"What Group?" Studying Whites and Whiteness in the Era of "Color-Blindness"

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"What Group?" Studying Whites and Whiteness in the Era of "Color-Blindness"*

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In this article I argue that despite the claims of some, all whites in racialized societies "have race." But because of the current context of race in our society, I argue that scholars of "whiteness" face several difficult theoretical and methodological challenges. First is the problem of how to avoid essentializing race when talking about whites as a social collective. That is, scholars must contend with the challenge of how to write about what is shared by those racialized as white without implying that their experiences of racialization all will be the same. Second, within the current context of color-blind racial discourse, researchers must confront the reality that some whites claim not to experience their whiteness at all. Third, studies of whiteness must not be conducted in a vacuum: racial discourse or "culture" cannot be separated from material realities. Only by attending to and by recognizing these challenges will empirical research on whiteness be able to push the boundaries of our understandings about the role of whites as racial actors and thereby also contribute to our understanding of how race works more generally.

"What group?"

Sally (white college junior)

"Like I told you, I haven't been around it too much."

Mrs. Nelling (white suburban housewife)

The opening epigraphs highlight the ways many whites today think about race (Lewis 2001), that is, that race is about others—minority groups generally, and often blacks in particular. In the first quote Sally had just stated that she was glad she had taken my Race and Ethnic Relations course because she had learned a great deal about "minority groups." When I asked her what she had learned about her own group she replied, "What group?" Mrs. Nelling was responding to an interview question in which I asked her what role she thought race had played in her life. Here she seemed to understand my use of *race* to be a coded reference to racial minorities with whom she had had little contact in her life. As she put it, "I haven't been around it too much."

Rather than the idiosyncratic utterances of several individual whites, the epigraphs capture a growing trend in racial discourse, a post-civil rights common sense of

color-blindness (Forman 2004; Gallagher 2003; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Bonilla-Silva 2001; Lewis, Chesler, and Forman 2000; Carr 1997; Crenshaw 1997; Gotanda 1996, 1991). In fact, playing off the well-known quote in which W. E. B. DuBois states that the problem of the 20th century will be the problem of the color-line, one author has argued that "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" (Fair 1997:xxiii).

Despite the key role whites have played historically in the original construction and the replication of racial categories, they often claim today to be beyond race— to be color-blind and not to think about race (Bonilla-Silva et al. 2003; Lewis 2001; Frankenberg 1993). In this article I contend that, despite Sally's confusion, whites are, in fact, a *group* or social collective and that, if we are to understand the role race has had in shaping the life experiences and life chances of people like Mrs. Nelling, sociological research needs to pay more serious attention to the role of whites as racial actors (Andersen 2003).[1] Too often sociological research on race engages whites in conversations about race only to ask them about their opinions about others (Schuman et al. 1997). Whites' own racial subjectivities, their very *racialness*, has not been given nearly the same amount of attention as that of racial minorities.[2]

In short, because of the increasing prevalence of color-blind ideology, the very nature of "white experience" today makes it difficult to study. However, research on whiteness must not fall prey to focusing on whites only when they are claiming white identities most loudly or explicitly. The importance of studying the role of whites as racial actors cannot be measured by the level of whites' felt racial identities or explicitly felt *groupness* but rather stems from their racialized social location and their status within the racial hierarchy. Self-identification processes are linked with but are not equivalent to external ascriptions of racial categorization (Lewis 2003a; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Jenkins 1996). Whether all whites have self-conscious racial identities may or may not matter as much for their life chances as external readings of them as white. Thus, in what follows I make a case for continuing to consider whites as a social collective, but I argue for a manner of understanding the *groupness* of whites, which takes the difference between self-identification and external ascription seriously and enables us to avoid essentializing differences or homogenizing an admittedly diverse group.

In any serious engagement of whites, careful attention also must be paid to links between symbolic and material dimensions of race. It is the interaction between the two dimensions that often makes *whites* appear to be a somewhat invisible or not altogether interesting subject of analysis. Our very ideas about whether racial *groups*

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[1]In recent years there has been a growing body of sociological research on whiteness. While arguably the descendants of a long history of sociological research on whites, this more recent research has raised much interest and furor—generating attention in the national media and gaining detractors and proponents from a broad range of perspectives. Although our understanding of race has much to gain from shifting our sociological imaginations toward whiteness, such research has received many challenges (Andersen 2003; Arnesen 2001; Sheets 2000; Apple 1998; Chennault 1998; Bonnett 1996). Some of these are challenges present in general research on race—but they are manifested in particular ways in discussions about the racialness of whites. Thus, while not without shortcomings, as a whole this new research has taken us several steps toward filling the real gaps in sociological research on race in understanding the role of whites as racial actors. Moreover, fleshing out the parameters of and solutions to issues raised in this kind of work may well provide us with lessons that should be used in wider discussions of race.

[2]There have been some important exceptions. See Hartigan (1999), Brodkin (1998), Ferber (1998), Gallagher (1997), Feagin and Vera (1995), Ferber (1995), Frankenberg (1993), Doane (1997), and some recent work by DiTomaso (2001). For more extensive critiques of sociological research on race relations, see Steinberg (1995) or McKee (1993).

are "social problems" deserving examination is connected deeply to our ideas about those groups and their location within social hierarchies. Studies of whiteness then must pay attention to the relationship between ideological and material components of race. The history of U.S. racialization demonstrates that the formation and evolution of white as a racial category (the formation and evolution of race itself) is inherently about struggles over resources (Guglielmo 2003; Lipsitz 1998; Almaguer 1994; Takaki 1993; Said 1978). Throughout the history of racialization, material (economic, social, and political resources) and ideological elements of race have been inextricably linked; particularly in any examination of whiteness it is crucial then that the two not be discussed in isolation from one another. As several critics have pointed out, work that focuses on culture, ideology, or identity without careful attention to power and the structural components of race threatens to miss the key point that, as Andersen (2003) put it, "racial identity is not just an individualized process but involves the formation of social groups organized around material interests with their roots in social structure." Here I am arguing, in part, that *race* as a set of identities, discursive practices, cultural forms, and ideological manifestations would not exist without racism. The racialization of whites thus is inherently at some level about domination because the category's very existence is dependent on the continuation of white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Mills 1997). Studies of whites as racial actors then must engage with issues of power—how larger historical patterns, institutionalized process, and everyday practices make *white* identities even possible, much less relevant. This does not mean, however, that whiteness always has looked the same or that the boundaries of the racial category *white* are not constantly under negotiation. In fact, what is perhaps most interesting to examine is how the boundaries of racial categories are negotiated, challenged, and/or reinforced in daily life.

