Deconstructing Color Blind Racism:
An Analysis of the Dominant Frames
Of Post Civil Rights Racial Ideology

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The problem of the twenty-first century will be the problem of color blindness—the refusal of legislators, jurists, and most of American society to acknowledge the causes and current effects of racial caste and to adopt effective remedial policies to eliminate them. Bryan K. Fair (1997: xxiii)

INTRODUCTION

All groups in power construct ideologies to explain and ultimately rationalize social inequality. Even in situations of crude domination such as slavery, patriarchy in antiquity, or early capitalism, dominant groups have generated complex ideologies to provide intellectual and moral justification for the dilemmas arising of maintaining domination such as punishing slaves, mistreating women, or employing children in factories. Thus, ideology can be conceived as the broad mental and moral frameworks or “grids” that social groups use to make sense of the world, to decide what is right and wrong, true or false, important or unimportant (Ricouer 1981; van Dijk 1998).

Races in “racialized social systems” (Bonilla-Silva 1997; 1999) have produced throughout history racial ideologies or racially-based frameworks to explain and justify (dominant race) or challenge (subordinate race or races) the racial status quo. In terms of the United States, analysts agree on the broad contours of white racial ideology from the late 17th century until the 1960s. During the slavery era in the United States, for example, masters proclaimed that blacks’ inferior status was due to their sub humanity and thus stipulated that whites had to "care" for them (Franklin 1974 [1947]; Fredrickson 1981; Jordan 1977; Owens 1976; Stampp 1956). Yet, because of the highly coercive and absolutist character of blacks'
1976; Stampp 1956). Yet, because of the highly coercive and absolutist character of blacks' subordination during slavery, racial ideology did not develop greatly until the 1840s and 1850s when slavery became a national issue. In contrast to the slavery era, during the Jim Crow era, as blacks became free subjects, an explicit and elaborate racial ideology became imperative to specify blacks' place in the social order. The central issue became justifying blacks' inferior social place or, in the southern parlance of the time, "how to keep them in their place" (Marable 1981; Zinn 1990). This task was accomplished by an ideology that naturalized the position of blacks and whites in society in biological and moral terms (Newby 1965; vann Woodward 1966).

Events that transpired between the 1940s and 1960s such as (1) the urbanization of racial minorities, (2) the gradual incorporation of minorities in jobs in the industrial sector, (3) the protests by civil rights organizations as well as the rebellion in the streets, that is, the over 200 race riots in the 1960s, and (4) the contradiction between the democratic rhetoric of the United States government at the height of the Cold War and its treatment of minorities at home, led to a change in the racial structure of America (the racial practices that help reproduce white privilege in a racialized social system). Whereas the practices typical of the Jim Crow era were overt and clearly racial, today they tend to be covert, institutional, and apparently nonracial (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1998; Brooks 1992; Smith 1994. See also Bonilla-Silva and Lewis 1999). Whether in politics, housing markets, banks, stores, corporate America, restaurants, schools, or Universities, white supremacy (Mills 1999) is fundamentally maintained.
today through in a style that Roy Brooks (1990) has labeled as “smiling discrimination.”

Not surprisingly, since white supremacy changed in nature, the central ideological glue that binds America’s racial dynamics changed too (Carr 1997). This change has been documented by analysts such as William Ryan (1976) and Joel Kovel (1970), who labeled post civil rights racial ideology in the as “meta racism” and “cultural deprivation” arguments to “blame the victims” respectively. More recently, analysts such as Mary Jackman (1994), Philomena Essed (1996), and Larry Bobo and his associates (Bobo and Smith 1998; Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997; see also Sidanius et al. 2000), have characterized post civil rights racial ideology as “paternalistic,” “competitive,” and “laissez faire.” According to all these analysts, although today’s racial ideology tends to exclude racist—and even racial—speech, it effectively safeguards racial privilege by applying the principles of liberalism to racial matters in an abstract manner as well as by focusing on minorities’ (particularly dark-skinned minority groups such as blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexican-Americans, and some Asian American groups) cultural differences as the reason for their inferior standing and performance in labor and educational markets.

1 Color blind racism is not the only racial ideology in play in America. My argument is, however, that the racial ideology typical of the Jim Crow era based on overt white supremacy has declined in significance and has become secondary (see Chapter 5 in Kinder and Sanders 1996; Carr 1997).
In this paper I follow the arguments of researchers such as Kovel (1970), Ryan (1972), and Essed (1996) and of survey researchers such as Jackman (1994) and Bobo and his associates (Bobo and Smith 1998; Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1998) on the nature of post civil rights racial ideology. However, by studying post civil rights racial ideology --which I label as color blind racism because this term fits better the actual rhetoric used by whites to explain (justify) racial matters-- with a systematic qualitative sample, I am able to provide a more detailed and refined study of the frames of this ideology and illustrate how actors employ them to explain concrete matters. My goals then are to (1) examine the specific dominant frames of color blind racism, (2) analyze how extensive these frames are in whites' social imaginary, and (3) explore how whites use these frames discursively to articulate their views on a variety of issues. In the first part of the paper I operationalize the concept of racial ideology, discuss the data for this paper--the 1998 Detroit Area Study (DAS henceforth), and describe the methods I use to analyze the data. I follow this with a discussion of the four main frames of color blind racism with specific illustrations of how actors use these frames. Finally, I discuss the implications of my findings for future research and policy makers.

