

# **A Critical and Comprehensive Sociological Theory of Race and Racism<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This article contests the contention that sociology lacks a sound theoretical approach to the study of race and racism, instead arguing that a comprehensive and critical sociological theory of race and racism exists. This article outlines this theory of race and racism, drawing from the work of key scholars in and around the field. This consideration of the state of race theory in sociology leads to four contentions regarding what a critical and comprehensive theory of race and racism should do: 1) bring race and racism together into the same analytical framework; 2) articulate the connections between racist ideologies and racist structures; 3) lead us towards the elimination of racial oppression; and 4) include an intersectional analysis.

## **Introduction**

Three of the most prominent sociologists of race in the United States agree on one thing: sociology lacks a sound theoretical approach to the study of race and racism. In his 1997 *American Sociological Review* article, sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva stated: “the area of race and

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ethnic studies lacks a sound theoretical apparatus.” Shortly thereafter, another prominent sociologist of race, Howard Winant (2000: 178) agreed, when he stated in his *Annual Review* article on race and race theory: “The inadequacy of the range of theoretical approaches to race available in sociology at the turn of the twenty-first century is striking.” One year later, sociologist Joe Feagin in *Racist America*, posited “in the case of racist oppression, ... we do not as yet have as strongly agreed-upon concepts and well-developed theoretical traditions as we have for class and gender oppression” (2001: 5). Notably, that line stayed intact in the 2014 edition of *Racist America*. And, in the third edition of *Racial Formation*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2015: 4) wrote: “Despite the enormous legacy and volume of racial theory, the concept of race remains poorly understood and inadequately explained.”

In this essay, I contest this assertion that theories in the sociology of race and racism are underdeveloped. Instead, I argue we can bring together the work of the scholars cited above along with other critical work on race and racism, inside and outside of sociology, and conclude that sociologists do have a comprehensive and critical sociological theory of race and racism. This essay thus contests the bold claim made by Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer (2015: 1) that “there has never been a comprehensive and systematic theory of race.” The goal of this essay is to outline a critical sociological

theory of race and racism, drawing from the work of key scholars in and around the field.

The purpose of a critical theory of race and racism is to move forward our understanding of racial and racist dynamics in ways that bring us closer to the eradication of racial oppression. Legal scholar Dorothy Roberts (2012: 5) explains that race is a “political category” and a “political system,” ... which means we “must use political means to end its harmful impact on our society.” Roberts cautions that this does not mean we should discard the idea of race; instead she posits we should use a politicized lens to understand the pernicious impacts of race as a political system. Roberts’ position stands in contrast to Emirbayer and Desmond’s (2015: 42) distinction between political and intellectual motivations for scholarship, and their preference for the latter. Nevertheless, in the spirit of Emirbayer and Desmond (2015: 43), I agree that “reflexivity requires not only exposing one’s intellectual biases but also being honest about how one’s political allegiances and moral convictions influence one’s scientific pursuits” and thus contend that the study of race *must* be political and politicized because there is no good reason to study race other than working towards the elimination of racial oppression.

Furthermore, in the spirit of reflexivity, it is also crucial to consider one’s positionality when doing race scholarship. I write this piece as a tenured professor and a white woman. My position as a

tenured professor provides me with the academic freedom to write what I think without the fear of losing my job. As a white woman, I can be critical of racism without being labeled “angry” in the same way that people of color may be. I also write as a committed anti-racist. I work to end racial oppression even though I reap the material and psychological benefits of white privilege for two main reasons: 1) the system of white supremacy materially and psychologically damages people I love more than I love myself; and 2) racial oppression suppresses human potential by holding back amazing people of color while pushing forward mediocre white people. In this sense, racism has pernicious societal effects for all.

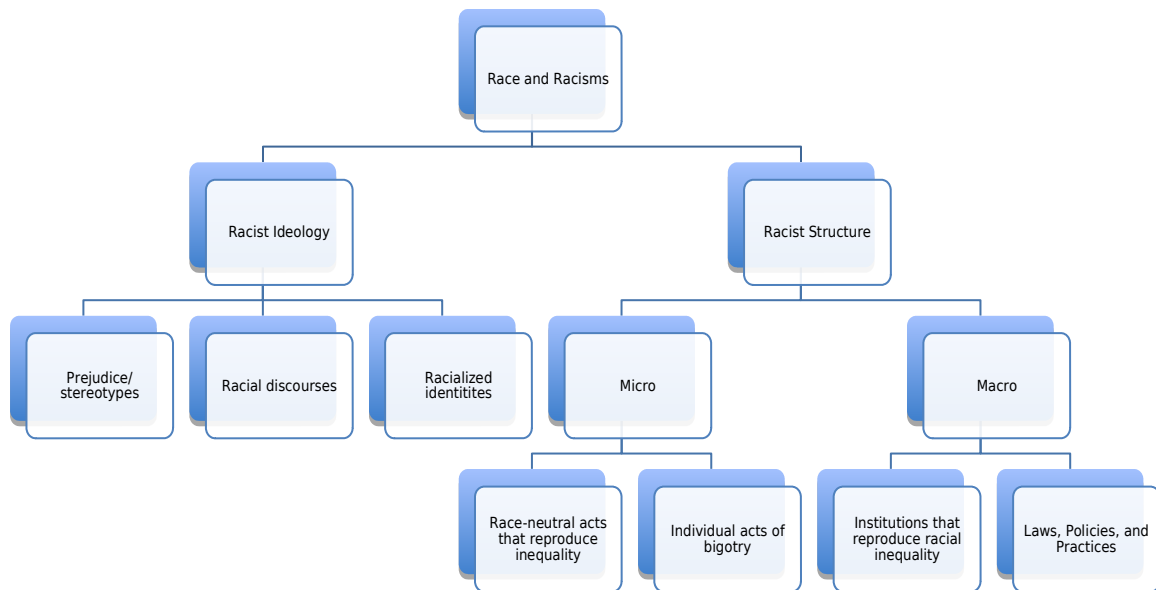
Critical race scholarship in sociology also needs a framework flexible enough to be applied across settings. Theoretical knowledge undergirds empirical work as it helps us to know which questions to ask and how to interpret our findings. At the same time, empirical work helps push theory forward and can reveal the limitations of current theories. Whereas Emirbayer and Desmond (2015: 3) contend that the abundance of empirical work in the field of race has led to “theoretical atrophy,” I explain how rich empirical work constantly pushes the boundaries of race theory and renders it clear which direction the field should move in.