Arguing for the need to study dynamics of racial hierarchy along with studies of racial meaning raises, however, the ever-present sociological dilemma about the relationship between structure and culture. Within sociological discussions on race, this debate has recently taken place around the questions of whether race is material or virtual—existing in the realm of culture and thus somehow "soft," or "hard," material and durable. For example, recent work by Bonilla-Silva (1997), Feagin (2000), and Marable (2004) argues for structural theories of race that recognize its powerful role within racialized societies. Critics of this work have challenged that the discussion of race as *structural* suggests a durability to race or essentializes it (Loveman 1999; Michaels 1995). As captured by Duster (2001:114), the question is, "How can race be both structural and embedded yet superficial, arbitrary, and whimsical—shifting with times and circumstances?"

At issue here is partly the ongoing debate as to what constitutes a *structure*. As I discuss further later, these issues can be resolved partly by applying Sewell's (1992) conceptualization of structures as dual—both material and symbolic—which changes the terms of the debate from whether race is somehow one or the other to understanding just how the different components are linked to everyday meaning-making. If the material and ideological components of race are inextricably intertwined, the interesting question is not "which is it" but how do the symbolic and material dimensions of race interact and how are they reproduced or challenged in the everyday. This means not only studying the way race differently constrains and empowers social actors but also understanding the ways racial meanings are contested in daily life.

Finally, because racial meanings and boundaries are not fixed, research on whiteness must be undertaken with an understanding of the current and historical contexts.

Racial discourses, ideologies, and structural arrangements shift over time. The present racial context raises new challenges. Research on racial dynamics must pay attention both to the increase in color-blind discourses of race discussed already and to the related shifts in how racism gets enacted and deployed. In fact, expressions of racial sentiments and preferences may well have shifted such that whiteness functions in new ways (Dolby 2001; Gallagher 1997). Thus, our examinations of whiteness must pay attention to covert processes that reproduce racial privilege—especially those that do so without appearing to.[3] Studies of whiteness and racism that are not responsive to the shifting terrain of each at the very least will miss part of the picture if not providing entirely false characterizations of current realities.

In what follows I argue that in a racialized social system all actors are *racialized*, including whites. Because all social actors are racialized, at some level they must live and perform or "do race." However, because of their social location (as dominants) whites historically have had the luxury of racializing others without necessarily, except strategically, developing or invoking a strong racial consciousness. Yet they remain an important racial collectivity despite their lack of felt groupness. They are a passive social collectivity that can become, at strategic moments, a self-conscious group (e.g., race riots, choosing a school for children, hiring a new employee). In highlighting that whites are a social collective, this does not negate their heterogeneity. There are multiple ways of expressing or doing whiteness. However, there is at any particular time a dominant form that shapes the lives of all those living within that particular racial formation. In order to understand the role of whites as racial actors, in fact, to capture the full complexity of racial dynamics, we must imagine new and creative methodological strategies. To this end, I conclude this article with suggestions for future research that build up on the theoretical framework laid out within.

WHAT GROUP? THE COLLECTIVITY OR *GROUPNESS* OF WHITES

One key question for research on whites today is how to talk about them as a group when they may not share a common self-conscious identity. Clearly whites generally do not (Perry 2002; Hartigan 1999; Gallagher 1997; Frankenberg 1993; Waters 1990). The stakes here, however, are not in claiming that racial groups all have coherent and consistent self-conscious group identities—none do. Though racist presumptions may lead us to assume more coherence for racial minority groups, the fact is that no racial group shares a singular understanding of the meaning of their racial categorization or a singular and coherent sense of group identity (O'Connor, Lewis, and Mueller forthcoming; Maira 2002; Waters 1999). *Whites* present a particularly difficult case because of individual whites' inability to talk coherently about their racial identity and their sometimes denial of having any identification with *white* as a collective reality. To talk about *whites* as a collective, however, it is not necessary to theorize racial groups as having shared group identities explicit and universally. What is critical is to have a conceptual framework that enables us to recognize their similar location within the racial structure—locations that have material implications—but to do so without assuming any inherent continuity.

Following Young's (1994) specification with regard to the category "woman," I argue that we are able to talk meaningfully about whites as a social collective if we draw upon Sartre's (1976) notion of seriality. Here Young, drawing on Sartre,

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[3]For discussion of one way this manifests itself (i.e., racial apathy), see Forman (2001a, 2004).

provides a useful distinction between self-conscious, mutually acknowledging collectivities (groups) and passive collectivities (series). For example, white groups that come together with explicitly racial purposes (e.g., neo-nazi or white supremacy groups) are quite different than white collectivities (made up of entirely white members) that have nonracial goals and purposes (For example, many community groups, service clubs, Boy Scout troops are all-white even though they may not have a self-conscious racial identity or purpose.). A series, on the other hand, is as Young (1994:724) defines it, a "social collective whose members are unified passively by the objects around which their actions are oriented and by the objectified results of the material effects of the actions of the others" (e.g., social structures, institutions). In her article, Young provides a useful example. A collectivity of people standing at a corner waiting for a bus stop is a series. Driving by every day we might think of them as the "6 a.m. bus riders." They are unified by their actions, which are organized around the same objects (the bus or bus schedule) but not in a way that they must recognize or necessarily must consider. If they were to come together with the self-conscious purpose of organizing to get the buses to stay on schedule, then they would be a *group* of bus riders rather than just a *series*.

This differentiation resembles Marx's (1936) distinction between a class in itself (a series) versus a class for itself (a group).[4] Both distinguish between the social fact of the material conditions of one's life and a felt internalized identity. For instance, a person's statement that she or he is "a worker" may not designate an identity so much as a social fact. In this way, members of a series are unified passively through their relations to social structures and not through their active, mutual identification.