RACIAL IDEOLOGY, DATA, AND METHODS

Although ideology is a very slippery notion (Fine and Sandstorm 1993), I propose
operationalizing the notion of racial ideology as an *interpretive repertoire* consisting of the following elements: common frames, style or racetalk, and storylines. *Common frames* are topics central to the maintenance (or challenge) of a racial order. The second component of a racial ideology is *style* or *racetalk*—the idiosyncratic linguistic manners and rhetorical strategies used to articulate racial viewpoints. The third element is *storylines* which are narratives that appear over and over in the justifications (or criticisms) used to maintain (or challenge) racial privilege. Individuals employ these elements as "building blocks... for manufacturing versions on actions, self, and social structures" in communicative situations (Wetherell and Potter 1992: 90). The looseness of the elements allows users to maneuver various contexts (e.g., responding to a race-related survey, discussing racial issues with family, or arguing about affirmative action in a College classroom) and produce various accounts and presentations of self (e.g., appearing ambivalent, tolerant, or strong-minded).  

3. Wetherell and Potter (1992: 90-91) define interpretive repertoires as "systems of signification" composed of "clusters of terms, descriptions, and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images." They are "resources for making evaluations, constructing factual versions and performing particular actions." These repertoires, the textual foundation of *any* ideology, allow users to achieve political goals in communicative situations.

10. Some discourse analysts (Billig 1991) believe that all talk is dilemmatic. Although I recognize that racial ideology (the dominant as well as subordinate ones) has contradictions inscribed in it, I contend that speakers use the various building blocks of an ideology to state
exhibit considerable rhetorical, stylistic, and even affective variations (Jackman 1994; van Dijk 1984; 1998; Wetherell and Potter 1987), analysts can determine whether they are breaking with the dominant repertoire, that is, if they are using a different repertoire altogether. In this paper I focus on documenting the main frames of color blind racism.

The data for this paper comes from the 1998 DAS on white racial ideology. The 1998 DAS is a probabilistic survey of 400 white and black Detroit metropolitan area residents (324 whites and 76 blacks from Wayne, Macomb, and Oakland counties). Follow-up in-depth interview were conducted with a 21 percent random sample of the survey respondents (66 whites and 17 blacks). The response rate for the survey was an acceptable 67.5 percent and for the in-depth interviews it was close to 80 percent (incentives were offered for this part of the research).

Since ideology is expressed and reproduced in communicative interaction, I base most of my analysis on the DAS interview data. The DAS interviews were race-matched, followed positions. The fact that individuals may offer various accounts on an issue does not mean that they do not hold positions on those issues. Variations on expressions are due to contexts, fragmentary application of themes, and conflation of ideologies since people belong to more than one social group. Although variability and ambivalence on issues are real, the most interesting fact is most members of racial groups similar positions on racial issues in different contexts an communicative situations (see van Dijk 1998).
a structured interview protocol, were conducted in the respondents’ homes, and lasted about one hour. After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed verbatim—i.e., included nonlexical, pauses, and meaningful changes in intonation. This is a crucial element of interview-based research (Kohler Riessman 1993; Kvale 1996) dealing with sensitive topics such as race (van Dijk 1984; Wetherell and Potter 1992). After the material was transcribed, the principal investigator performed a basic content analysis of the material to extract the dominant thematic, stylistic, and narrative features.4

**THE FRAMES OF COLOR BLIND RACISM**

**A) The Dominant Frames of Color Blindness**

In the United States most whites proclaim to be color-blind and express their wish to live in a society where race does not matter at all. Yet whites tend to navigate everyday a  

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4 It is possible that actors try to present their “best foot forward” in interviews as much as they do in surveys (strategies of self-presentation are the norm rather than the exception in life). Yet, this process did not affect the coding of the data for this paper since my analytical goal was assessing whether individuals relied (and how) on the frames of color blind racism to articulate their views rather than their specific positions on issues.

5 Politicians such as former President George W. Bush, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, and Louisiana Governor Mike Foster claimed to be color-blind and praised Martin Luther King. However, Congressperson Bush opposed the civil rights legislation in the 1960s,
“white habitus” and seem to be rather “color-conscious” in terms of their choice of significant others (close friends and romantic partners) (Bonilla-Silva and Saenz 2001). When confronted with these apparent contradictions between what they believe and what they do, whites argue that “it’s economics, not race,” “the evidence is not clear,” or that “it’s just the way things are,” or “it’s natural for people to gravitate toward likeness” (for a critique of these arguments, see Chapter 7 in Cose 1997). Based on a content analysis of the DAS interview data, I list the central frames of color blind racism and of alternative interpretive repertoires in Table 1.

**INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

White respondents, as shown in Table 2, used these frames extensively in their answers, specifically between 43 and 94 percent of the time in their responses.\(^6\) I illustrate in

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Newt Gingrich orchestrated the “Contract with America,” and Mike Foster signed an order banning affirmative action in agencies under his control.

\(^6\) Blacks used these themes *significantly* less than whites (a high of 35 percent on abstract liberalism and a low of 6 percent on the denial of the centrality of discrimination). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of an ideology should not be judged exclusively by the number of people who use its topics or its stylistic modalities. A dominant ideology is effective if it blurs the positions of the dominated groups and, more significantly, if it shapes their political struggle against the dominant groups. In the case of blacks (analysis not shown in this paper), although few seem to be *directly* affected by color blindness, this ideology has shaped the argumentative terrain in
the sections below how they used these frames to answer questions on neighborhoods, schools, affirmative action, jobs, and friendship.

**INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

1) *The Reasonable Racist: Liberal Justifications for The Racial Status Quo*

In the post civil rights era whites articulate their racial views as “reasonable racists” (Armour 1997; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000). They apply elements of political (equal opportunity, meritocracy, equal rights) and economic (free market, competition, individuals’ preferences, little government intervention) liberalism to racial matters in an abstract and decontextualized manner that help preserve and rationalize racially unfair situations. I label this frame as *abstract liberalism*. Because this frame has become the centerpiece of color blindness (for example, abstract liberalism was deployed by 96% of the white respondents), I present five cases to illustrate how these topics are deployed by whites in a variety of matters.

First is Jim, a 30 year old computer software salesperson. He explained his opposition to affirmative action in the following way:

*I think it’s unfair top to bottom on everybody and the whole...the whole process*. It often....you know, discrimination itself is a bad word, right? But, uh, but you discriminate everyday and you go...and you look at the...you wanna buy a beer at the store, if there are six kinda beers you can get from Natural

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which they battle and blurred their views on many issues.
Light to Sam Adams, right? And you look at the price and you look at the kind of beer, and you...it’s a choice. And a lot of that you have laid out in front of you...which one you get? Now, should the government sponsor Sam Adams and make it cheaper than Natural Light because it’s brewed by...someone in Boston? That doesn’t make much sense, right? Why would we wanna do that or...make Sam Adams eight times as expensive because we want people to buy Natural Light? And it’s the same thing about getting into school or...getting into some place. And the reason I have that, you know, and universities it’s easy, and universities is a hot topic now, and I could bug you, you know, UM (University of Michigan) I don’t think has a lot of racism in the admissions process. And I think UM would, would agree with that pretty strongly. So why not just pick people that are going to do well at UM, pick people by their merit? I, I think that....I think you, we should stop the whole idea of choosing people based on their color. It’s bad to choose someone based on their color, why do we, why do we enforce it in an institutional process? (Interview 18: 12).

Since Jim assumes that hiring decisions are like market choices (Natural Light or Sam Adams), he embraces a laissez faire position on hiring practices. The problem with Jim’s view is that labor market discrimination is alive and well (e.g., it affects black and Latino job applicants 30 to 50% of the time) and that most jobs are obtained through informal networks (80%) (Holzer
1996; Wilson 1996). Jim himself acknowledged that being white is an advantage in America because “there’s more people in the world who are...white and are racist against people that are black than vice versa” (Ibid.: 11). However, he also believes, as he stated in response to a question on the significance of discrimination for blacks’ life chances, that although blacks “perceive or feel” like there is a lot of discrimination, that he doesn’t believe there is (ibid.: 9). Hence, by upholding a *strict* laissez faire view on labor market decisions and, at the same time, ignoring the significant impact of past and contemporary discrimination in the labor market, Jim, as most whites, can safely voice his opposition to affirmative action.

The second case is Lynn, a human resource manager in her early fifties. Her answer to a question on why there has been so little school integration since the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision is another example of reasonable racism.

I don’t and that’s another one. *I do not believe in busing.* The reason I don’t believe in busing, you know, I said I don’t. I didn’t encourage my children to play with the neighborhood kids. I still felt that going to school in your community was the key to developing a child’s sense of community and I still believe that. One of the reasons, another reason I moved from where I was, was I didn’t want my children to be bused. I didn’t want to have them got on a bus, especially me working. So I don’t think that is an answer. I think the answer is education and helping people learn to make a life for themselves and, you know, any type of social program that interacts, that provides interaction
between races I think is excellent. But ah...I’m just not a busing person

(Interview 25: 10).

Lynn wants equal opportunity in education but also community schools, a position that sounds perfectly reasonable. However, one would expect that Lynn would support doing something to make sure that communities throughout America are diverse, a policy that, other things being equal, would guarantee school integration. Yet, Lynn takes a very strong laissez faire anti government intervention stance on this issue. For example, Lynn’s response to the question “America has lots of all white and all black neighborhoods. What do you think of this situation?, was the following:

...I don’t have a problem with all white and all black neighborhoods.

Ah...if that’s the choice of the people, the individuals. But, if it’s forced either way, if I’m a black person and I’ve come into the neighborhood and I want to live here and, I mean, and I’ve come into the neighborhood and I want to live here and, I mean, selectively denied that option, that’s wrong. But ah...and again, but there still has to be some type of social interaction for growth and if, if the social interaction takes place then, the cross-integration will take place, I think (Ibid.: 11).

When pressed about what can be done specifically to increase the mixing of the races in neighborhoods?, Lynn restated that it ought to be “through educating and encouraging businesses” (Ibid.: 11). Lynn was not alone in having this abstract view on school and
neighborhood integration. Only one of the white respondents who opposed busing (69.7% of whites opposed busing in the survey), provided a specific proposal that if implemented would increase the level of residential as well as school integration.  

The third case is Don, a machinist in his early thirties, who explained his own housing choice, in response to a question on the extent of residential segregation in America, in the following manner:

I wouldn’t write any kind of theme on it because it really doesn’t matter to me.

Uhm...if there’s blacks there or whites there. 'Cause not really the color of the people that’s going to make like an area. Well, to be honest with you, the reason I’m in this area is because of the price I got on this house. And I need a place, so I bought this but when I buy my next house, it doesn’t matter if the people are uhn, the kind of people that I would like or get along with.

