construction of responses to such questions requires analytically powerful, sensitizing (Blumer 1954) and core sociological concepts.

The works of W. I. Thomas (1923, 1928), Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Anthony Giddens (1984) provide the sensitizing concepts that inform this analysis. *Definition of the situation, social construction, and structuration* are concepts that work as useful analytic lenses to explore discourse in "*whiteness* studies," sometimes referred to as "anti-racist" scholarship. Both

"race" and *whiteness* are socially defined notions that have socially significant consequences for Americans. Employing Giddens' (1984) perspective, we can investigate a specific structuration, **the interactive and dynamic duality of *whiteness* and "race"** in American society.

"*Whiteness* studies [explore] what it means to be White in the United States and the global community," and constitute "a growing body of books, articles, courses, and academic conferences," (Rodriguez 1999:20). This exploration of what it means to be "white" in American society raises a key question: Does American society, or merely one set of its constituents, benefit from the social construction of whiteness? According to one critic, "the critique of *whiteness*, . . . attempts to displace the normativity of the white position by seeing it as a strategy of authority rather than an authentic or essential 'identity' "(Bhabha 1998:21). A cadre of scholars (as noted above), some of whom identify themselves as white, are raising and responding to critical questions about the social and political significance of whiteness in American society.

The goal of *whiteness* studies is to reveal and to share new knowledge about a seemingly under-investigated social phenomenon; namely, the social construction of *whiteness*. In a 1997 *California Law Review* article, Juan Perea suggests that "In the midst of profound demographic changes, it is time to question whether the Black/White binary paradigm of race fits our highly variegated current and future population. Our 'normal science' of writing on race, at odds with both history and demographic reality, needs reworking" (1244). As sociologists, creators of knowledge, and educators, do we dare question whether the time has come for us to reconsider our **normal science** of writing on "race?" Does our scholarship on "race" and *whiteness* need to be re-worked, updated and, as some have argued, even drastically reconceptualized? Should the undergraduate and graduate students of the Class of 2020 be subjected to what now appears as mis-education on the role that "race" and *whiteness* play in American society?

Definition of the Situation:
The Social 'Realities' of Race and *Whiteness*

It is now well accepted by social scientists, that the notions of "race" and *whiteness*, in their social significance, are guided not so much by any biological foundation as by the social meanings that are ascribed to them. That is, they depend on the social definition their situation is accorded. Uncovering or deconstructing the social construction of "race" and *whiteness* begins with a definition of the situation or context in which these ideas

tend to define social interaction patterns. It was W. I. Thomas (Thomas and Thomas 1928:572) who suggested that, "If [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." As social facts, both "race" and *whiteness* define real situations in American society; and, as real situations, both "race" and *whiteness* issue into real social consequences.

As real situations, the social construction of "race" and *whiteness* and their social significance are intimately linked to the history of social organization in American society. Blumer observed that the organization of American "race" relations emerged from the intersection of three significant events in history. He opined that these events were "the conquest of the Indians, the forced importation of Africans, [and] the more or less solicited coming of Europeans, Asians, and Latinos" (Lyman 1977:25–37).

Discourse from anthropology, history and sociology characterizes the concept, "race," as having a modern history. According to Roy (2001:81), "[r]ace was created mainly by Anglo-Europeans, especially English, societies in the 16th and 19th centuries." In spite of several centuries of use as a concept representing a natural phenomenon, sociological studies on "race" critique the notion as lacking scientific clarity and specificity. Rather than emerging from a scientific perspective, the notion, "race," is informed by historical, social, cultural, and political values. Thus, we find that the concept "race" is based on socially constructed, but socially, and certainly scientifically, outmoded beliefs about the inherent superiority and inferiority of groups based on racial distinctions (Montagu 1952, 1963; Gossett 1963; Bernal 1987; Bennett 1988).

While outmoded today, in the past, the rationale for convictions about racial superiority and inferiority are linked to Herbert Spencer's 1852 theory of population (Jary and Jary 1991:486). Spencer's theories of natural selection predated Darwinian theory by six years (ibid.). His theory of populations' struggles for existence and fitness for survival came to be recognized as Social Darwinism. Therefore, discourse analysis of knowledge about "race" and *whiteness* must take into account the saliency of Social Darwinism in social science theorizing about "race" and *whiteness*. It turns out that theories asserting the 'survival of the fittest' explanation of population and societal development were translated into "nature's indispensable method for producing superior men, superior nations, and superior races" (Gossett 1963:145).

Discussion of the social construction of *whiteness* cannot be complete unless we acknowledge the social and political significance of "race" in America. Whatever its scientific validity, "race" **is** a social fact in which the social and political significance of *whiteness* plays a critical role. Classical scholars have remarked about "race" as a social fact. Thus, according to Durkheim, the concepts, "race" and *whiteness*, are social facts.