For whites, how they experience existing racial structures varies, but all still experience them. Although numerous all-white groups are not explicitly racial, their racial composition is not an accident but is a result of whites' status as members of a passive social collectivity whose lives are shaped at least in part by the racialized social system in which they live and operate. For example, the racial composition of all-white settings can result from self-conscious exclusive polices (e.g., country clubs that do not allow blacks to join), can be just one of many outcomes from exclusive policies at a different level (e.g., housing segregation shapes who belongs to neighborhood organizations, who shops at local grocery stores, who attends local schools, and who plays at local parks), or can be an outcome of long histories of racial exclusion, even if those discriminatory policies are not pursued actively or aggressively today (e.g., past racial discrimination in the labor market influences what kinds of "work experience" people can draw on today in applying for promotions and better jobs and thus who utilizes executive dining rooms, who serves on the board of directors, or who attends partners' meetings). Though these collectives are not (or not all) organized self-consciously around group racial interests, their memberships are not entirely random or accidental. Those who participate are unified at least in part through their similar relation to historic and present-day racial structures. As Young (1994:731) makes clear, one's "racial position is constructed by a relation of persons to a materialized racist history that has constructed racially separate spaces, a racial division of labor, racist language and discourse, and so on."

Race as a passive collectivity or series is a background to identity rather than constitutive of identity. A person even can claim not to identify at all as white, and this does not change his or her social location or mean that he or she no longer

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[4]Gamson (1968) makes a similar distinction in his discussion of the difference among interest groups, quasi-groups, and solidary groups.

accrues privilege from being part of the dominant racial group. Particularly in regards to dominant racial groups, one does not have to consciously identify with being "white" to benefit from a system in which being designated as a racial "other" carries physical, psychological, and material penalties (Forman forthcoming(a); Lipsitz 1998; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Almaguer 1994; Feagin and Sikes 1994; Quadagno 1994; Harris 1993; Massey and Denton 1993; Hacker 1992; Roediger 1991; Farley 1990; McIntosh 1988; Schuman et al. 1983). As Reskin (2001:XX) clarifies, "Whiteness is a potential resource for all whites that others (who perceive their whiteness) confer and even impose on them (us) whether or not they (we) seek it. Even whites who abdicate racial privilege can readily reclaim it at the moment they cease to actively reject it. The automaticity of unconscious race stereotypes and in-group favoritism make complete abdication all but impossible. To paraphrase Thomas Wolfe on home, whiteness is where you can always go and where they always have to take you in . . . if you appear to be white." Whites in all social locations are relatively privileged in regards to similarly located racial minorities. While their access to cultural capital and other resources may vary, all whites have access to the symbolic capital of whiteness or what DuBois ([1935] 1962:700) refers to as the "wages" of whiteness.[5]

Most whites do have racial identities—even if they only become salient and thus self-conscious in the symbolic or actual presence of nonwhites[6]—but this is not a necessary prerequisite to talking about whites as a collective. Such racial identifications are, as Young (1994:731–732) puts it, "an active taking up of a serialized situation . . . [but] which, if any, of a person's serial memberships become salient or meaningful at any time is a variable matter." The serialized situation, whites' social location (i.e., their status as racial actors, as part of the racial hierarchy) is always present whether or not it ever actively is taken up or becomes self-consciously salient. The salience of racial membership is clearly a less variable matter for some than for others. The "blackness" of blacks is more often an object of focus than the "whiteness" of whites. In this way racialized others (blacks, Latinos, Asians, and so forth) are in many ways thought to "have race" in a way whites deny of themselves.[7] Thus, blacks and other racial minorities are thought to bring race into situations that previously were understood, in their all-white formation, as nonracial or as racially neutral.[8]

Though race matters for all whites, saying that a person is white does not specifically predict necessarily anything about how she or he will take up her or his social positioning. It does predict, however, something about the relative constraints and expectations with which a person must deal (Young 1994). In this way, no person within a racialized society escapes the markings of race, but how it marks their life varies considerably.[9] For example, in his research in Detroit, Hartigan (1999) discusses the quite different ways that race shapes the lives of poor inner-city whites as compared to middle-class white suburbanites.

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[5]Here I am drawing on Bourdieu (1977) to frame whiteness as a resource that can facilitate access to additional resources. In this case the value of whiteness can be demonstrated easily by studies showing that whites, for example, receive better treatment in restaurants, better mortgage rates from brokers, and lower prices on automobiles (Ayres and Siegelman 1995; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Yinger 1995; Schuman et al. 1983). For more on this, see Lewis (2003b).

[6]See Gallagher (1999), Lewis (2003b), or Perry (2001) for more on this point.

[7]Social scientific work on race has not escaped this problem, often focusing on the deviant behavior of racial minorities as the cause of racial problems rather than looking to whites. For more on this, see Kelley (1997), Steinberg (1995), and Wacquant (1994). Some important exceptions include Almaguer (1994) and Takaki (1993).

[8]De Beauvoir (1964) made similar arguments with relation to gender in her book, *The Second Sex*.

[9]For a recent explication of the varying ways whites experience their serialized racial location, see Perry (2002) and Hartigan (1999).

Race thus shapes everyone's daily life. It impacts our interactions with other people and with institutions. But race is not something with which we are born; it is something learned and achieved in interactions and institutions. It is something we live and perform. It is not a set of traits but is the product of social interaction (Lewis 2003a). As West and Zimmerman (1987) argue with regard to gender, race is something we "do." Moreover, as they outline, while gender displays may be optional, we do not have the option of being seen or read by others in gendered ways; similarly, we do not have a choice about being recognized as *racial* or about which race with which we want to be identified.[10]

While this has been complicated somewhat by growing numbers of multiracial children (see Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002; Ferber 1995; Spickard 1992)—as the case of Tiger Woods and others demonstrate—even explicit efforts to identify as multiracial (or "Cablinasian" in this case) rarely meet with success given current racial realities. Woods is touted as a great black golfer (not a great multiracial golfer); Fuzzy Zoeller did not try to dissuade him from selecting Pad Thai (i.e., Thai food) for the menu for 1998 Master's but rather mentioned fried chicken and greens, cuisine associated with the black southern tradition. On the other hand, his categorization as black within the United States is complicated by his placement elsewhere; Woods is esteemed as a great Asian golfer in many Asian countries. His racial categorization thus is transformed within different social contexts. Thus, though in regards to race, the one-drop rule still too often reigns supreme in the United States; how race is lived and performed and how we are categorized and understood varies across contexts.

Participation in race is not voluntary, however, within racialized social systems. As West and Zimmerman (1987:137) note, "Insofar as a society is partitioned by 'essential' differences between women and men and placement in a sex category is both relevant and enforced, doing gender is unavoidable."

In the same manner, doing race is unavoidable in societies such as ours where racial meaning and categories are relevant and are enforced and where racial differences are naturalized. Doing race, or the production of race in interaction, allows not so much "the expression of natural differences" but the actual production of difference (West and Zimmerman 1987:138).