Uhm, I would move in that area whether it was all-white, all-black or whatever.

So it really doesn’t matter to me (Interview 30: 4).

Although Don claims to have followed strict market criteria (price) for selecting his place of residence, analysts have documented that racial concerns are central factors influencing people’s housing choices and neighborhood composition (Massey and Denton 1993; Yinger 1995; Bobo and Zabriskie 1997). In our own survey, when asked “If you could find the

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7 One white respondent suggested a tax incentive policy to stimulate residential integration.
housing that you would want and like, would you rather live in a neighborhood that is all white, mostly white, half and half, or mostly black?”, 53.1 percent of whites preferred the “all white” and “mostly white” alternatives (62.2 of blacks preferred the “half and half” answer). And, based on Don’s responses to other questions, it is possible that race may have influenced his own housing choice. For example, when asked if he has ever being attracted to a minority person, he stated the following:

_Uhh, boys out! [Interviewer laughs]_ I just don’t want some of this stuff [Don tells his children, “Go outside and play”]_ Uhmm, you know, it’s OK for the boys to know stuff but, yeah there’s some things that they don’t need to uh know. Just because of you know, the way that I feel as far as you know. I’ve never been in a relationship, well I have been in a relationship with a black person but not as far as someone...but I wouldn’t want my kids to get involved with something like that. That’s why I told them to leave [Interviewer: Oh, you wouldn’t want your kids to get involved with a black woman?] Right, and then, you know, I made that clear in my last thing [he is referring to the survey part of the study] but they [his children] weren’t here so that’s why I asked them to leave (ibid.: 6).

Not surprisingly, Don disapproved of interracial marriage. In his own words:

I really don’t think that they should....Uh, I think that as far as for them, OK but when they bring kids into it, that’s why I say no. I think tah the kids suffer more
than the people that are in the, two adults in that relationship, fine...(ibid.: 6).

The last two cases illustrate how many whites employ a free market view on love in a way that allows them to safely state their doubts (if not opposition) to interracial marriage. First is Darrell, a driver of chartered buses in his late forties who answered the question on interracial marriage as did most white respondents.

I don’t have anything against it if two people are in love and want to get married. The only thing that I see a problem with, ah....I can see where it’s regional. Where the children are gonna have problems because they are mixed.

But the outlook is on the children, if they’re in a racially biased area. I don’t think it’s fair to the kids (Interview 50: 4).

In previous research (Bonilla-Silva and Saenz), I identified this “I don’t have anything against interracial marriage, but...” rhetorical strategy as central in whites’ repertoire of answers to the interracial marriage question. This answer allows respondents to signify their nonracial stand (“if two people are in love”) but, at the same time, to safely offer a plethora of reasons why they believe interracial marriage is problematic (e.g. location, family concerns, children’s welfare, etc.). Furthermore, I suggested that white respondents’ profession of color blindness on love is an abstract ideal that is very unlikely to be realized because most of them live in racially hypersegregated communities and have minimal levels of interaction with blacks.

Seventy percent or white DAS respondents reported living in neighborhoods where blacks were “10% or less” and eighty seven percent reported that none of their three closest
friends were black. Interestingly, of the thirteen percent who reported having black friends, 40 percent reported interacting with them once a month or less.8 This racial isolation from blacks shapes whites’ cognitive, emotional, and even aesthetic reading of blacks. Thus, for example, Darrell, grew up in an almost totally white community in northern Michigan and never had black friends or associates. Although he presently works in Detroit and has worked in all kinds of jobs in the Detroit metro area, he has never had a black friend, close associate, or lover. When questioned about the racial background of all his significant others (he had stated that all of them had been white), he stated that he had not dated blacks because he “just haven’t met anyone I was interested in” and added that “I don’t date down here in Detroit area” because “I’m too busy working” (Ibid.: 4).

The last case is Trudy, a merchandiser for a large retail store in her late twenties, who answered the interracial marriage question as follows:

I don’t know how I feel about that um....I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it. Umm I don’t know if I had a child and they wanted to marry a black

8 Rather than asking how many black/white friends respondents had, DAS asked first a question dealing with the level of activity respondents had with their three closest friends. This was followed up by the question “How many of these (three) friends are black/white?” Blacks were less slightly less likely than whites to live in neighborhoods that had “10% or less” white (61% to 70%) and less likely not to have a white friend (61% to 87%).
person, I don’t know how I would feel. I think it might be kind of odd for the children. And in fact, my husband has a real good friend at work. Her name is Laverne. She’s black and her husband is white and, you know, they’ll have us over for dinner. I mean really nice couple! I mean, I don’t see anything, you know, if that’s what they want to do, I don’t have a problem. Me personally...I don’t know...if I would feel comfortable, you know...(Interview 84: 4-5)

Although Trudy stated, as did many white respondents, that marriage is a matter of people’s choice, it is clear that she has some issues with interracial marriage. When the interviewer pressed her on whether she would do it herself, Trudy replied that: “I don’t know how I would...um, like I’d feel real comfortable with it if I would um...I’d probably feel kind of awkward about it or like our families would think things or...” (Ibid.: 5).