This essay pulls theories of race and racism together into one theoretical framework. Recently, Matthew Desmond and Mustafa

Emirbayer (2009) have attempted to do the same. However, whereas they contend research in the sociology of race “has produced ... few insights that apply more generally to racial life” (Emirbayer and Desmond 2015: 334), I argue that the sociology of race has a well-established foundation with many profound insights. In addition, I contend that the claim that race theory is inadequate requires an empirical example that reveals its inadequacy, which Emirbayer and Desmond (2015) do not provide.

The graphic below presents a visualization of the comprehensive theory of race and racisms I lay out in this essay. This foundation provides an ample starting point for scholarship on race and racism. Empirical and theoretical work by race scholars is constantly pushing at the boundaries of this framework; however, I have yet to see an empirical study of race and racism that justifies the claim that we need to upend this framework and start anew.

**Figure 1: A Comprehensive Sociological Theory of Race and Racism**



## Defining Race

The idea of “*race*” includes the socially constructed belief that the human race can be divided into biologically discrete and exclusive groups, based on physical and cultural traits (Morning 2011). This idea of race is inextricably linked to notions of white or European superiority that became concretized during the colonization of the Americas and the concomitant enslavement of Africans. Race is a modern concept and a product of colonial encounters (Mills 1997). The way we understand the idea of race today is distinct from previous ways of thinking about human difference. Before the conquest of the Americas, there was no worldview that separated all of humanity into distinct races (Smedley 1999; Montagu 1997; Quijano 2000). The idea that some people are white and others are black, for example, emerged in the seventeenth century when European settlers in North America

gradually transitioned from referring to themselves as Christians to calling themselves whites and enslaved Africans, Negroes (Jordan 1968).

In the current context of globalization, every corner of the earth has been affected by “global white supremacy” (Mills 1997: 3). However, that does not mean that every form of social differentiation is necessarily connected to race or racism. For example, the skin color distinctions between Chinese people that Desmond and Emirbayer (2009) reference are not racial distinctions, but another form of social classification that predates colonialism. Moreover, colorism prior to colonialism did not involve the biological conceptualization of race that emerged after European colonial domination of non-European populations. Scholars who focus on Asia (Rondilla and Spickard 2007; Saraswati 2010; Saraswati 2012) attribute the preference for light skin in some parts of Asia to pre-colonial ideas that equated leisure with light skin and work with dark skin. As early as the late ninth century, the ancient Sanskrit text *Ramayana* featured light skin as ideal (Saraswati 2010). These pre-colonial modes of social differentiation involve evaluations of skin color, but do not constitute a racial hierarchy insofar as they are unrelated to the history of the idea of race, do not derive from a biological theory of superior and inferior groups with innate differences, and are not part of a racial worldview.

It is imperative to trace the genealogy of the idea of race as it helps us to perceive what is “race” and what is not. Racial categories and ideologies change over time, but race as a worldview can be traced back to ideas European scientists promulgated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. One of the earliest examples of racial pseudoscience is the work of Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus (Eze 1997). In 1735, Linnaeus proposed that all human beings could be divided into four groups. These four groups are consistent with the modern idea of race in two ways: the four categories continue to be meaningful today, and Linnaeus connected physical traits such as skin color with cultural and moral traits such as “indolent.” Carolus Linnaeus described these four groups, which correspond to four of the continents, in *Systemae Naturae* in 1735:

*Americanus*: reddish, choleric, and erect; ... obstinate, merry, free; ... regulated by customs.

*Asiaticus*: sallow, melancholy, ... black hair, dark eyes, ... haughty, ... ruled by opinions.

*Africanus*: black, phlegmatic, relaxed; women without shame, ... crafty, indolent, negligent; governed by caprice.

*Europaenus*: white, sanguine, muscular; inventive; governed by laws.

These racial categories were invented by Europeans in the context of European colonization, slavery, and genocide, and form the basis for



racial thinking today. Any theory of race and racism must take into account this brutal history.