Race shapes self-understanding, interactions with others, institutional practices, and access to material resources. As Holt (1995:12) points out, "Race yet lives because it is part and parcel of the means of living." Yet because many whites live in homogenous settings, even as race is shaping their lives, experiences, and opportunities, they may not experience race necessarily as a meaningful part of their lives (Lewis 2001; Waters 1990). Even though doing race is inevitable, in white, racially segregated settings, race may remain almost entirely as subtext. One result of whites' dominant status is their ability to live and do race without ever being self-consciously aware of it (Frankenberg 1993). Moreover, race is not reproduced from scratch; existing racial schemas, understandings, and rules of interaction fundamentally shape and constrain what is possible. Understanding the relationship between the daily performance of race and larger racial structures is key to our understanding of how race works more generally and to how it shapes the lives of whites. Key here is the recognition that race is always simultaneously about both ideas and resources.

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[10]The historical phenomenon of *passing* provides a partial exception to this.

RACE, RESOURCES, AND WHITENESS: LINKING THE CULTURAL AND THE MATERIAL

While there are competing arguments about the exact origins of race (specifically, whether we should date the history of American racialization to first contact or to the beginnings of slavery), it is clear that race is intricately tied to the history of the United States (Takaki 1993; Morgan 1975; Degler 1971; Jordan 1968; Williams 1961). Racialization in the United States has always been about both meaning and domination. The racialization of whites has always been tied intimately to a history of defining *self* both through the symbolic construction of *the other* and through the actual domination of others (Almaguer 1994; Gabriel 1994; Hall 1991; Said 1978). The realm of ideas associated with race has been invested not only in representing groups of people but also in dominating people. New white identities were tied to feelings of group racial superiority and, more importantly, to a sense of superiority that was active rather than passive. These ideas of cultural superiority were put into action in the "defending" of civilization against the savages and in the taking over of the land, lives, and resources of these *others*. Thus, race has both ideological and material components—components that are inextricable both practically and analytically.

In this way we should understand American forms of whiteness to be tied closely to larger ideas of both Westernness and Occidentalism (Frankenberg 1993). As Said (1978) argues in his study of Western constructions and representations of "the Orient," an Occidental "us" has been bound up integrally with ideas of Western, European, white superiority; the Western or white "we" being clearly distinguishable from an Oriental or dark "they." However, these ideas of superiority were not mere psychosocial expressions but were seen as clear justifications for intervening into the lives of those identified as "Oriental." The forms of Orientalism (of which whiteness is a part) have changed over time, but at their heart, all these projects are aimed at possessing what is represented as *the other*—others who are not merely represented but are subjugated (Said 1978:5).

In this way race can be thought of as what Sewell (1992) terms a *dual structure*. Addressing the way sociological language about structures too often represented them as immutable and all determining, Sewell's formulation gives us a way of understanding race as both symbolic and structural, as comprised of both *cultural schemas* (e.g., rules of racial interaction and folk understandings of the meaning of and differences between racial groups) and *resources* (e.g., cultural capital, wealth).[11] Moreover, it recognizes the dialectical relationship of material and symbolic components of race. As Sewell (1992:12) states, it "must be true that schemas are the effects of resources, just as resources are the effect of schemas.... If resources are instantiations or embodiments of schemas, they therefore inculcate and justify the schemas as well.... If schemas are to be sustained or reproduced over time... they must be validated by the accumulation of resources that their enactment engenders." For example, white flight is driven in part by white expectations that

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[11]Another way of capturing this relationship is detailed in Lamont and Molnár's (2002) discussion of the study of boundaries in the social sciences. They distinguish between symbolic boundaries, "conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, and practices," and social boundaries, "objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources" (2002:168). It is only when symbolic boundaries are widely agreed upon that they become social boundaries and take on "a constraining character" (2002:168). According to Lamont and Molnár (2002), they are equally real and mutually constitutive. In this case symbolic boundaries are necessary but not sufficient for social boundaries to exist. Again, here we see the intricate connection between symbolic and material components of social life—between systems of meaning and the distribution of resources.

a black presence will lead to a decline in property values (Krysan 2002a, 2002b). While it is true there is a connection between race and housing values (Raffalovich, Denton, and Deane 2002; Sandoval 2002), this phenomenon arguably results from the presumptions whites use in making housing decisions and their resulting behavior. When housing markets in racially transitional neighborhoods gets flooded artificially with fleeing whites or when whites stereotypes lead them to prefer living in white neighborhoods than comparable black neighborhoods (Farley et al. 1994), housing prices in white neighborhoods are inflated. Thus, whites reap financial benefit from the fact that their neighborhoods are consistently worth more, but this resource payoff is deeply connected to a set of racial stereotypes. Schemas or racial ideas play a key role in generating resource outcomes (e.g., higher property values), which in term appear to confirm the original schemas.[12]

Sewell (1992) argues that dual structures vary along two dimensions—depth and power. A structure's depth is measured by the extent to which its related schema become unconscious taken-for-granted assumptions and to the extent that it is present in a wide range of institutions, practices, and discourses. I will address this more broadly in the next section, but there is much evidence of the depth of race along this dimension. The power dimension captures the amount of resources a structure mobilizes. Data on vast racial gaps in wealth, life expectancy, unemployment rates, poverty levels, cancer survival rates, and levels of infant mortality demonstrate the power of race to shape life outcomes and opportunities (U.S. Census Bureau 2002; Feagin 2000; Pinkney 2000; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Wilson, Tienda, and Wu 1995; Hummer 1993; Reed et al. 1992). Race is thus both deep and powerful—existing both in the realm of the symbolic or ideological and also at the material level, incorporating cultural schemas and understandings that run deep and that are backed by resources.

Part of what it means to talk about race as having "depth" is exemplified by the social fact that no person living within a racialized social system can escape being racially marked. That is, all those living within societies structured by race are thought to belong to one (or more) racial groups and that belonging is thought to have meaning. As outlined, this does not mean that all those categorized in any particular racial group will understand their racial identification in identical fashion (Murguia and Forman 2003; Perry 2001; Hartigan 1999). The fact that such categorization is a product of social relations rather than being a biological fact, however, necessarily means that that such categorizations will always be in process, up for contestation, and negotiated (Lewis 2003a; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002). The challenge again is how to recognize the fluidity in how race is experienced while simultaneously recognizing its power and force in shaping the lives of all those living in racialized social systems.