A social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations. (Durkheim, [1895] 1938:13)

In *The Division of Labor* ([1933] 1984:246–257), Durkheim wrote about the saliency of "race" as a social fact. Durkheim scholar, Jennifer Lehmann, observes that according to Durkheim, "[T]he word 'race' no longer corresponds to anything definite" (1995:569). Durkheim further suggested that "race" was destined to disappear from modern society. However, here we are, 113 years after the first publication of *The Division of Labor*, and "race" remains very much a part of the organization of contemporary society. Lehmann (1995:569) further explains that in Durkheim's view, "the hereditary transmission of innate, group-level characteristics – racial structures – is supplanted by the **social** transmission of **learned** abilities – acquired structures – and by **individual-level** abilities – individual structures." (emphasis mine).

Similary, Weber ([1921] 1978) argued in *Economy and Society*, Chapter V, that "race" is no more than a manifestation of norms of endogamy. Endogamy is a cultural rule that encourages group members to marry only persons within their group. Thus, above all other considerations, group identity determines the extent to which one is an acceptable marriage partner. Catholics prefer to marry Catholics, the wealthy prefer to marry the wealthy, *whites* marry *whites*, and blacks marry blacks. In the American binary paradigm of race (Perea 1997), the outcome of endogamy perpetuates the structures of "race" and *whiteness*. Thus, norms of endogamy become a primary mechanism for the perpetuation of "races" in America. With reference to the role "race" plays in American society, Weber remarked that ". . . this abhorrence on the part of Whites is socially determined by the . . . tendency toward the monopolization of social power and honor, a tendency which . . . happens to be linked to 'race' (Weber [1921] 1978:386).

Even in more recent times, it has also been argued that "just what 'race' means to those who study 'race relations' sociologically or social psychologically, actually remains surprisingly unclear" (Bash 1979:194). Seeing "race" as a metaphor to imply social hierarchy between blacks and whites, van den Berghe (1967:6) observed "the sociologist might regard racial distinction as a special case of invidious status differentiation" (Bash 1979:197).

Herbert Blumer's work also points to implications of status differentiation in American "race" relations. One of his student's reports that for Blumer, "race" relations are

a basic feature of social organization . . . based on hierarchy and racial group position. As such, the particular relations that prevailed at any time among the races were not immobile. Any established pattern of race relations indicates the structure of group positions that had been institutionalized in time and space by the concrete acts of men in power. Race prejudice was a matter of history and politics, not a function of individual attitude. (Lyman 1984:111)

As a basic feature of social organization, "race" in American society largely depends upon what we mean by *whiteness* and its significance in patterning social interaction and social organization between whites and non-whites. We can observe historical moments in the social construction of knowledge about "race" and the power of *whiteness* in America by describing types of concrete social action from which the social and political significance of *whiteness* emerged. To contextualize this claim, it is instructive to note the core features of the perspective of social constructionism.

What is Social Construction?

In considering race and *whiteness* as basic features of social organization, it is helpful to review Berger and Luckmann's (1966) thesis on social construction. In their treatise on the sociology of knowledge, the authors argue that, "Reality is socially defined. But the definitions are always *embodied*, that is, concrete individuals and groups of individuals serve as definers of reality" (1966:116). As part of a socially constructed and symbolic universe, American "race" relations represent "historical products of human activity . . . brought about by the concrete actions of human beings" (1966:116).

Following Berger and Luckmann's (1966) logic, the notions of "race" and *whiteness* may be regarded as the conceptual machineries of universe-maintenance for American "race" relations. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966:108), "the success of particular conceptual machineries is related to the power possessed by those who operate them." Thus, the terms "blackness" and "*whiteness*" represent conceptual machineries of universe-maintenance relative to the concept, "race." By employing blackness and *whiteness* as opposing dualisms in sociological discourse, we seek to explain – but, in effect, allow ourselves to tacitly legitimate and/or justify – the institutional order of American "race" relations. Such legitimations " . . .are learned by the new generation during the same process that socializes them into the institutional order" (Berger and Luckmann 1966:61).

In *Invitation to Sociology*, Berger reminds us of several objectives of our discipline, which are appropriate to consider when venturing into *Whiteness* studies or anti-racist arguments (1963:156–157). Berger reminds us of our mission as sociologists:

> Sociology uncovers the infinite precariousness of all socially assigned identities. Sociological perspective, as we understand it, is thus innately at odds with viewpoints that totally equate men with their socially assigned identities . . .

> The sociologist ought, therefore, to have difficulties with any set of categories that supply appellations to people – 'Negroes,' 'whites,' 'Caucasians,' or for that matter 'Jews,' 'Gentiles,' 'Americans,' 'Westerners.' In one way or another, with more or less malignancy, all such appellations become exercises in 'bad faith' as soon as they are charged with ontological implications . . .

> Sociological understanding, by contrast, will make clear that the very concept of 'race' is nothing but a fiction to begin with, and perhaps helps make clear that the real problem is how to be a human being. (Berger 1963:156–157)

Part of our commonsense knowledge about American population groups is that social interaction and organization between such groups tends to vary according to "race" or ethnicity. Part of our commonsense knowledge about "race" and *whiteness* in America is that interaction between the "races" is generally perceived in terms of hierarchical relations between blacks and whites.