2) The Biologization of Culture: “I think their social values are very different”

Let me now present two cases to illustrate topic 2 in Table 1, whites justifying the inferior status of blacks in America in cultural rather than biological terms. This is another important topic since 88 percent of the white respondents used this topic in their responses. The first case is Ian, a manager of information security at an automotive company in his forties. He explained why blacks have in average worse jobs, income, and housing than whites in the following way:

The majority of `em just don’t strive to do anything, to make themselves
better. Again, I’ve seen that all the way through. “I do this today, I’m fine, I’m happy with it, I don’t need anything better.” Never, never, never striving or giving extra to, to make themselves better. And I know a lot of people say “well, the opportunity isn’t there.” Well, the opportunity wasn’t there when I got into high school either. My parents weren’t rich and they wanted me to go to school and the only way I could go to school was to get a full time job, my parents couldn’t even pay for my books ’cause they didn’t make enough.

So I had to do certain things . . . (DAS Interview 9: 7).

Ian’s perception of blacks as lazy emerged from his understanding of blacks as culturally deficient. In his response to the question, “Do you think that the races are naturally different?,” Ian stated the following:

Well I think that genes have something, some play in this, but I think a lot of it is past history of the people and the way they’re brought up. You look at Chinese, if you’re gonna get ahead in China, you’ve gotta be very intellectual and you’ve gotta be willing to, uh, to fight for everything that you’re gonna get. Ja-Japan is the same way. For a kid just to get into college, they gonna take two years of going through entrance exams to get in. Um...then you kinda look at the blacks’ situation. It’s like, “well, because of slavery, I ought to be given this for nothing, so I don’t have to work for it, just give it to me.” So, I, you know, culture, and their, and the upbringing is the big, the big part of this
Although some analysts regard the demise of biological or Jim Crow racism as a tremendous sign of racial progress (Lipset 1996; Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Sniderman and Carmines 1997), I suggest that whites’ contemporary view of blacks as culturally deficient is as problematic because (1) it is as extensive as biological racism used to be among whites, (2) it regarded by whites as a fixed matter or as something that is very hard to change (hence the idea of the “biologization of culture”), and (3) like biological or God-given ideas of inferiority, it allows whites to express resentment (Kinder and Sanders 1996) and hostility (Jackman 1994) safely since, in their view, blacks are where they are as a group because they do not want to get ahead. For instance, although Ian acknowledged that “being white is still an advantage in America,” he added that “I still think there is a very high level of people that are as frustrated as I am with the, with the blacks not wanting to strive, not wanting to, to do more. Always whining, ‘I don’t have the opportunity,’” “I can’t do that (clears throat). You can if you get off your butt and try. So, you know, I know, (name of Automotive Company) bends over backwards to try to help the blacks up. But I would still say it’s an advantage being white” (Ibid.: 8).

Ian’s relative directness and coarseness in expressing his negative views on blacks, however, was not the norm among white respondents. Most mixed up their answers to avoid the appearance of being flat out antiblack and to deal discursively with the reality of discrimination. For instance, Jill, a salesperson in her thirties, answered a question on blacks’
inferior overall status in a way that resonates with the culture of poverty argument.

I think one of the biggest problems with the black community is lack of education. And I don’t know if that has to do with the schools or if it has to do with the families because there’s a lot of poor people who are educated in other races but not necessarily so in black. I don’t think, I think their social values are very different (Interview # 17: 17).

The interviewer followed-up this response by asking her, “Uhhmm, can you explain that a little?” After being reminded that her answers were confidential and hence that she should not be afraid to state her opinions, Jill said the following:

OK. I think one of the biggest [things] that affects...black families is that there’s a loss of male role. And I think that really umm, because so many are in prison, so many are dead. I mean, they have, they die, their fatality rates are so much higher. I think that the whole nucleus to the family, something’s missing. And because something’s missing, they don’t have it all together. I mean, I don’t care whether you are black, white, green, or yellow to be a single mother raising children is tough and there’s just so many black women that are doing that. And they have low paying jobs and, God the family has got to suffer. Because I know that I can still put my kids in camp and I can still, you know, what I lack as a mother, I can still employ someone whereas these people don’t have those opportunities (Ibid.: 18).
In case that you believe that Jill was here just stating “facts” about blacks’ contemporary situation,\(^9\) let me cite her response to a question on whether the status of minorities is due to lack of motivation, laziness, or lack of proper values, a question that incidentally followed the previous one in the interview schedule.

Minorities, oh I don’t think that. I think there’s a lot of minorities out there that, well, *I think a perfect example of a minority who’s got their act together are Jews. I mean, they put a lot of emphasis on education. And they have been, as a group or people, uhm, prejudiced against forever and they still come to the top of the class.* So, you know, how can you say that about minorities *in general* (ibid.: 18).

This erratic comparison with other minorities is a common storyline used by white respondents to suggest that blacks lack “something” (intelligence, drive, human skills, etc.) which accounts for their low standing in America.

3) *Naturalization of Racial Matters: “People naturally gravitate toward likeness”*

In this section I address frame 3 in Table 1: the naturalization of matters that reflect the effects of white supremacy (43% of white respondents deployed this topic in their responses).

\(^9\) Discourse analysts on racial matters label this as a “force of facts” semantic move, that is, a move to justify a position by presenting “facts” out of context (Wodack 1997; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000).
White respondents deployed this topic mostly when explaining school and residential segregation and, a few, to explain the limited level of interracial marriage. Because this topic has not been discussed previously by other analysts as part of post-civil rights racial ideology, I will provide three examples. The first case is John, the vice president of a pest control company in his forties, who answered questions dealing with school segregation and busing as did most white respondents.