Arguably, much sociological work on whites that has tried to tap into racial schemas has remained in the realm of survey work on racial attitudes—that is, work that asks whites in delimited ways to express their individual affective or cognitive

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[12]Gould (1999) talks about another example in employers' use of stereotypes about black laziness to justify their hiring preferences. When whites discriminate against blacks, "these whites (and blacks) believe that they are simply facing facts...this belief is a natural outcome of the conjunction of a belief in egalitarian values, the beliefs that equal opportunity is available to all, and clear indications that blacks do not attain the same level of success as do whites....[Black 'failure'] is overdetermined by whites who are committed to egalitarian values of equal opportunity, who believe that blacks have equal opportunity, and who conclude from the fact that black performances often do not measure up to white performances that blacks are lazy and/or dumb" (Gould 1999:173).

ideas about racial minorities.[13] Historically, this work has helped us to chart broad changes in whites' attitudes toward racial others (primarily blacks) (Schuman et al. 1997).[14] As others have argued recently, rather than focusing on (individually generated) attitudes, there is much to be gained analytically from shifting attention to racial ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Forman 2001a; Jackman 1994; Wellman 1993; Hall 1990; Bobo 1988). Ideas about race need to be understood in relation to structures, institutional and cultural practices, and discourses, not simply as "something which emanates from certain individual beings (Hall 1990:7)." In this way, racial ideologies—central schemas in racial structures—serve as collective ways of understanding our lives and of how we fit into social relations. Racial ideologies then provide explanations for both the causes and solutions to personal and social problems. Racial ideologies highlight the ways race operates throughout our lives, not just in conscious or explicit thoughts about others. They are connected tightly to social relations and are produced and reproduced in specific sites, particularly in those ideological apparatuses that produce and distribute social meaning in society (e.g., the media and schools) (Althusser 1971).

Ideologies provide frameworks for understanding our social existence, providing a way of making sense of the world. They are most effective when they are invisible, common sense understandings that tend to naturalize the social world and thus to justify the status quo (Hall 1990). Because they affect ways of understanding the world they also deeply shape practices in that world. When ideology becomes common sense, the "of course" way of understanding social existence, it is gaining hegemony, though one that always is contested and always only is partial.[15]

For an ideology to gain hegemony it must do more than enable people to make sense of their lives; it must successfully naturalize the status quo. In naturalizing and legitimating the present state of things, ideologies tend to support certain interests and to subvert others. In a society riddled with social inequality, ideologies must naturalize a system that ensures subordination for millions (Fiske 1987). Ideologies become hegemonic to the extent that they enable people to understand and to accept their positions within a stratified society. They gain consent from those on various rungs of the social ladder to a system that secures the positions of both the dominated and the dominating (Hall 1986; Gramsci 1971). Within societies like the United States, which are based on ideals of equity but are rife with vast inequality, ideology is essential for people to live with the pervasive contradictions. People are not "duped" by ideologies; an ideology is successful only when it helps people to understand their lives by providing stories of the world that make sense. In that way they fulfill certain

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[13]Within sociology there is a long-standing survey research tradition of tracking white racial attitudes (see Schuman et al. 1997). While survey research in this area has much to offer, there are several shortcomings. First, the explanations survey researchers traditionally have provided (as do the survey questions they draw on) focus primarily on whites' attitudes about others rather than their attitudes about self. Also, most explanations of trends in racial attitudes are premised on an individualized understanding of racial attitudes rather than on a theory of racial ideology generated in the context of group struggle (Forman 2001; Bonilla-Silva 2001; Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997). Finally, due to the nature of survey research, though this work can provide some breadth of understanding using its large samples of individuals, it is necessarily limited in its depth.

[14]Though this work can assist us in bridging the gap between ideas and outcomes (i.e., the levels of white antipathy for racial minorities that is responsible at least partly for unequal racial realties), it has several shortcomings. Not only does it not help us to understand white racial understandings more globally (e.g., ideas about self), but it also tends to characterize racial understandings as individual-level phenomenon.

[15]It is part of the nature of "wars of position," as Gramsci (1971) has described ideological contestation, that hegemony is never total or final. At any moment there are always competing racial logics circulating that hold the possibility of undermining, if not challenging, hegemonic common sense.

needs.[16] However, as Jackman (1994:8) points out, this is a process that is often invisible to its beneficiaries: "What is often overlooked is that the collective and institutionalized character of the expropriation renders it particularly invisible to its beneficiaries. When a relationship is regularized and institutionalized, it is simply a case of 'c'est la vie.' Personal acts of aggression are not required to claim one's due as a member of the advantaged group; benefits simply fall into one's lap. There is thus no need for deep, personal insight into how things work, nor is there any feeling of personal accountability or guilt for the expropriated benefits one enjoys. Indeed, it is remarkably easy to view one's benefits as the natural outcome of individual endeavor and to overlook the dreary fact that those benefits have been delivered at someone's expense."

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.[17] They often fail to understand how race shapes where they live, who they interact with, and how they understand themselves and others. In this way, at least for members of the dominant group, racial privilege need not be visible to be influential.

Racial ideologies are always produced and rearticulated in relation to material circumstances. They are schemas that are deeply articulated with resources, "meaning in the service of power" (Bonilla-Silva 2001:63). As numerous scholars have shown, the structural elements of racial advantage are linked closely to the ideological expressions of race (Wellman 1993; Bobo 1988; Blumer 1958). In this way racism is a defense of group privilege (Wellman 1993). Racial groups are divided then because of issues grounded in real and material conditions. We can see this manifested in recent studies of the white working class. For example, the resentment Fine et al. (1997) find among working-class white men toward their similarly low-income black and Puerto Rican neighbors or that Rieder (1985) finds among whites in Canarsie toward their African-American neighbors is not a signal that these working-class whites are uneducated and irrational but that at some level they understand they enjoy certain privileges attached to their group membership and that those privileges need defending.[18]

These men and women do not act violently toward African Americans in their neighborhood merely because, for example, their sense of themselves as white men needs shoring up but also because they are fighting against the real (or imagined) encroachments into what they believe to be their jobs and their territory. As Jackman (1994:8) states, this process often takes place in uncontrived ways: "Because individuals in the dominant group do not feel personally accountable for the expropriated benefits of their existence, there is no impetus for them to contrive knowingly to manufacture such an ideology. Instead, out of pressures created by their collective relationship with subordinates there evolves naturally an interpretation of social reality that is consistent with the dominant group's experience...It permeates the main institutions and communication networks of organized social life and is propagated with an easy vehemence that can come only from uncontrived sincerity." This leads many whites to actually believe that what they have rightfully belongs to them. Neutral, supposedly "nonracial," spaces, jobs, and life partners are seen to be under their jurisdiction because it always has been that way. In this way it is most

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[16]As pointed out by Apple (1993), when examining hegemonic ideologies, the first question we must ask is not what is false about them, but what is true.