Pierre van den Berghe (1967) and John Stanfield (1985) link the social construction of *whiteness* to a particular type of social action that is linked to and generated the emergence of *whiteness* as a social fact in American society. In *Race and Racism* (1967:11), van den Berghe argues that

> The existence of races in a given society presupposes the presence of racism, for without racism, physical characteristics are devoid of social significance . . . it is not the presence of objective physical differences between groups that creates race, but the social recognition of such differences as socially significant or relevant.

If we link the concept "race" to social action, we change the ostensibly neutral, categorical character of the concept by introducing agency into its implications on social relations. John Stanfield (1985:161) best characterizes the type of social action informing the social construction of "race" and *whiteness*. In *Theoretical and Ideological Barriers to the Study of Race-Making* (1985), Stanfield links "race" to social action with the concept, race-making:

> Race-making is a mode of stratification and more broadly nation-state building. It is premised on the ascription of moral, social, symbolic, and intellectual

characteristics to real or manufactured phenotypical features which justify and give normality to the institutional and societal dominance of one population over other populations materialized in resource mobilization, control over power, authority and prestige privileges, and ownership of the means of production. (Stanfield 1985:161)

Stanfield defines racism as the generator of race-making. He observed that

Racism and race-making are part and parcel of the manner by which major industrial, European-descent nation states such as the United States have originated and developed, and that the significance of race-making in American nation-state building has been normative, not accidental, coincidental [nor] a contradiction between democratic ideals and human interests as Myrdal (1944) claimed years ago. (Stanfield 1985:162)

Stanfield criticized the progress sociologists have made toward producing critical studies of the role "race" and *whiteness* play in American society. "Sociologists have made little effort to explore the material origins and dynamics of "race" and its role in creating stratification, differentiation, and the social psychology of intergroup relations" (Stanfield 1985:167). As American citizens and as social scientists, has the time come for us to confront the material origins and dynamics of "race" and *whiteness* in American culture and society?

Berger and Luckmann suggested years ago that part of understanding the social construction of any universe is linked to understanding the social organization "that permits the definers to do their defining" (1966:116). They recommended that "[i]t is essential to keep pushing questions about the historically available conceptualizations of reality from the abstract 'What?' to the sociologically concrete, 'Says who'?" (ibid:116). Thus, Weber's "norms of (racial) endogamy" combined with Stanfield's "race-making" process, eventuate in the structuration of "racial" asymmetry. Together, such processes result in the bifurcation of ideas about "race" along parameters of blackness and *whiteness in* American society.

Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration is useful in informing inquiry into the historically available and abstract conceptions of "race," racism, and *whiteness* as well as the sociologically concrete, 'says who?' Among the core concepts in his theoretical scheme are structuration, structural properties, and structural principles. A major goal of structuration theory is to overcome oppositional dualisms in theorizing by acknowledging the role actors play in the structuration process – in this case, the structuration of American "race" relations.

Structuration Theory

Giddens' (1984) structuration theory is conducive to analyzing the process of social construction, a process through which social actors do the defining of "race" and *whiteness*. Social structure conventionally appears in literature as a concept disembodied from actors who participate in its creation, reproduction, and transformation. Giddens criticizes this static conceptualization of social structure "for its tendency to view structure and symbols as somehow alien to the actors who produce, reproduce, and transform these structures and symbols" (Turner 1991:523). Giddens' core argument is similar to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) claim that actors are producers as well as products of society and its structurations.

Structuration refers to the **process** of constructing, ordering, and routinizing of social relations across time and space, in virtue of the duality of structure (Giddens1984:374). In Giddens, the duality of structure refers to the observation that actors are as much producers as they are also products of society's structurations. For example, social actors were involved in constructing laws, rules, and regulations that created structured social relations during Slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow and the Civil Rights eras. Both black and *white* people, both enslaved and free people understood the racial rules that ordered their day-to-day routines in everyday life. Across time and space, racial routines in social interaction became institutionalized practices that ensured social distance and geographical separation between black and *white* population groups. The duality of structure concept suggests that, "people in interaction use the rules and resources that constitute social structure in their day-to-day routines in contexts of co-presence, and in so doing, they reproduce these rules and resources of structure. Thus individual action, interaction, and social structure are all implicated in one another" (Turner 1991:521).

Gidden's explanation of the process of structuration is consistent with Georg Simmel's (1950:9) conception of society:

> More specifically, the interactions we have in mind when we talk about "society" are crystallized [social interactions] as definable, consistent structures such as the state, and the family, the guild and the church, social classes and organizations based on common interests.

In defining society as "crystallized interactions," Simmel (1950) suggested that patterns of social organization in society find their foundations in the basic processes of social interaction. He noted that (1950:11–12):

> [T]he recognition that man in his whole nature and in all of his manifestations is determined by the circumstance of living in interaction with other men . . . that what happens to men and by what rules do they behave, not

insofar as they unfold their understandable individual existences in their total-
ities, but insofar as they form groups and are determined by their group
existence because of [social] interaction.