### **A Sociological Theory of Race and Racism**

Sociological scholarship tends to focus primarily on race (Omi and Winant 2015; Cornell and Hartmann 2007) or on racism (Feagin 2014; Bonilla-Silva 1997; 2014), thereby separating out these dialectically related concepts. Whereas Omi and Winant (2015) argue we need a more refined understanding of the concept of race, Bonilla-Silva (1997) contends we need a better understanding of the structures of racial oppression, and Feagin (2014) maintains that racial formation theory does not adequately account for the deep entrenchment of systemic racism as a core function of U.S. society. A comprehensive theory of race and racism should bring race and racism together into the same analytical framework because we cannot separate the construction of race from the reproduction of racism. This framework further needs to articulate the connections between racist ideologies and racist structures. *Racism* refers to both (1) the *ideology* that races are populations of people whose physical differences are linked to significant cultural and social differences and that these innate hierarchical differences can be measured and judged, and (2) the micro- and macro-level *practices* that subordinate races believed to be inferior (Golash-Boza 2015).

*Individual, Institutional, and Structural Racism*

Although it is evident that racial categories were created using pseudoscience, we continue to use these categories today. Moreover, these categories are used in ways that are psychologically and materially harmful. For example, individual acts of bigotry such as using racial slurs or committing hate crimes continue to be prevalent in the United States (Feagin 2014). In addition, microaggressions - daily, commonplace insults and racial slights that cumulatively affect the psychological wellbeing of people of color - abound (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yasso 2000). Studies consistently find that individual acts of bigotry are commonplace, even in places such as college campuses, which one might presume to be more accepting than most other places (Harper and Hurtado 2007; Chou, Lee and Ho 2015). A recent study of African Americans on college campuses found that white students and professors consistently doubted the academic potential of African Americans (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yasso 2000). Derald Wing Sue and his colleagues found that Asian Americans experienced a wide variety of microaggressions, ranging from the assumption of foreignness, to exoticization of Asian women, to invisibility (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Dadal and Torino 2007).

Individual acts of bigotry sustain racism and are harmful to people of color. However, race-neutral acts can also serve the same function. For example, my white colleagues have told me that they give hiring preference to people with whom they get along. These

same colleagues often have social circles that are almost exclusively white. Although they may be unaware of these biases, it is harder for them to imagine “getting along” with non-whites. Psychologists have labeled this phenomenon “aversive racism,” understood as “a subtle, often unintentional, form of bias that characterizes many White Americans who possess strong egalitarian values and who believe that they are nonprejudiced” (Dovidio et al 2002). Similarly, admissions committees that take into account biased tests such as the SAT or the GRE limit access to higher education through this allegedly race-neutral act. A recent article in *Nature* reported that the practice of relying on graduate record examinations (GRE) scores is a poor method of “selecting the most capable students and severely restricts the flow of women and minorities into the sciences” (Miller and Stassun 2014: 303). This practice is so widespread, however, that it has become part of institutional racism, to which we will now turn.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, sociological thinking on racism moved away from a focus solely on prejudice and individual acts of racism towards an institutional or structural approach. Carmichael and Hamilton (1967) introduced the idea of institutional racism in their book *Black Power* when they explained that the high rates of black infant mortality in Birmingham and the prevalence of black families in slums are best understood through an analytic of institutional racism. Two years later, Samuel Robert Friedman (1969: 20) defined

“structural racism” as a “pattern of action in which one or more of the institutions of society has the power to throw on more burdens and give less benefits to the members of one race than another on an on-going basis.”

In an essay published in 1979, Carol Camp Yeakey posited that research on institutional racism in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s represented a marked departure from previous research, which had not focused on “the attributes of the majority group and the institutional mechanisms by which majority and minority relations are created, sustained, and changed” (1979: 200). Yeakey then argued that racism operates on both a covert and an overt level and takes two related forms: “The first is on an individual level. The second is on an institutional level where racism as a normative, societal ideology operates within and among the organizations, institutions, and processes of the larger society. And the overt acts of, individual racism and the more covert acts of institutional racism have a mutually reinforcing effect” (200).

The arguments and concepts Yeakey (1979: 203) laid out in her essay continue to be relevant today. She wrote about “the interrelated and cumulative nature of systemic or institutional discrimination and racism,” the way racism works in “social systems,” and explained:

The resource allocation of city schools; residential segregation and housing quality; the location, structure, and placement of

transport systems; hiring and promotion practices; academic underachievement of racial and ethnic minority youth; availability of decent health care; behavior of policemen and judges; a legal order that incarcerates more minorities than majorities; stereotypical images prevalent in the media and school curricula; price gouging in ghetto stores; morbidity, mortality, and longevity rates; lack of political clout and effective legislative representation--these and a myriad of other forms of social, political, and economic discrimination concurrently interlock to determine the status, welfare, and income of the racial and ethnic minorities of color.

Unfortunately, nearly 40 years later, we can make the same assessment with regard to systemic racism. Fortunately, scholars of race and racism continue to refine these theories and approaches. The work of Joe Feagin and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has been at the center of macro-level theories of racism in sociology. Joe Feagin builds on the concept of “systemic racism,” which he defines as “a diverse assortment of racist practices; the unjustly gained economic and political power of whites, the continuing resource inequalities; and the white-racist ideologies, attitudes, and institutions created to preserve white advantage and power” (Feagin: 2001: 16).