[17]This is not to imply that all whites benefit uniformly from racial advantage. What it does mean is that relative to similarly located members of subordinate groups, they are generally much better off.

[18]For another example from South Africa, see Dolby (2001).

often not necessary to organize around "white interests"; "normal," everyday modes of operation and interaction reinforce existing relations with surprising smoothness.[19] Racial ideologies explain the gaps in resources so they appear to be the natural if not inevitable outcomes—the way things are supposed to be.

How smoothly this does or does not work for differently positioned whites (e.g., women, working class, disabled) is an empirical question. Whiteness works in distinct ways for and is embodied quite differently by homeless white men, golf-club-membership-owning executives, suburban soccer moms, urban hillbillies, antiracist skinheads, and/or union-card-carrying factory workers (Rasmussen et al. 2001; Kenny 2000; Hartigan 1999). In any particular historical moment, however, certain forms of whiteness become dominant. We can think of this form as something similar to what Connell (1997) calls "hegemonic masculinity." Hegemonic whiteness then would be that "configuration of [racial] practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of [white supremacy]" and that secures the dominant position of whites (Connell 1995:77).

Hegemonic whiteness thus is a shifting configuration of practices and meanings that occupy the dominant position in a particular racial formation and that successfully manage to occupy the empty space of "normality" in our culture.[20] Collectively, this set of schemas functions as that seemingly "neutral" or "precultural" yardstick against which cultural behavior, norms, and values are measured (Perry 2001; Frankenberg 1993). As part of a central force in the functioning of white supremacy, hegemonic whiteness is not a quality inherent to individual whites but is a collective social force that shapes their lives just as it shapes the lives of racial minorities. It is also something people may well have only partial access to and that regularly is contested. For example, colloquial references to blacks "acting white," to Jews being "too Jewish," and to whites behaving as "wiggers" all are examples of people partially crossing borders in and out of hegemonic whiteness, with varying degrees of reward or penalty.[21] Undoubtedly, hegemonic whiteness is not merely an ideological or cultural artifact but carries material rewards. This does not mean that all who have power individually embody and symbolize hegemonic whiteness but that "hegemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual" (Connell 1995:78).[22]

The elite levels of major institutions provide fairly coherent displays of hegemonic whiteness even if all their members do not do so smoothly or uncompromisingly. Gould (1999:172) outlines the impact that institutionalization of dominant forms of whiteness can have: "When the major institutions in society are constructed within the culture and in the interests of one group instead of another, even when the subordinate group is included within those institutions, its performance will be, on average, less proficient than the dominant group. Organizations may systematically favor the culturally constituted performances of one group over the developmentally equivalent, substantively different, performances of another group." People who are

[19]In fact, it is at historical moments when racial boundaries have been under challenge or in flux (e.g., during Reconstruction) that whites have organized most explicitly and actively around white interests. For one historical example, see DuBois ([1935] 1962).

[20]This discussion of hegemonic whiteness itself could take up the space of an entire manuscript. This is meant just as a means of answering challenges that suggest it is dangerously oversimplified to act as if all whites embody the same form of whiteness.

[21]"Wigger" is a colloquial term used to describe whites who try to "act black." For more of a discussion on this, see Roediger (1998b).

[22]It is also true that only some whites will have full access to what is a simultaneously gendered, heterosexual, and classed space (Rasmussen et al. 2001).

not *white* can embody or perform hegemonic whiteness (e.g., embracing certain cultural practices, defending institutional practices, protecting particular interests), but those who deviate from hegemonic whiteness are likely to suffer some consequences unless they have access to enough resources to buffer themselves.

Recognizing that there are multiple forms of whiteness, some of which provide more rewards than others, does not mean that some whites are unaffected by race. Despite the claims of some (e.g., Sally or Mrs. Nelling quoted in epigraph), all whites in racialized societies "have race." One real challenge, however, for research on whites as racial actors is how to avoid essentializing race when talking about whites as a social collective—that is, how to write about what is shared by those racialized as white within a particular social context without implying that they will experience such racialization in a particular way and while also confronting the reality that some whites claim not to experience their whiteness at all.

SHIFTING MEANINGS OF RACE AND RACISM

Not only do many whites lack self-conscious understandings of themselves as racial actors, but many today claim that race is no longer important, that we should all be color-blind, and that even talking about race or racial groups is racist in that it perpetuates racial classification (Gilroy 2000; Michaels 1995; Berg 1993).[23] Part of this new color-blind ideology is the presumption or assertion of a race-neutral social context (Gallagher 2003; Bonilla-Silva 2001; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997; Crenshaw 1997; Doane 1997; Smith 1995). It stigmatizes attempts to raise questions about redressing racial inequality through accusations such as "playing the race card" or "identity politics," which suggest that one is bringing race into a situation or conversation where it previously did not exist and in which it does not belong (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Crenshaw 1997; Gitlin 1995; Tomasky 1996).[24] It also involves the assertion that color is noticed but is not "seen" or given meaning (Crenshaw 1997). (For example, in interviews with college students, Lewis, Chesler, and Forman (2000:79) quote one student as saying, "I'm not going to think of you as black, I'll just think of you as my friend.") This kind of assertion, however, illustrates the very power of race in that it suggests that acknowledging blackness is likely to lead to negative consequences (Crenshaw 1997).

Color-blind ideology has gained dominance as a framework within which to understand issues of race and racial justice at the same time that institutional reforms aimed at ameliorating racial inequality are being abandoned (e.g., rollback of affirmative action) (Forman forthcoming; Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997; Crenshaw 1997). As Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith (1997:40) argue, color-blind ideological assertions stand in the face of "substantial and widening racial economic inequalities, high levels of racial residential segregation, and persistent discrimination experienced across class lines in the black community." Thus, in suggesting that racial inequality

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[23]As much as whites want to deny the salience of race, under certain conditions they acknowledge the value of being white. For example, in Hacker's (1992) *Two Nations*, he describes an exercise he conducted with white students; he asked students "how much financial recompense" they would require if they suddenly were to become black (1992:32). As Hacker (1992) states, most students felt that "it would not be out of place to ask for $50 million, or $1 million for each coming black year. And this calculation conveys, as well as anything, the value that white people place on their own skins" (1992:32).