Giddens' (1984:376–77) concept, "structural properties," refers to "institu-
tionalized features of social systems which [stretch] across time and space."
Here again, we observe a Simmelian feature in Giddens such that Giddens'
"institutionalized features" of social systems are pratically synonymous
with Simmel's (1950) conceptualization of patterned social interaction.

"Race," racism, and, what has come to be called, "white-skin privilege"
can be conceptualized as properties or characteristics of the **structuration**
of "race" relations. Thus, we can argue that the social facts of "race",
racism, and white-skin privilege have become increasingly institutionalized
features of American society since the 17th Century. The processes of
social construction, structuration, or institutionalization of "race," and of
blackness and *whiteness* is described in "The Struggle to Define and
Reinvent *Whiteness*," where Joe (1999:162–167) Kincheloe observes:

> Even though no one at this point really knows what whiteness is, most
> observers agree that it is intimately involved with issues of power and power
> differences between white and non-white people . . . As with any racial cat-
> egory, whiteness is a social construction in that it can be invented, lived,
> analyzed, modified and discarded . . . the ephemeral nature of whiteness as
> a social construction begins to reveal itself when we understand that the Irish,
> Italians, and Jews have all been viewed as non-white in particular places at
> specific moments in history. Indeed, Europeans prior to the late 1600s did
> not use the label, black, to refer to any race of people, Africans included.
> Only after the racialization of slavery by around 1680 did whiteness and
> blackness come to represent racial categories.

The property or characteristic of asymmetric organization of relationships
is clearly observable in the process of structuration of American "race"
relations. Based on structuration theory, we can view the racialization of
American citizenry as a type of structuration. Omi and Winant use the
term, *racialization*, in a very specific way: that with the onset of American
slavery, "a racially based understanding of society was set in motion
which resulted in the shaping of a specific racial identity not only for
the [enslaved] but for the European settlers as well" (1986:64).

The structuration of American "race" relations has been achieved
through the process of racialization, a process that is dependent upon a
prior process that Omi and Winant refer to as "*racial formation*" (Omi
and Winant 1986:61). Racial formation is the:

> . . . process by which social, economic and political forces determine the con-
> tent and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn
> shaped by racial meaning.

Racialization, a structural property or institutionalized feature of the system of "race" relations in America, enhances the life experience of those who would benefit from this form of socialization. When a subordinate group is racialized, the superordinate group is racialized as well. However, the superordinate group, in order to maintain the advantages of its constructed status, must also maintain and sustain the racial ideology of the mass culture, an ideology which "validates" the superordinate group's position of dominance in the first instance. So, the structural properties of "race," racialization, racism, white-skin privilege, and asymmetric relations become transformed into **structural principles** of social organization which constitute the social system of American "race" relations.

According to Giddens (1984:376) structural principles are "factors involved in the overall institutional alignment of a society or type of society." I think we can all agree that *racialization* permeates all of American society, or as Giddens (1984:376) would say, "a societal totality." Another important structural principle for maintaining racism and white-skin privilege is that of asymmetry. According to Peter Hall (1985:310), asymmetric relationships assume a power dimension:

> Relationships and interactions characterized by 'more' or 'less' can be labeled asymmetric. asymmetric relationships are those in which one party is capable of disproportionately imposing his/her will on the other and setting conditions, making decisions, taking actions, and exercising control which are determinative of the relationship.

It can be argued then, that in addition to racialization, a major organizing principle in the structuration of American "race" relations is asymmetric power relations between whites and non-whites. A recent example of racism by consequence is what America learned about its "racial" issues in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The Lower 9th Ward neighborhood in New Orleans, LA provided a classic example of how social, economic, and political structuration resulted in the marginalization of 9th ward residents. Economically depressed areas along the Gulf Coast suffered more than other residents simply because they were not financially able to pick up and relocate themselves. Ranking low on education and income scales, residents of the Lower 9th Ward were at the mercies of public and private institutions for help with acquiring the basic necessities of life.

In his analysis of "race" as a social category, British sociologist Michael Banton (1966) explains how he sees asymmetric power relations. "The power of the masters was secured by the adoption of 'race' as an overriding principle of organization through the society." Banton further observes that

"Just before the outbreak of the Civil War, Jefferson Davis told the United States Senate 'One of the reconciling features of the existence [of Negro slavery] is the fact that it raises every white man to the same general level, that it dignifies and exalts every white man by the presence of a lower race." (Banton 1966:11)

We might then ask, "What is the mechanism that enables the structuration of American "race" relations?" How is it that the overriding principles of American "race" relations continue to operate effectively as America enters the Third Millennium?

Giddens (1984) talks about the structuration process and its reliance on rules and resources. He sees social life as governed by rules or rule sets. Such rules are "procedures of action . . . techniques or generalizable procedures applied in the enactment and reproduction of social practices" (1984:21). The awareness of rules, argues Giddens, is "the very core of that 'knowledgeability' which specifically characterizes human agents" (1984:22). Rules in the social system of "race" relations play a vital role in "the constitution of meaning," as well as the application of "sanctions" (1984:20).