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva builds upon the concept of “racialized social systems,” which he defines as “societies in which economic,

political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories” (1997: 469). Bonilla-Silva places particular emphasis on racial hierarchies and points to how these hierarchies influence all social relations. Societies that have racialized social systems differentially allocate “economic, political, social, and even psychological rewards to groups along racial lines” (1997:442).

In *Beneath the Surface of White Supremacy*, sociologist Moon-Kie Jung (2015) contends that Bonilla-Silva’s structural theory of racism is one of the “most compelling and influential reconceptualizations” of racism insofar as it moves racial theories beyond the realm of ideology. However, Jung (2015) contends that race theory requires a more complex understanding of structure and a clearer articulation of how dominant racial ideology articulates with structures of racial inequality. To address this concern, Jung (2015: 49) redefines racism as “structures of inequality and domination based on race” and argues that the structure of racism refers to the “reiterative articulation of schemas and resources through practice.” In this way, Jung’s redefinition helps us to see how racist ideologies and racist structures are mutually constitutive of one another.

### *Racist Ideologies*

In his 1997 article, Bonilla-Silva explains how racialized social systems develop racial ideologies and contends that racial ideologies have a

structural foundation. A racial ideology is a set of principles and ideas that (1) divides people into different racial groups and (2) serves the interests of one group. Ideologies are created by the dominant group and reflect the interests of that group. Racial ideologies change over time because the needs and interests of the elite change. As Karl Marx wrote in *The German Ideology*, “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.” Both historically and today, the dominant racial group in the United States is white (Feagin 2001).

The work of philosopher Charles Mills (1997) is helpful in terms of linking ideology and structure as he explains that “global white supremacy is ... a particular power structure of formal or informal rule, socioeconomic privilege and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties.” (Mills 1997: 3) This set of formal and informal rules, norms, rights, and duties is enforced by the prevailing racial ideology. During the era of slavery in the United States, “de jure white supremacy” (Mills 1997: 73) prevailed. In contrast, the current period of de facto white supremacy is characterized by “the pretence that formal, juridical equality is sufficient to remedy inequities created on a foundation of several hundred years of racial privilege” (Mills 1997: 73) and “an illusory color blindness that actually entrenches white privilege” (Mills 1997: 77).

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2014: 25) elaborates on this notion that white supremacy in the United States has changed since the 1960s yet continues to produce racial inequality. Bonilla-Silva lays out the elements of the “new racial structure,” which he defines as: “*the totality of social relations and practices that reinforce white privilege*” (9) (emphasis in original). These elements include “the increasingly *covert* nature of racial discourse and racial practices; the avoidance of racial terminology” (27) (emphasis in original) and other practices that make racism more discrete yet nonetheless potent. He further posits that “much as Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defending a brutal and overt system of racial oppression in the pre-civil rights era, color-blind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-civil rights era.” (3)

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s work on color-blind racism has been critical in our efforts to understand how racial ideologies work on the ground. Color-blind racism is a racial ideology that explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial factors, such as market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and nonwhites’ supposed cultural limitations. However, color-blind ideology is not the only racial ideology that operates today. Moon-Kie Jung (2015) explains that “schemas of ‘colorblindness’ operate at rather ‘shallow’ depths – as ideology.” (44) Jung (2015) contends that if we dig just a bit deeper, we find widespread and persistent anti-black



schemas and discourses. Jung gives an example of hiring practices: employers do not just use color-blind discourses when they decide not to hire black men, they often use anti-black discourses such as that black men are unmotivated and have bad attitudes.

There are many excellent examples of how our understanding of racial ideologies is constantly advancing. For example, sociologist Amanda Lewis (2004: 632) proffers the notion of “hegemonic whiteness” as an example of a discourse that undergirds racial ideologies and justifies racial inequalities. Lewis explains: “For an ideology to gain hegemony, ... it must successfully naturalize the status quo. ... Racial ideologies in particular provide ways of understanding the world that make sense of racial gaps in earnings, wealth, and health such that whites do not see any connection between their gain and others' loss” (Lewis 2004: 632-3). The work of Patricia Hill Collins (2004) is also useful here as she explains: “When ideologies that defend racism become taken-for-granted and appear to be natural and inevitable, they become hegemonic. Few question them and the social hierarchies they defend.” (96) For Collins, “new racism reflects sedimented or past-in-present racial formations from prior historical periods” (55).

There is general agreement among race scholars that the post-1965 era is distinct, and scholars use different analytical techniques to describe the new forms of racism. Michael Omi and Howard Winant

(2015) use a Gramscian analogy of “war of maneuver” and “war of position” to characterize the transition of the United States from a place where non-whites had no political voice to one where people of color have achieved some political gains. They explain that whereas the state could once be overtly violent towards non-whites, “in the post-civil rights era, the racial state cannot merely dominate; it must seek *hegemony*” (147) (emphasis in original). Omi and Winant (2015) attribute this shift primarily to “the black movement and its allies.” Their emphasis here is on the fact that racial dynamics only changed because of extreme political pressure from an anti-racist movement. All of these scholars use Gramscian or Marxian understandings of hegemony and ideology, which permit us to develop a clear understanding of what racist ideologies are and how they articulate with structures of racial domination.