John: I... it's not anybody's fault. *I think it just happens.* I mean when we talk about... about uh... where people live... uhmm... there are backgrounds, *there are cultures, people stay together.* Why is that, that eh, Dearborn has one of the largest Arab communities in the country. Is it anybody's fault? *No,* they chose to live there. Uhm.

Interviewer: Ok, umm, should the government continue busing to guarantee some mixing of the races in our schools?

John: [2 seconds] No. [5 seconds] [Interviewer: For some of these reasons or...?] *Why force the issue?* I mean, you can force it, but what good is it gonna do? Either they're gonna be happy or they aren't gonna be happy. *And uh, it just goes back to...natural tendencies.* People naturally *gravitate...toward...likeness* (Interview# 21:13).

Although John uses a free market rationale to express his opposition to busing ("they chose to live there"), market choices are regarded as grounded in people's "natural tendencies," or in his
words, "people naturally gravitate toward likeness."

The next case is Monica, a medical transcriber in her late fifties who professed throughout the interview her commitment to the Jehovah’s Witness religious viewpoint. For example, she claimed that interracial marriage is “fine” because “one person is a person and I think that people should be treated as individuals and not according to their race or their ethnic beliefs” since “Jehovah is not partial, so why should we be” (Interview 1: 10). However, despite her religiosity, she had very strong racial views. For instance, when asked about busing, Monica stated:

*I think is beating a dead horse.* They don’t want to be there. We don’t want to be there. You know, our, our secondary schools and that, you have a choice. Do your best where you are and when you have the opportunity to go on somewhere else, then make those choices. But your messing with peoples’ minds at this young, vulnerable age, even from kindergarten to high school. You’re messing with the formation of a people. And it’s no wonder why they’re bitter, it’s no wonder they say there is prejudice (sic), you know, we are just perpetuating it. My, uh, one daughter went to U of M and she was in and all girls that was supposed to be integrated, well, guess what? The Jewish girls had their own little group, the black girls had their own, the Japanese had their own (*4 seconds pause*) What integration is there when they chose to stay with their own? *Birds of a feather flock together...it's a natural thing.* And
anybody who disagrees with that, that’s where your prejudice comes (ibid.: 1: 17).

Monica believes that segregation is the result of people’s natural choices (Birds of a feather flock together...it’s a natural thing). Interestingly, Monica uses the expression “birds of a feather flock together” in a positive light here although she had used the same phrase to explain the racist position of her father’s family on interracial dating (Ibid.: 10).

Lastly is Bill, a manufacturing manager in his fifties, who explained school segregation as follows:

Bill: I don't think it's anybody's fault. Because people tend to group with their own people. Whether it's White or Black or upper-middle class or lower class or, you now, upper class, you know, Asians. People tend to group with their own. Doesn't mean if a Black person moves into your neighborhood, they shouldn't go to your school. They should and you should mix and welcome them and everything else, but you can't force people together...If people want to be together, they should intermix more.

Interviewer: OK. Hmm, so the lack of mixing is really just kind of an individual lack of desire?

Bill: Well, yeah individuals, it's just the way it is. You know, people group together for lots of different reasons: social, religious. Just as animals in the wild, you know. Elephants group together, cheetahs group together. You bus a cheetah into an elephant herd
because they should mix? You can't force that [laughs]

(Interview 11: 10-11).

4) Denial of Centrality of Discrimination: “Right now they’re just kind a, crying out about it”

When white and black Detroiter were asked in the survey the question

“Discrimination against blacks is no longer a problem in the United States,” a high proportion of both groups (82.5 percent of whites and 89.5 percent of blacks) indicated that they “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with that statement. However, whites and blacks dispute vehemently the salience of discrimination as a factor explaining blacks’ standing in America. Thus, in response to the more specific question, “Blacks are in the position that they are today as a group because of present day discrimination,” 60.5 percent of blacks compared to only 32.9 percent of whites stated that they “agree” or “strongly agree” with that statement. In general, whites believe that discrimination has all but disappeared whereas blacks believe that discrimination--old and new fashion--is a central factor in their lives. Because whites do not think that discrimination is so salient, they explain racially-apparent matters as (1) aberrations committed by the few ignorant “racists” who are still out there or (2) as blacks’ own doing.

Let me provide two examples of whites’ denial of the structural character of discrimination, a topic that was deployed by 84 percent of the white respondents in the sample. One typical example is Sandra, a retail salesperson in her early forties, answered the question on discrimination as follows:
...I think if you are looking for discrimination, I think it's there to be found.

But if you make the best of any situation, and if you don't use it as an excuse

[Interviewer: Right] I think sometimes it's an excuse because ah, people felt
they deserved a job, ah whatever! I think if things didn't go their way I
know a lot of people have tendency to use...prejudice or racism as
whatever as an excuse. I think in some ways, yes there is ...ummm...people
who are prejudiced. It's not only blacks, it's about Spanish, or women. In a
lot of way there [is] a lot of reverse discrimination. It's just what you wanna
make of it (Interview 76: 9)

Not surprisingly, since Sandra believes that antiblack racial discrimination is not very salient, she
does not believe that being white is an advantage in America. In her words:

...I think at one time it used to be an advantage. Ummm and I think now it's
probably becoming a disadvantage because you have to, as a white person,
you basically have to be very careful [of] what you say and what you do
because if something is taken the wrong way by anyone, then you can be
considered a racist (ibid: 10).