Rules represent *knowledge of procedure* or *mastery of techniques* of doing social activity. Such rules, argues Giddens (1984:22), "are locked into the production and reproduction of institutionalized practices, that is, practices most deeply sedimented in time and space." Accordingly, "[f]rom a sociological perspective, the most important rules are those that agents use in the reproduction of social relations over significant lengths of time and across space" (Turner 1991:524). The nature of such rules is that they are only tacitly understood by actors; they become such an integral part of actors' practical stocks of knowledge that, as procedures, they simply appear as the natural order of things. And, in the historically conditioned system of American "race" relations, what could be more "natural" than the hierarchical order of social status based on "race"?

Structuration of *Whiteness*: ## A History of Production and Reproduction

On the one hand, agents use resources to get things done; while on the other hand, agents use rules as generalized procedures for informing action. Giddens (1984:258) points out that

"Power . . . is generated in and through the reproduction of structures of domination. The resources which constitute structures of domination are of two sorts – allocative and authoritative."

Allocative resources include raw materials, instruments of production, technology, and produced goods created by the interaction of raw materials and instruments of production. Authoritative resources include the modes of production and reproduction of social systems and the organization of life chances (Giddens 1984:258). Allocative resources provide capability to generate command over objects, goods or material phenomena; authoritative resources refer to the capacity to generate command over actors and persons (Giddens 1984:33). The interactive application of allocative and authoritative resources produces dimensions of structuration. Signification, domination, and legitimation represent structural properties or dimensions of the process of structuration (Giddens 1984:30–31). The emergence of such properties is apparent in America's colonial history.

America's colonial history documents three dimensions of the structuration of what gradually evolved into "race" and *whiteness* in the contemporary social system of American "race" relations. Giddens explains that we can identify three structural dimensions of social systems: **signification**, **domination**, and **legitimation** (1984:30). The dimension of signification refers to symbolic orders (discourse, language, and communicative processes in interaction) in a society. Domination is the dimension whose domain includes resource authorization and allocation in a social system. Domination tends to manifest itself in a society's political and economic institutions. The third dimension, legitimation, refers to a society's systems of normative regulation, as reflected in its legal institutions (Giddens 1984:28–34).

The history of the structuration of America's racialized society began first with the growing signification (interpretive rules) of *whiteness*. Interpretive rules or 'race norms' informed social interaction in American colonial society. The second stage of this process is observed in the domination (control over allocative and authoritative resources) of the social system of "racialization" by white actors. Domination over the life chances of non-whites was accomplished through the economic disadvantage associated with slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow and continuing forms of discrimination based on "race." The last dimension of the structuration of American race relations refers to the legitimation (normative rules) of white-skin privilege. African-descended Americans learned the normative rules of 'racial etiquette,' which dominated social interactions between blacks and *whites* for most of America's history as a nation. For persons of African descent not understanding the normative rules of 'racial etiquette,' even in 2002, could be life threatening.

Giddens' (1984) structuration theory thus suggests that when signification, domination, and legitimation occur in consecutive order, institutionalization

or structuration develops. Thus, the structuration or institutionalization of America's race relations produces a racialized society. The role of "race" finds its way, then, into the social construction of law or normative rules for social interaction between *whites* and non-whites. It is this history of the development of such properties of the structuration process of the system of "race" relations that informs the work of scholars engaged in *whiteness* studies or antiracist scholarship.

The Structuration of Status Constructions

Historians like Gossett (1963:17) found that although seventeenth century "race" theories were not scientific, they "led to the formation of institutions and relationships that were later justified by appeals to "race" theories." For example, while both were regarded as heathens, Gossett noted that the colonists found that the Native American did not adapt to enslavement; in contrast, he claims, Negroes had been conditioned to subjugation by African tribal chiefs. Thus, racial theories were more easily applicable to justify Negro enslavement (Gossett 1963:28–31). To legitimate status differences between "Negroes" and European servants, laws were enacted that imposed the status of 'slave for life' on enslaved Africans. While white European indentured servants could conceivably envision an end to their servitude, Africans did not fare as well (Gossett 1963:31).

Alternatively, Bennett (1988:33) also an historian, examined letters and diaries of the 16th Century and found that the first European emissaries to African centers greeted Africans as allies and trade partners. Such diaries showed that "down to the eighteenth century [these emissaries] had no conception of Africans as racial pariahs" and saw them as "their equals and superior to many of their countrymen back home" (Bennett 1988:33).

The first Africans landed in America in 1619. They were not enslaved and operated on a basis of equality with whites (Bennett 1988:36–37). The first Africans in pre-racial America occupied the social status of free persons or indentured servants (Roy 2001:85). However, facing the birth of a nation and socioeconomic forces, (i.e., such as a worldwide demand for tobacco cotton and sugar, and the need for a system of labor), 17th Century colonial leaders needed a large labor force to meet market demands from Europe and America. Native American populations proved too difficult to submit to enslavement, and, ". . . European Christians were reluctant to enslave other Christians [such as the Irish]" (Roy 2001:83).