Two important consequences of racist ideologies today are the prevalence of racialized identities and the proliferation of racial stereotypes. An examination of these facets of white supremacy renders it evident that an understanding of racial ideology must be clearly articulated with other structures of domination such as capitalism and patriarchy.

### *Controlling Images*

Although the concept of “hegemonic whiteness” that Lewis proposes is useful, the work of Collins (2004) helps us perceive that an

understanding of how racial ideologies are promulgated must be intersectional. Hegemonic whiteness is not only racialized; it is also classed and gendered. One of the most compelling sociological discussions of racial discourses can be found in the work of sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2004: 187), who explains that “hegemonic masculinity” is the social idea of what “real men” are and is shaped by ideologies of gender, age, class, sexuality and race. Collins contends that “controlling images” (2004: 165) - gendered depictions of African Americans in the media - define hegemonic masculinity in opposition - by showing what it is not. Controlling images define what marginalized masculinity and subordinated femininity are, thereby defining what hegemonic masculinity is not.

Portrayals of people of color in the media are raced, gendered, and classed—meaning the representations vary by race, class, and gender, and they influence how we think about racial groups in this country. Patricia Hill Collins (2004: 147) argues “mass media has generated class-specific images of Black women that help justify and shape the new racism of desegregated, color-blind America.” In addition, Collins’ analysis can be extended to other groups, as the idea of “controlling images” also can be applied to Latinos, Native Americans, Asians, and Arabs.

In *Race and Racisms*, I brought together a broad range of scholarship on media stereotypes and used Patricia Hill Collins’

concept of controlling images to develop a characterization of prevalent gendered stereotypes of non-whites in contemporary U.S. media. The table below renders it evident that an understanding of racialized discourses must involve a consideration of gender. For example, when someone says “terrorist” in the United States, the image of an Arab man comes to mind for many Americans. Likewise, the stereotypical “welfare queen” is a black woman.

**Table 1: Gendered and racialized controlling images**

	Men	Women
Arabs	Terrorist	Veiled Victim
	Immoral Billionaire	Exotic Seductress
	Haggler	Maiden
Native Americans	Savage	Squaw
	Sidekick	Princess
	Wise Elder	Matriarch
Latinos/as	Doomed Warrior	
	Latin Lover	Hot-blooded Latina
	Greaser/Bandito	Maid
	Gangbanger	Abuela (Grandma)
Asians	Gardener	Mexican Spitfire
	Buffoon	
	Buddy	Butterfly
	Threatening foreigner	Dragon Lady
	Martial artist	

	Corrupt businessman	
African Americans	Thug Athlete Rapist Sidekick	Mammy Bitch Welfare queen Video ho

(adapted from Golash-Boza 2015)

These stereotypical representations not only shape how people in the United States view one another; they also work to justify rampant inequalities. Representations of Latinos as drug kingpins, gangbangers, and petty criminals work to justify the disproportionate rates of imprisonment for Latinos. Representations of Latinas as possessing uncontrolled sexuality serve to justify cuts in welfare and restrictions on immigration. And representations of Latinas as maids reinforce the idea that Latinas are destined for-low wage occupations. These stereotypes also work to justify foreign interventions. Hollywood has played an important role in portraying the Arab world as an exotic place that requires white Westerners to civilize its people and drag them into the twenty-first century. Shoba Sharad Rajgopal (2010) argues that representations of Arab women as veiled, traditional, and oppressed work to reinforce the stereotype that Western culture is “dynamic, progressive, and egalitarian,” whereas Arab cultures are “backward, barbaric, and patriarchal.” (145) Rajgopal further contends that these stereotypes reinforce the idea that Americans need to go to

Iraq and Afghanistan and rescue women from their brutal oppressive Arab husbands. A consideration of these stereotypes helps us to see how ideologies articulate with structures: the “controlling image” of the black man as a thug has been critical to the expansion of the criminal justice system. Racialized and gendered fears of crime have justified the development of the prison-industrial complex.

Because media depictions shape our perceptions, and portray white characters with more depth and redeeming qualities, they work to justify the fact that whites tend to do better on nearly any social measure. In a similar fashion, the depiction of Americans as the (white) saviors of the world helps to shape our perception of the United States as the beacon of democracy, even as the military wreaks havoc on the Middle East. These gendered and racialized discourses reinforce prevalent stereotypes about people of color in the United States, and also work to define whites as morally superior. These ideologies articulate with structures that reproduce inequality as explained in the work of Bonilla-Silva, Feagin, Collins, and Mills.

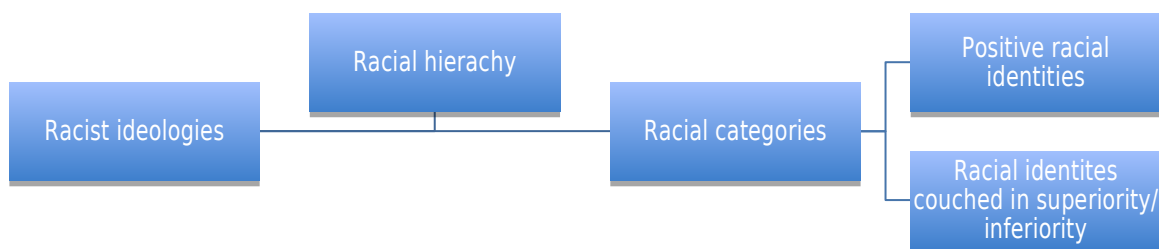
### *Racialized Identities*

Although racial categories were created during the time of slavery, genocide, and colonialism, they have taken on their own meaning over time. We still use categories such as White, Black, Asian, and Native American to make meaning of our social world. In the United States, Arab and Latino/a have emerged as meaningful racial categories. In

Latin America, *mestizo* (white/Indian) and *mulato* (white/black) as well as other racialized categories continue to shape social life. One key aspect of racial categories is that they are flexible and can accommodate distinct social realities. The emergence of “Arab” and “Latino” as racialized categories in the United States is an example of how racial ideologies can evolve and change the racial structure itself.