The next case is Henrietta, a transsexual school teacher in her fifties, replied the
following to the question of discrimination:

[9 seconds] Trying to be an unbiased observer...because as a transsexual I am
discriminated against...I think if people act responsible they will not be
discriminated against. People who are acting irresponsible, in other words, demanding things, ah, “I need this” or “You did this because of my skin color”... yeah then, they will be... discriminated against. People who are intelligent present themselves in a matter that is appropriate for the situation and will not be discriminated against (Interview 52: 21).

Because whites do not believe that discrimination is a normal part of America, they view most race-targeted government programs as illegitimate. Furthermore, because they believe that the bulk of the problems afflicting the black community are self-inflicted, they also do not believe is necessary to establish programs to deal with the effects of past discrimination. Thus, for example, Sandra answered a question on whether or not the government should have specific programs on behalf of blacks to deal with the history of discrimination as follows:

No, no. Irish were persecuted when they came over. Polish, Russians, Germans, you name it. There aren’t any individual programs for them. Everybody basically is listed and my grandparents taught me, you pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Don’t count on anybody else to help you out. You have to help yourself first. So, ummm, should a program be done just because they were slaves? NO (Interview 76: 11).

Similarly, Henrietta answered the question on government intervention on black’s behalf in the following manner:

[5 seconds] As a person who was once reversed discriminated against, I
would have to say no. Because the government does not need those programs if they, if people would be motivated to bring themselves out of the poverty level. Ah, [coughing] when we talk about certain programs, when the Irish, came over, when the Italians, the Polish, and the Eastern European Jews, they all were immigrants who lived in terrible conditions too, but they had one thing in common, they all knew that education was the way out of that poverty. And they did it. I’m not saying...the blacks were brought over here maybe not willingly, but if they realize education’s the key, that’s it. And that’s based on individuality (Interview 52: 26).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although the ideas endorsed by most whites today may sound as “racism lite” or not even as “racist” at all, they signify the postmodern way of supporting the racial status quo. For example, most whites indicate in surveys that they support integration, equal opportunity, and are less likely than ever before to disapprove of interracial marriage, yet they oppose most programs to reduce racial inequality, residential and school segregation, and have limited primary associations with blacks (Schuman et al. 1997; Jackman and Crane 1986; Smith 1999). And how do whites explain these apparent contradictions? They explain them by appealing to liberalism (“Affirmative Action violates the American Creed”), blaming minorities for “their” problems (“Blacks are poor because they lack the proper values”), and by claiming that segregation is the product of the invisible (non-racial) hand of the market (“I live in this white
neighborhood but it has nothing to do with race”).

In this paper I documented the centrality of five themes among Detroit metropolitan area residents. I showed that white respondents rely on topics such as the abstract and decontextualized (political and economic liberalism) on racial matters, biologization of culture, naturalization of race related matters, and denial of the centrality of discrimination at substantial rates ranging from a low of 43 percent to a high of 96 percent. Respondents used these themes to explain their views on interracial marriage, affirmative action, the centrality of discrimination in America, neighborhood and school segregation, and a host of other issues.

At this point it is possible to piece together the puzzle formed by color blindness.

10 I have documented elsewhere (Bonilla-Silva and Forman) that the style of color blind racism, unlike the openly “racist” and direct style associated with Jim Crow racism, is subtle, full of double-talk, and replete with apparent contradictions. I specifically have shown how whites avoid traditional racist speech, use a variety of semantic moves to safely voice their racially-based views, and become rhetorically incoherent when addressing racially sensitive issues. I have also documented four of the dominant storylines that have emerged as part of post-civil rights racial folklore, namely, “The past is the past,” “I didn’t own any slaves,” “My ______ didn’t get a (job, promotion, etc.) because they gave it to a black guy,” and “If the (Irish, Jews, Asians, etc.) made it in America despite discrimination, how come blacks have not been able to make it?”
Whites believe that the United States has *de facto* extended equal opportunities to all Americans and is, for the most part, a race-neutral society. Therefore, they exhibit little sympathy if not outright resentment (Kinder and Sanders 1996) for affirmative action, race-targeted government programs, or minorities’ demands for their fair shares. This belief that America has truly become the land of opportunity for all allows whites to use liberal arguments—although in an *abstract* and *decontextualized* manner—to explain racial inequality and to justify racially-apparent phenomena. Furthermore, since whites believe that discrimination is no longer a salient factor in America, they believe that blacks’ plight is the product of their own cultural deficiencies (e.g., laziness, lack the proper values, disorganized family life, etc.).

Taken together, whites’ views represent nothing less than a new, formidable racial ideology. New, because the topics of color blindness have replaced, for the most part, those associated with Jim Crow racism (Bobo and Smith 1998; Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997). Formidable, because these topics leave little intellectual, moral, and practical room for whites to support the policies that are needed to accomplish significant racial change in this country. Furthermore, because color blind racism seems reasonable, its topics are apparently far removed from those typical of Jim Crow racism, and its style is so slippery (see footnote 8), this new ideology provides a mighty shield for the maintenance of white supremacy. How can anyone label as “racist” the argument that “people should be strictly judged by their merits” or the claim that “I am sort of against affirmative action, but I also think is necessary some times” or statements such as “I have no problem with interracial marriage, but I’m concerned about
the children?” Thus, the political beauty of color blindness as an ideology is that it allows whites to state their racial views as if they were principled, even moral positions.