As the New World was developing, highly civilized West African societies were engaged in trade relations with Europeans. Africans enslaved Africans ". . . for the same reasons as Europeans [enslaved Europeans]:

debts, crimes, conquest, and sale by parents" (Roy 2001:84). Therefore, West African states had a ready supply of slaves to trade with Europeans in exchange for "arms and other resources to dominate their regions, changing the balance of power within western Africa toward states that were friendly to Europeans" (Roy 2001:82).

Colonial Europeans discovered several benefits associated with enslaving Africans in the New World: "they were civilized and relatively docile, they were knowledgeable about tropical agriculture, they were skilled iron workers, they had immunities to Old World diseases, thus making them a more secure investment for a slave owner" (Roy 2001:84).

According to Roy (ibid:84), "Africans were preferred laborers less because they were uncivilized or tribal but because they were more civilized than laborers from other parts of the world." During a 110-year period (1700–1810), approximately 6 million Africans were transported to the New World under the status of chattel slave, or property (Roy 2001:84). The colonial leaders decided to "base the American economic system on human slavery organized around the distribution of melanin in human skin" (Bennett 1988:45).

By the 1660s, in the interest of supporting the agricultural economy of the South, slave codes were enacted in Virginia and Maryland. For Blacks, the slave codes extended the status of chattel slave from indentured status to slave for life. It was by the institutionalization of slavery that "the power of the masters was secured by the adoption of "race" as an overriding principle of organization throughout [American] society (Banton 1966:11). The imposed status, 'slave for life,' remained in effect for colonial Africans and their descendants until 1863 when the Emancipation Proclamation was signed into law.

However, by 1863, the "race" die had been cast. In Black Athena, Martin Bernal's (1987) historical research found that in Northern Europe by the 15th Century, clear links can be seen between dark skin color and evil and inferiority with respect to gypsies who "were feared and hated for both their darkness and their alleged sexual prowess" (Bernal 1987:201). Bernal also found that by the 1690s, "there was widespread opinion that Negroes were only one link above the apes – also from Africa – in the great chain of being" (Bernal 1987:203). Anglo-Saxon scholars such as John Locke, David Hume, and even Ben Franklin "openly expressed popular opinions that dark skin color was linked to moral and mental inferiority" (Bernal 1987:203).

Furthermore, in order to understand the structuration of "race" and *whiteness*, it is helpful to take into account the emerging industrialization of the 17th Century American economy. During the period of reconstruction once the status of 'slave for life' had been rescinded in law,

Roy (2001:80) suggests that "race" had become more than an idea; it had become a worldview, a way of understanding reality.

With a racialized worldview imbedded in the cultural consciousness, a clear social understanding existed among the public that if you're white, you're right, and, if you're black, get back. This assumption is relative to the racial construction of the industrializing North as pointed out by "race" relations scholars, Everett C. and Helen MacGill Hughes (1952:64):

> Industry brings people together and sorts them out for various kinds of work; the sorting will, where the mixture is new, of necessity follow racial and eth- nic lines. For cultures (and when races first meet they are always unlike in culture) differ in nothing more than in the skills, work habits, and goals which they instill into the individual. These differences may tend to disappear in the course of industrial experience, although segregation may tend to keep them alive in some modified form for a long time.

Past research in inequality structures "supports the broad generalization that with respect to inequalities in the distribution of life-chances and life-styles, ethnicity [and/or 'race'] operates as a partial, although salient, ordering principle" (Bash 1979:45). Even today, a time when the admix- ture of peoples is no longer new, differences based on "race" and/or ethnicity persist as attested to "by the significance that remains attached to 'hyphenated Americanism'" (ibid:45).

Consistent with van den Berghe's (1967:11) observation that the exis- tence of races in a society presupposes the presence of racism, white America created an ideology of racism that justified the subordination of Africans in America. Whether by intent or in inadvertent consequence, this ideological system enabled the destruction of early community bonds previously held between the very first Africans and European settlers in America. Such system also enabled the destruction of family and com- munity bonding between families of enslaved Africans (Bennett 1988:45).

Anti-Racist Literature:
Legitimate Scholarship or "Fads and Foibles"?

The emergence of anti-racist literature in Sociology is not without con- troversy or without a bifurcation of emphasis. I will not address here whether such a literature constitutes legitimate scholarship, or whether it is an instance of what Sorokin (1956) described as "fads and foibles." Perhaps it takes a little historical retrospection to resolve that question. More immediately, within this growing literature, one can identify two basic camps in the body of Whiteness Studies that reflects this perspec- tive. One sees the study of *Whiteness* as an essential part of eliminating

racism and white skin privilege, while the other camp focuses on the study of white pop culture. In his review of scholarship in the study of *whiteness*, Rodriguez (1999:20) notes that

> There is a growing academic movement in the 1990s to study the cultural aspects of the white race. Some scholars insist the cultural privileges ascribed to white people must be understood before an understanding of the conditions of minorities can be gained.