[24]This kind of discursive maneuver also implies that people of color are exploiting race to their own advantage, that whites are not the ones who benefit from "having" a race, and thus is connected to whites' growing perceptions of themselves as the real racial victims (see Gallagher 1997). Thanks to Barbara Reskin for helping to make this connection.

has all but been eliminated within a context in which racial inequities are still rampant, color-blind ideology serves both to explain and to protect the current racial formation (Omi and Winant 1994). With their claims of color-blindness, whites are self-exonerated from any blame for current racial inequalities, and thus people of color are blamed implicitly (or explicitly) for their own condition.

Color-blindness is a variant on the tradition of liberal individualism that denies the reality of groups and group-based privileges/penalties, thereby obscuring relations of domination (Crenshaw 1997; Young 1994). As Young (1994:718) argues in reference to gender, it becomes impossible "to conceptualize oppression as a systematic, structured, institutional process" if we cannot conceptualize both dominant and subordinate groups, including racial groups, as collectivities in some sense. Thus, rather than fulfilling Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream, color-blind ideology as it currently functions merely makes us blind to the effects of color (Fish 1993).

Not only does color-blind ideology facilitate the disavowal of numerous troubling racial patterns in interactions and outcomes, but in the way it co-opts a racially progressive aspiration—color-blindness—and asserts it as a reality, it also makes other antiracist frames that might allow for the creation of different outcomes very difficult. Racial ideology generally and color-blind ideology in particular, at least in part in the claim that whites are not a social collective, naturalize racialized interactions that privilege whites. These kinds of interactions often seem not to be about race at all, or to be just the normal way of operating. The unequal power relations enacted in such interactions are concealed almost completely. An example of the often-covert nature of whiteness in action comes from a recent book by Lefkowitz (1997) discussing the trial of a group of white teenagers convicted of raping a mentally impaired girl in their town. The author describes the judge's deliberations over the boys' sentencing during which the judge recalled his own years as a teenager: "[The judge] thought about how he had acted when he was a teenager. He asked himself, How much sense and discretion did I have? He told himself that there was no excuse for what they did, but then, he thought, if it hadn't been for that one horrible day, they would have been someone's all-American boys" (pp. 485–486). A large part of the (white) judge's considerations here is a strong identification with the defendants; they remind him of himself as a young man. In fact, the boys initially served no jail time for their crime (including using broomsticks and baseball bats to penetrate the young woman). It is this sort of implicit process in which a key decision-maker looks across a desk and sees someone who looks "like me" that whiteness and racial privilege gets enacted as a system of inclusion. This judge was not acting on behalf of his white brethren but was drawing his intuition from what he knew "to be true." Here he was not acting as a member of a self-conscious group but as a member of a series, a social collectivity of those similarly located in a particular racialized social system. Identification with *same* (as opposed to distancing oneself from *other*) leads to complexity of understanding and empathy and to the assumption of primary if not inherent innocence (Peshkin 1991). More specifically, this judge's notions of guilt and innocence were deepened and were complicated by his identification with the defendants.

This assumption of white innocence is perhaps as powerful and possibly as corrosive as the parallel assumption of black criminality. There has been much attention recently to the pervasive practices of racial profiling, which have led to the targeting of blacks on interstates, in neighborhoods, and in stores. As Russell (1998) captures in her book, *The Color of Crime*, the image of the "criminalblackman" is powerful, pervasive, and destructive. What we too often fail to see is that this image has a negative—the "innocentwhite"—that is the flip side of the racial profiling of blacks.

The racial profiling of whites as innocent, even in the face of evidence to the contrary, is one example of racial moments in which congealed histories of generations of racism translate into racial advantage (or disadvantage) today. These kinds of moments most often are recorded as patterns of outcomes in which blacks face some discriminatory behavior. Yet they are also patterns of whites benefiting from pro-white discrimination—affirmative actions of various sorts that regularly give them the benefit of the doubt, allow them to get away with questionable if not illegal behavior, and provide them with the ability to move through the world (and down highways and through stores) relatively unencumbered. It is here that the challenge begins. Understanding how race and racism works in the present day requires that we pay attention to the role of whites as racial actors and to the shifting contours of whiteness. However, the very nature of whiteness makes it difficult to study substantively. How, in fact, do we conduct research on whites as racial actors when they not only rarely recognize themselves as such but often also want to act as if race no longer matters?

STUDYING WHITENESS IN AN ERA OF "COLOR-BLINDNESS": WHO, HOW, AND WHAT TO STUDY

While some might suggest that there has been a relative explosion of "whiteness studies" over the last 10 years, as Gallagher (1999:180) asserts, "the systematic, empirically grounded gathering and telling of white people's narratives about how they understand their race, as opposed to how whites define the racial 'other,' remains relatively unexplored." While research on those socially defined as white is obviously abundant, research on whites as racial actors has not been. Moreover, it is not just white people's understandings of their own racial status that is underdeveloped but also our collective understanding of how whiteness works. How do whites live, perform, and "do" race in the everyday? How is this connected to new forms of racism? How does hegemonic whiteness shape organizational cultures and practices? Under what conditions do whites' serialized status get taken up and transformed into self-conscious group identification?

Empirical research on whiteness that is attentive to the theoretical challenges laid out herein has the potential not only to push the boundaries of our understandings about the role of whites as racial actors but also to extend our understandings of how race works more generally. Importantly, each of the issues raised in this essay is not specific to whiteness research—but only surfaces in a particular way because of the subject of study. For example, while diversity within the category white has always been assumed implicitly, it is only relatively recently in the long history of research on blacks that the coherence of the category *black* has been fundamentally challenged. The *groupness* of racial minorities historically has been inferred implicitly in a way that it has not been about whites. An everyday example of this can be seen in how often racial minorities are asked to speak as representatives of their race in a way rarely expected of whites. The nature of white supremacy has made it more difficult to think about *whites* as a social problem worth studying in explicit ways.

Though we need new empirical work on whiteness, the theoretical challenges outlined herein call for work of particular kinds. For example, some methodological strategies are perhaps better situated for capturing complex, nonessentialized conceptions of whiteness. As the few recent examples of ethnographic research on whiteness demonstrate, the complexity of this category is readily apparent upon close examination (Perry 2002; Dolby 2001; McDermott 2001; Kenny 2000; Hartigan 1999).