Insofar as racialized categories have taken on deep meaning for many marginalized groups - including campaigns such as #blacklivesmatter - it may seem problematic to trace all racialized identities to racist ideologies. However, if we think about the root of these unity struggles, it becomes clear that these calls for unity come about because of racist ideologies and structures. A recent example of this is the emergence of #blacklivesmatter in response to police killings of black people. The schema below lays out this process, which acknowledges that positive and negative racial identities exist, yet are rooted in racist ideologies and related to a racial hierarchy.

**Figure 2: Racist ideologies and racial identities**



Many scholars of race would agree with this line of argument. Charles Mills (1997: 63) posits that the racial contract creates not only “racial exploitation, *but race itself* as a group identity.” Amanda Lewis (2004: 625) contends that “*race* as a set of identities, discursive practices, cultural forms, and ideological manifestations would not exist without racism.” Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2015: 138) sum up the thinking on this succinctly: “We make our racial identities, both individually and collectively, but not under conditions of our own choosing” (Omi and Winant 2015: 138). Omi and Winant further contend: “The forging of new collective racial identities during the 1950s and 1960s has been the single most enduring contribution of the anti-racist movement” (2015: 153).

The work of Omi and Winant on “racial formation” is particularly useful for an understanding of racial identities. Omi and Winant (1994) define racial formation as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed,” and as a “process or historically situated project” (56). They argue that the state (national government) is the primary site where race is constructed and contested. Omi and Winant explore “how concepts of race are created and changed” and argue that “concepts of race structure both state and civil society” (vii). They also say that “race” is the symbolic representation of social conflict expressed through physical characteristics. And it is variable over time.



The concept of racial formation blends an understanding of social structures with cultural representations. Omi and Winant use the concept of a racial project, which they define as being “simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (1994: 56). Racial projects give meaning to racial categories through cultural representations while also organizing our social world on the basis of race through social structures. Cultural ideas and social structures work together in racial formation projects.

*Racial Formation* has served as the basis for a substantial body of scholarly work on racial identities and meanings. It is useful for thinking about how race is “a template for the processes of marginalization that continue to shape social structures as well as collective and individual psyches” (Omi and Winant 2015: 107). It is worthwhile to think about this concept of racial meanings alongside scholarship that deals specifically with identity as a concept. A useful starting point is Brubaker and Cooper’s (2000) clarification on the difference between identification and identity (notwithstanding the fact that they reject the concept of identity). A person can be identified as a member of a racial group by the state, by themselves, or by other members of society. The state has the “material and symbolic resources to impose the categories, classificatory schemes, and modes of social counting and accounting with which bureaucrats, judges,

teachers, and doctors must work and to which non-state actors must refer” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 16). Whereas identification is a process whereby a person is identified or categorized, identity is a condition. Jenkins (1994) lends further clarity to this distinction as he explains that “identity is produced and reproduced in the course of social interaction” (210). The persistent categorization of a person as a member of a racial group often leads to internalization of that label and the adoption of a racial identity.

The (racial) state has produced racial categories and Clara Rodriguez’s (2000) work sheds important light on how this happened and is a useful starting point for thinking about how people can “ignore, resist, or accept ... the state-defined categories and the popular conventions concerning race” (18). “Hispanic” is a state-produced ethnic category that many people with roots in Latin America resist, preferring instead to identify with their national origin (Rodriguez 2000). Nevertheless, about half of the self-identified Latino respondents to the 2002 National Latino Survey reported their race as Latino. Moreover, those with darker skin and who had experienced discrimination were more likely to self-identify as Latino (Golash-Boza and Darity 2008). It can be difficult for African Americans (or other people identified as black) to reject a black identity given that it is harder for many people of African descent to escape racialization as black. However, embracing a black identity has positive outcomes