Scholars identified in Rodriguez's review include Professor Morris Jenkins of Penn State and Dr. Evelyn HuDehart of University of Colorado-Boulder. Professor Jenkins observes that the study of *whiteness* is not new. He suggests that "the study of whiteness began with the formation of traditional university curricula. We get [the study of whiteness] without acknowledging it, . . . [w]hich explains why European Americans have problems with their Whiteness" (Rodriguez 1999:20). Dr. Evelyn HuDehart notes that

> . . . Whiteness is also a historically contingent and socially constructed racial category, once defined to be sure, by privilege and power . . . whiteness and other racial categories are part of the same racial order and racial hierarchy in the history of this country and in contemporary social reality. (Rodriguez, 1999:21)

According to Kincheloe (1999) cited earlier, "a pedagogy of *whiteness* reveals such power-related processes to whites and non-whites alike, exposing how members of both groups are stripped of self-knowledge" (ibid:163). He also argues "even though no one at this point really knows what whiteness is, most observers agree that it is intimately involved with issues of power and power differences between white and non-white people" (ibid:162).

We who engage in *whiteness* studies face a major challenge in organizing a critical pedagogy of *whiteness*. Kincheloe (1999:184) observes that

> A key feature of a pedagogy of whiteness involves inducing white people as a key aspect of their analysis of their subjectivity to listen to non-whites . . . Thus, it is no exaggeration to maintain that racial peace in the twenty-first century will depend on Whites' developing the willingness to listen and make meaning from what they hear. The meaning-making process in which Whites must engage will require that for the first time they will accept the presence of non-White culture.

Compounding the challenge ahead in organizing a critical pedagogy of *whiteness*, Kincheloe argues that,

> In an era where young Whites face identity crises that have elicited angry responses to efforts to pursue social justice, a critical pedagogy of whiteness

must balance a serious critique of whiteness and white power with a narrative that refuses to demonize white people. (1999:185)

British sociologist, Alistair Bonnett (1996) offers justification for the emergence of anti-racist scholarship in both Britain and America. He reports that social research on "racial" issues tends to have a normative quality about it. *Whiteness*, he argues, has

> at least within the modern era and within Western societies, tended to be constructed as a norm, an unchanging and unproblematic location, a position from which all other identities come to be marked by their difference . . . Thus, for example, although there exists a not unconsiderable body of American literature on White attitudes and behavior . . . and British work on anti-racist practice in 'White areas' . . ., this material has tended to retain an uncritical, ahistorical, common-sense perspective on the meaning of Whiteness. Thus, the social construction of Whiteness, its historical and geographical contingency, has remained unexplored. (1996:146)

Bonnett researched and writes primarily about the formation of European *whiteness*. In one work he provides a "critical history of the Europeanness and racialization of whiteness" (Bonnett 1998a:1030). He suggests that our modern idea of "race . . . is the product of European naturalist science and European colonial and imperial power" (p. 1031). Thus, he argues,

> a triple conflation of White = European = Christian arose that imparted moral, cultural and territorial content to whiteness. The broad constituency of this latter identity is suggestive of the [*transformation of the concept of race from a category denoting nobility, more specifically a noble line of descent, to the more socially inclusive idea of a people and/or nation*] . . . themes of nobility, skin colour, and Christianity, codified within the language of race in fifteenth century Spain, were transmuted into a colonial discourse of white superiority and non-white inferiority. (1998a:1038–1039). [emphasis added]

In her study of white supremacist discourse, Ferber (1998:60) suggests that "we cannot comprehend white supremacist racism without exploring the construction of white identity. White identity defines itself in opposition to inferior others; racism, then, becomes the maintenance of white identity . . . When researchers fail to explore the construction of 'race', they contribute to the reproduction of 'race' as a naturally existing category."

We can observe the process of socially constructing *whiteness* by recalling Kincheloe's observation that "the Irish, Italians, and Jews have all been viewed as non-white in particular places at specific moments in history" (Kincheloe 1999:167). Kincheloe observes that "Europeans prior to the late 1600s did not use the label, black, to refer to any "race" of people, Africans included. Only after the racialization of slavery by around 1680 did whiteness and blackness come to represent racial categories" (ibid.).

Labor historian, David A. Roediger, (1991) in *The Wages of Whiteness* examined the role "race" plays from about 1680 to the late 1800s in the emergence of America's labor market. Relying on historical writings, folklore, song, and language as documentary evidence, the work demonstrates the social construction of white identity in America. Roediger admits that although racist attitudes were present during the 17th and 18th centuries, "there were no compelling ways to connect 'whiteness' with a defense of one's independence as a worker" (1991:20).

Roediger (1991:20) discovered that the "term 'white' [first] arose as a designation for European explorers, traders and settlers who came into contact with Africans and the indigenous peoples of the Americas." The idea of *whiteness* next emerged in the development of America's free-labor market. White workers demanded they be entitled to a legitimate status of "freeman," a status that combined white supremacy, an exclusively occupational trade, and civil rights.