Despite the formidableness of color blind racism, this ideology does not control the entire racial ideological universe. Although most whites breathe color blindness, some do not. In previous work, I estimated that about 10 percent of white college students were racial progressives (Bonilla-Silva and Forman). The students most likely to be racial progressives or “ideological dissidents” (van Dijk 1998) were women from working class background. Although this finding may be surprising to some, it is consistent with previous work (Aptheker 1992; Feagin and Vera 1995). If we apply very strict criteria for defining racial progressives (respondents who did not use any of the topics of color blindness), only 4 percent of the whites qualify as such. However, if we use a more flexible definition (respondents who subscribed to two or fewer topics in a mild fashion), the number of progressives doubles. As in my previous study, working class women were significantly more likely to be racially progressive than any other segment of the white population.

What are the implications of my findings for future research and for policy makers? In terms of research, it suggests that analysts of racial attitudes may benefit from adding a qualitative dimension to their work. This may help elucidate some of the serious disagreements

11 Racial progressives were defined as students who supported affirmative action, did not subscribe to major stereotypes on blacks, and associated with minorities.
in the survey community (Is whites’ opposition to affirmative action based on principles or on “prejudice”? Are whites beyond prejudice or are they expressing their prejudice in a “symbolic” way? Shall we continue assessing whites’ views individually or as expressing collective interests?). Although survey research is excellent for examining the broad contours of an ideological formation, as the work of Jackman (1994) and Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith (1997) clearly shows, qualitative research-- or a combination such as that deployed in the 1998 DAS-- allows analysts to do three things that survey research is not well equipped to do. First, systematic qualitative data such as the one I used in this paper helps analysts determine how individuals use themes (or opinions) in practical matters. For example, a respondent may support affirmative action in a survey--or in an interview-- but rely on the theme of abstract liberalism in a way that reveals the limitations of his support. Second, qualitative data allows analysts to extract the stylistic elements and the narratives associated with an ideology. Third, qualitative data helps analyst determine the emotional intensity associated with respondents’ views on issues (Feagin and Vera 1995).

In terms of policy, my findings suggest that policies exclusively based on education -- developed with the assumption that “racists” are ignorant people who can be cured with education-- or on semantics -- e.g., the “hidden agenda” strategy of Wilson (1987) or the reframing issue strategy of Sniderman and Piazza (1993) -- will not help much since white ideology is group-based and rooted on the preservation of white privilege. As I showed, whites from all walks of life and with all levels of education use color blind themes to state
views that ultimately help reproduce white privilege.

Nevertheless, my findings also point to some things that may help advance progressive social policy. First, although most whites are color blind, they are not monolithically imbued by color blindness (e.g., working class whites, the majority of the population in the United State, have the potential of true racial progressiveness) and, even those who subscribe to color blindness, have various degrees of commitment to this ideology. Policy makers sensitive to these realities may craft policies “centered around a mutual recognition and accomodation of legitimate interests” (Bobo 2000: 164). This means that in order to manufacture broad, class based policies that will benefit most Americans (as liberals and radicals have suggested), the general (white) public will need to recognize the salience of race in America. Real racial reconciliation will not begin until whites realize their advantageous position in this society and wake up from the myth of color blindness. However, if our racial past is any indication of the future, racially progressive social policy will not materialize until a new civil rights movement supported by a significant number of whites surfaces to advance the racial question from formal equality (i.e., the issue of equal opportunity) to substantive equality (i.e., achieving equality of results). The and only then will we be able to eradicate blacks and other minorities second class citizenship in America.

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### Table 1—Central Frames of Color-Blind Racism and Alternative Racial Ideologies

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dominant Racial Ideology (Color Blind Ideology)</th>
<th>Critical Alternative Racial Ideologies (Cultural Pluralism, Nationalism, &amp; Others)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1) Abstract Liberalism</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Political Liberalism</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Abstract and decontextualized extension of political liberalism to racial matters in ways that preserve racially egalitarian views on how social goods ought to be distributed unfair situations (e.g. “Race should not be a factor when judging people”)</td>
<td>Concrete and contextualized notions of political liberalism or more</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Economic Liberalism</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Employment of free-market economic ideology to justify contemporary racial inequality (e.g., “Kids should be exposed to all kinds of cultures but it cannot be imposed through busing”)</td>
<td>Recognition that “market” outcomes have a racial bias and thus support of special programs to ameliorate the effects of racial inequality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2) Biologization of Culture</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cultural rationale for explaining the status of racial subjects in society (e.g. “Blacks are lazy” or “Blacks lack the proper work ethic”)</td>
<td>Political rationale for explaining the status of racial subjects in society (e.g., &quot;Blacks have been left behind by the system&quot;)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3) **Naturalization of Race-Related Matters**

Naturalization of matters that reflect the effects of white supremacy (e.g., explaining segregation or limited segregation as the product of the racialized actions of the state, realtors, and individual whites)

4) **Denial of Systemic Nature of Discrimination**

Denial of *structural* character of "racism" discrimination viewed as limited, sporadic, and declining in significance

Understanding racism as societal & recognition of new forms of discrimination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2--Deployment of Color-Blind Topics by White Respondents</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Topics</strong></td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abstract Liberalism On Affirmative Action</td>
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<td>Biologization of Culture</td>
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<td>Naturalization of Race-Related Matters</td>
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<td>Denial of Systemic Nature of Discrimination</td>
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