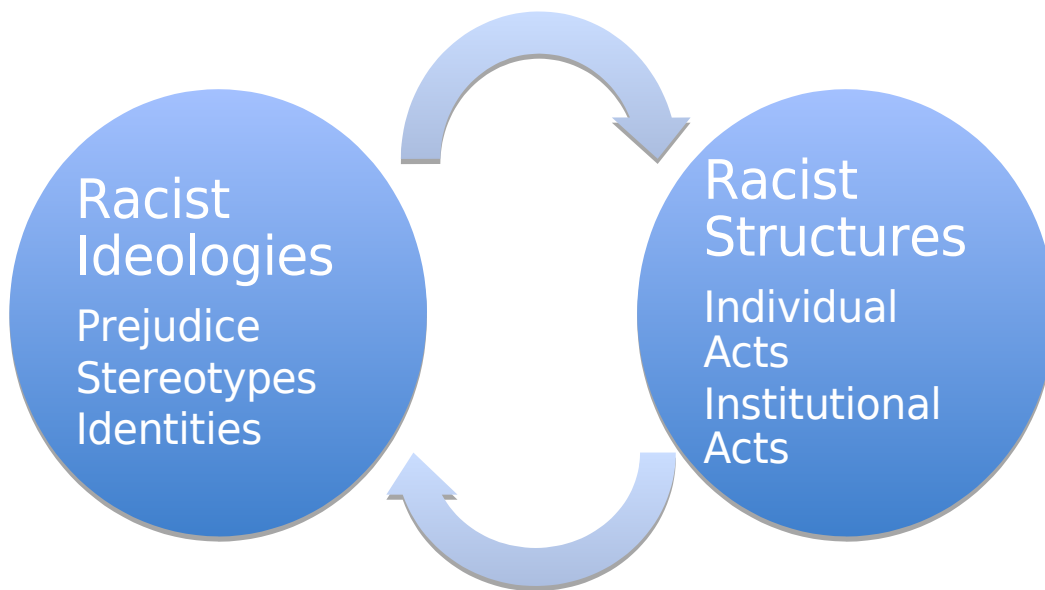
insofar as African Americans who identify closely with other blacks tend to have higher self-esteem and fewer depressive symptoms (Hughes, Kiecolt, Keith, and Demo 2015). Research on Latino identity also shows that a stronger group identity leads to higher self-esteem (Phinney, Cantu, and Kurtz 1997). In sum, although racial categories are produced by the state and through daily interactions, and emerge from a brutal history of oppression, people have embraced these racial identities and transformed them into positive group-based identities. In addition, people have also contested these categories and made claims to the state for distinctive forms of recognition – for example, the calls for the addition of “multiracial” and “Middle Eastern” as racial categories to the Census.

### **Racist Ideologies and Structures**

Racist ideologies lead to controlling images, discourses of hegemonic whiteness, and racialized identities, which in turn lead to racist practices on the micro and macro level, which themselves reinforce racial identities and discourses. These structures and ideologies thus reproduce one another in a dialectical manner. One clear empirical example of the articulation between ideology and structure comes from the work of Wendy Leo Moore (2008: 27) who argues that ideologies of white supremacy and a history of racial oppression work together to produce “white institutional spaces” in elite white schools. For Moore (2008), law schools are white institutional spaces both

because of the fact that the upper administration is (and has always been) primarily white and because of how discourses about whiteness and the law are disseminated within the law school. The figure below is a visualization of how racist ideologies articulate with racist structures.

**Figure 3: Racist ideologies and racist structures**



I will use another example from my work on deportations to explore how these ideologies articulate with structures. In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed into law two pieces of legislation that expanded the grounds on which a person could be deported, narrowed the grounds on which they could appeal, and dedicated increased funding to immigration law enforcement. These laws - the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA) - led to the deportation of 5 million people between 1997 and 2015 (Golash-Boza 2015). Politicians advocated for and implemented these

extremely punitive laws because of racialized and gendered ideologies that painted Latino men as criminal and Latina women as breeders (Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013). The racial ideologies that lead many Americans to see Mexican immigrants as unfit to be citizens or undesirable residents have led to the implementation of a state apparatus designed to remove Latino immigrants. In turn, this state apparatus, which criminalizes Latinos as “illegal aliens,” reinforces ideologies of Latino criminality. This is one example among many possible examples of a clear articulation between racial ideologies and racial structures and allows us to see the material consequences of racial ideologies as well as the dialectical relationship between ideologies and structures.

This example, however, also makes it clear that racial ideologies alone do not account for mass deportation. To understand the implementation of mass deportation, we need to consider gendered, raced, and anti-immigrant discourses. We also need to consider these discourses in light of broader structures of patriarchy, white supremacy, and global capitalism. This brings us back to a consideration of intersectionality.

### **Intersectionality**

At a certain level of abstraction, we can talk about racist ideologies and structures without mentioning class or gender. As Barbara Risman (2004: 444) argues, “Each structure of inequality exists on its own yet

coexists with every other structure of inequality.” In this sense, we can think of Figure 1, which laid out the theoretical framework for this essay, as one pillar of oppression, with similar pillars of gender and class oppression having their own frameworks yet working in conjunction with structures and ideologies of racial oppression. This is similar to arguments made by Omi and Winant (2015: 106) that “race is a master category” and that race, class, and gender oppression are produced in tandem. Nevertheless, once we move beyond abstractions and begin to think about lived experiences, an intersectional framework becomes necessary. The racist discourses that circulate about black men and black women are distinct, and therefore lead to distinct acts of individual and institutional racism. For example, the discourse of black men as dangerous leads to white women crossing the street when they see a black man approaching and also leads to police officers shooting black boys like Tamir Rice for holding a toy gun. The typical white reaction to black women is not marked by the same kind or level of fear. Similarly, the barriers that black women and black men face in employment are not the same and an examination of these barriers requires an intersectional framework (Wingfield 2012).

Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) developed the concept of intersectionality, using the example of black and Latina women in a battered women’s shelter to make her point. She contends we have to

consider race, class, and gender oppression to understand how they ended up in the shelter. The women faced abuse because of gender oppression, but their economically vulnerable situation and racism also play a role. If they had the economic resources, they likely would have gone elsewhere – not to a shelter. If they were white, they would not face racial discrimination in employment, meaning they may have had more resources.

In a similar vein, Priya Kandaswamy (2012) contends that an intersectional perspective helps us understand welfare policies better. She argues that the perspectives of race scholars, Marxists, and feminists often look past one another. In contrast, she takes an intersectional perspective to shed light on the 1996 welfare reforms. Ideas of gender, sexuality, race and class work together to create public understandings of who deserves state assistance and who does not. The subtext of the “welfare queen” in the successful passage of the 1996 welfare reform is due to the raced, class-based, gendered, and heteronormative ideas surrounding the welfare queen. The 1996 law explicitly embraced marriage, was based on a public discussion of family values and personal responsibility, and was designed to reform the “welfare queen,” a stereotype often imagined as a black woman. Priya Kandaswamy (2012) explains how the idea that race is historically produced and constantly changing can complicate our understanding of intersectionality, as it forces us to look at how race

and gender “are constituted in and through each other” (26).

Kandaswamy’s and Crenshaw’s work are both exemplary of how empirical analyses can question existing theoretical frameworks and move them forward in exciting ways.

Returning to the example of mass deportation, it is also clear that a comprehensive understanding of mass deportation requires looking not only at race/class/gender as many intersectionality scholars do, but also at white supremacy/global capitalism/patriarchy as the structures that maintain and are justified by racist, sexist, and classist discourses. An understanding of mass deportation requires a consideration of the political economy of racialized and gendered state repression. Mass deportation is a form of state repression based on stereotypes of “criminal aliens” that disproportionately targets Latino and Caribbean men. “Controlling images” (Collins 2004) of black, Latino, and Arab men as threatening have served as discursive fodder for the implementation of state repression. Moreover, we have to consider deportation as part of a system of global apartheid—where (mostly white) affluent citizens of the world are free to travel to where they like whereas the (mostly non-white) poor are forced to make do in places where there are fewer resources. Global apartheid depends on the possibility and reality of deportation. Finally, 98 percent of people deported are sent to Latin America and the Caribbean and 90 percent of them are men even though there is no raced or gendered language



in the Immigration and Nationality Act which governs immigration policy enforcement (Golash-Boza 2015).

The work of Zulema Valdez (2011:33-35) is exemplary here in terms of a consideration of global capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy insofar as she explains how these systems of oppression work in articulation with one another. She explains: “capitalism produces inequality that is based on a class hierarchy of privilege and oppression ... Patriarchy justifies the maintenance and reproduction of men’s power .... [and] White supremacy justifie[s] ... racial exploitation.” She further contends that “the American social structure is constituted by the interlocking systems of capitalism, patriarchy, and White supremacy.” We need more work in this line of thinking that grapples with race, class, and gender not just as discourses or ideologies but also as structures or systems of oppression.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This essay pulls theories of race and racism together into one theoretical framework by articulating the connection between racist ideologies and racist structures. This analysis began with a discussion of the genealogies of the idea of race and the sociological understanding of racism in order to highlight the points of agreement among race scholars. I then draw from the work of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Joe Feagin, Charles Mills, Patricia Hill Collins, Carol Camp Yeakey, Zulema Valdez, Amanda Lewis, Dorothy Roberts, Wendy Leo Moore,

and other scholars to argue that we have a solid understanding of racial ideologies and how they articulate with racial structures. I use a few key empirical examples to show how empirical research has helped to move theories of race and racism forward. These examples, however, reveal the need for an intersectional framework in most areas of race scholarship. These and other examples of empirical work constantly push the boundaries of race theory and render it clear which direction the field should move in.

Now that it has become clear that we do have a sociological theory of race and racism, where do we go from here? Moving forward, I suggest we 1) design empirical studies that help move our field forward; 2) develop projects that draw from existing frameworks to delve deeper into these understandings of how race and racism work on the ground; 3) imagine ways that theories of race and racism can become more conversant with feminist theory and world-systems theory; and 4) get involved in movements to dismantle racism as the best ideas often come through struggle.

The first two are relatively self-explanatory, so I will use the remainder of this conclusion to specify what I mean by the third point, which references intersectionality and the fourth, which involves activism. In a recent essay, feminist scholar Kathy Davis (2008: 68) wrote “it is unimaginable that a women’s studies programme would only focus on gender.” Race scholars should hold ourselves to the

same standard and incorporate political economy and feminist theory into our analyses of race on a consistent basis. It is impossible to study black identity, for example, and separate out the gender, sexuality, class, dis/ability, and other aspects of people who embody blackness. As for activism, race is not a topic that one should study only for its intellectual interest. It should be studied to the end of eradicating racial oppression. Knowledge is most useful when it is produced in community and through struggle. An understanding of racial oppression cannot be an armchair exercise. Instead, race scholars have to start with empirical questions about why things are the way they are and push forward theoretical understandings that help us to explicate and end racial oppression. Working towards dismantling racism both helps us to understand it better and moves us towards its demise. In a conversation about this essay, Sam Friedman reminded me that “struggles against racism tend to lead to creative and more systemic thinking.” I could not agree more.

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