Between 1830 and 1900, Roediger (1991:123) found that minstrel performances supported pro-slavery and white supremacist politics. Part of his overall point is to show how white worker groups participated in creating a white working-class identity to assure their own differentiation from and superordination over enslaved and emancipated blacks in the newly developing industrial labor market.

Probably the most radical of anti-racist scholars is a Lecturer at Harvard University, Noel Ignatiev. His partner, John Garvey is associated with the Office of Academic Affairs at the City University of New York. Ignatiev and his partner publish a journal entitled, *Race Traitor*. Their arguments are very bold, to say the least. The journal's editors suggest (Ignatiev and Garvey 1996:35–36):

1. . . . the 'white race' is not a natural but historical category; second, that what was historically constructed can be undone.
2. The white race is like a private club, which grants privileges to certain people in return for obedience to its rules.
3. The rules of the white club do not require that all members be strong advocates of white supremacy, merely that they defer to the prejudices of others. The need to maintain racial solidarity imposes a stifling conformity on whites, on any subject touching even remotely on race.
4. It [membership solidarity] is based on one huge assumption: that all those who look white are, whatever their complaints or reservations, fundamentally loyal to it.

Conclusion

Sociological discourse has generally embraced "race" as a socially constructed notion and tends not to endorse its popular acceptance as a "natural" phenomenon. By employing Giddens' (1984) conceptual tools as outlined above, we can clearly see the processes flowing into the structuration of the concept "race." Sociological inquiry can illuminate the structuring or institutionalized process of the duality of "race." Thus the focus of such inquiry would be on the binary rather than unitary character of racialized social interaction patterns and their routinization or structuration in American society as the natural order of things. Such inquiry can potentially illuminate the structuring or institutionalizing process of a racialized social order. However, the literature appears to reflect an under-representation of studies addressing the duality of "race."

To fill this void, anti-racist scholarship in the form of *Whiteness* studies has joined the conversation about how to analyze American "race" relations. Typically, scholars have problematized 'blackness' and/or 'the other,' and therefore overlooked the social and political significance of *whiteness* in the black/white dichotomy that characterizes how most Americans perceive "race." Scholars such as Omi and Wynant (1986), David Roediger (1991), Joe Feagin (2001), Cornel West (1994), Ruth Frankenberg (1993), and Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey (1996) are only a few who are calling for and providing legitimacy to inquiry into antiracist scholarship and the social construction of *whiteness*.

To talk about racism by intent is moot and somewhat unproductive. It is however, useful to conceptualize the construction of America's labor market and social mobility opportunities in terms of white-skin privilege. However, whether "race relations" studies of social relations are grounded in solid research, or continue to be based upon normative and uncritical foundations, consequences do follow. While the manifest consequence of American racialization and legitimation of white privilege is linked to Anglo-Saxon perceptions of racial superiority, and thus used to justify the exploitation of the labor of non-white peoples in the Americas and Africa, unintended or latent but patterned consequences continue to be realized.

As early as 1966, the British scholar Michael Banton (1966:8) suggested that when racial distinctions are used as a way of organizing social relations, unanticipated but systematic consequences flow from identifying basic roles by racial signs:

– ascription of roles to individuals
– the maintenance of racially-divided, two-category social systems dependent upon this line [color line] being kept distinct

– ascribed identities affect changes in the socio-political system over time
– to maintain a system of institutionalized inequality it is necessary to develop some ceremonial expression of super- and subordination which is regularly enacted.
– thus, the operation of race as a social category follows ascertainable principles which it is the sociologist's task to uncover.

In conclusion, I argue that mainstream America manifestly benefited in the past and benefits today from the profit made by the use of hundreds of years of free labor and thus, low production costs. It was the labor and production system of early slavery that produced an efficient method of capital investment and production. Keeping the labor cost low allowed for the creation of wealth based on capital investment, the ownership of real estate, and the ownership of human beings categorized as property.

The latent consequences of such an arrangement continue to be prominent in the year 2006. The collective consciousness of many Americans continues to be informed by the rules of antiquated "'race" norms. The content of this public consciousness produces latent consequences in subordinate groups and it manifests as low self-worth and low self-esteem for the descendants of those who were enslaved, while the descendants of the masters and overseers continue to enjoy, in general, the benefits of white-skin privilege.

Secondly, and most damaging to the descendants of those who were enslaved is the construction of class conflict. While the rich get richer, poor and uneducated whites and blacks compete for the limited opportunities that exist in the new, information economy. Further, and equally damaging, is that among most descendants of the formerly enslaved, there continues to exist a social hierarchy based on skin color . . . the myth of light-complected people implying something better than, or above, dark-complected people.

Empirical research inquiring into the social significance of *whiteness* opens up the way to employ both poststructural and postmodern perspectives to the analysis of "race" relations in America by investigating the nature of the meaning and political significance of *whiteness*. Chicago School scholars, critical theorists, and feminist scholars share a similar view in terms of problematizing *whiteness* as appropriate questions for research inquiry. Their focus tends to be on interaction and the subjective meaning(s) of "race" and *whiteness*. They raise questions that the "received view" or conventional approaches to the study of "race" relations tend to overlook or ignore.

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