However, this work also may have a tendency to give close examination to variation in white identities and cultural formations without enough attention to issues of power. Still, ethnographic work remains a potentially fruitful strategy in that it allows us not only to examine what people say in more depth but also to examine what they actually do in their daily lives. Similar to calls by some recent authors for more interview-based research to unearth whites' present-day racial attitudes and under-standings (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000), historically ethnographic studies of race relations have provided greater depth of understanding of the relationships between ideology and behavior in the everyday and between ideology and the larger context of material struggles (Hartigan 1999; Bourgois 1995; Rieder 1985; Ladner 1971; Rainwater 1970; Hannerz 1969; Liebow 1967; Gans 1962). Much of this work, however, has focused on dominated groups, particularly the urban poor.[25] Especially today when racial thinking and behavior remains pervasive but operates in much more covert ways, ethnographic work in white settings on the "everydayness" of whiteness is essential. As Dennis (1988:44) notes, "The role of participant observer allows the researcher to engage in extensive and intensive activities which permit him to acquire information about local community life as this impinges upon and is affected by race and race relations...[These are] intricacies of everyday life that are basically immune to the survey. The keen eyes of the participant observer can help analyze and explain the consistencies and inconsistencies of group life, that is, what people say they do and what they actually do."

While survey and interview-based studies can provide important breadth of inform-ation that participant observation studies cannot, participant observation or ethno-graphic work may well be a good alternative for tapping into the current racial context with regards to whites.[26] This work has the possibility of uncovering how race operates for whites as a series. In this way it may well be left to the social analyst to describe how race is operating in settings where those present are oblivious to and hence would deny its cogency.[27]

For example, in recent ethnographic research in a white, suburban school on the West Coast, I documented the simultaneous existence of color-blind discourse as the explicit racial logic/talk side by side with pervasive color-consciousness in both talk and action (Lewis 2001). Teachers, students, and parents verbally expressed the idea that "everybody is human" just as they expressed, in various forms, beliefs in group-level racial differences. For better or worse, these were differences that mattered to them—that shaped where they chose to live, who they wanted their children to marry, who they chose to play with in the schoolyard, what television shows they liked to watch, and how they understood gaps in achievement. These were not part of con-trived arguments to defend privilege but just what they believed "to be true," a result of either natural instincts to be around people who are "like themselves" or of "cultural differences" in values. In fact, the white people I spoke to rarely, if ever, thought about their own "racialness." In response to questions about what impact they thought race had had on their lives, they said things like, "I haven't been around it very much." This study illustrated in one setting the unique ability of whites to live their lives in racialized ways while denying the salience of race generally and not thinking about their own whiteness. One could not discover this phenomenon except through observational research.

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[25]There are a few recent exceptions to this, particularly work on far-right white groups. See Ezekiel (1995).
[26]For some recent examples, see the work of Doane (1997), Gallagher (1997), and McDermott (2001).
[27]Findings from participant observations also can be used by survey researchers to refine their measurement of contemporary racial phenomenon.

In trying to identify research strategies that examine the link between ideological and material components of race, one place to turn is to a recent body of work focused on the black middle class. Recent work by Feagin and Sikes (1994), Collins (1997), and Cose (1993) demonstrates that blacks are particularly eloquent in discussing the various components of racial advantage. Describing the many ways that racial "ideas" and understandings impact their hiring, promotion, treatment in public settings, and so forth, it is precisely the link between racial schemas and racial resources, or specifically the high costs of being black, that middle-class African Americans describe in this work.[28] That high cost is levied predominately by whites, and it is whites who predominately benefit both indirectly from the absence of such costs to themselves and from the direct reduction in competition. Thus, whites benefit not only from better access to scarce resources because of reduced competition; they also benefit from the absence of race-related economic, social, and emotional costs suffered by people of color (e.g., getting stopped by police because of racial profiling).[29] This body of research raises important issues not only of how to examine whiteness but also of to whom we should be talking. It is blacks (along with other racialized *others*) who currently and historically have had to spend the most time and energy contemplating just what whiteness is all about (Roediger 1998a). It is their lives that have been contained, limited, and excluded. It is their survival that has been dependent on understanding whites and how whiteness works. Racial minorities, then, are one potential source of insight in an effort to understand how whiteness works today.

This research strategy does not tap into, however, the ways (as in the case of the judge previously described) in which whiteness functions as a direct advantage (rather than merely the absence of disadvantage). This raises issues not only of how to study whiteness or to whom we should be talking but also of exactly what kinds of data are useful. Of most import here in trying to understand white advantage may not be, for example, the motives of decision-makers but the mechanisms involved in decision-making processes (Reskin 2003). Especially in a context of vast reductions in the expression of explicit forms of racism, trying to understanding persisting patterns of racial inequity as the result of mean or "wrong-headed" whites may well be much less effective than careful research on the structural and organizational practices that privilege whites: What are the specific institutional arrangements that benefit some more than others?

One example of this kind of work has come from several macro-level, historically grounded studies of major social institutions. For example, Oliver and Shapiro's (1995) study of black-white wealth gaps documents not only the fact of large gaps in the amount and kind resources available to black and white families but also outlines the origins of these gaps in historic and present-day public policies and private practices. Though not specifically or explicitly about whiteness, this study is still very much about what it means to be white in the United States and how the historical legacy of whiteness continues to provide advantage today through a number of specific mechanisms. Massey and Denton's (1993) *American Apartheid* and Quadagno's (1994) *The Color of Welfare* are two other good examples of quantitative and historical work that similarly map the role of race in skewing opportunities and life chances along racial lines and identify key processes involved in leading to racially

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[28]While the authors of these texts talk primarily about racial discrimination, it is quite easy to understand what they outline as also being about racial advantage.
[29]For a recent example, see White (1999).

disparate outcomes. These are all ways to study the contemporary contours of racial advantage and disadvantage as part of a project of situating and contextualizing racialized experiences—of, for example, highlighting the seriality of whiteness.

Finally, in trying to address the changing terrain of race in the United States and, particularly the new ways whiteness works, it is important to think about how to conduct research that addresses the more subtle forms of racial discourse and practice that continue to support a racially unequal status quo but in new ways (Forman 2001b; Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997). Here, testing or audit strategies may be particularly useful. In the numerous important ways covert racial processes of preference privilege some groups over others, recent efforts to conduct audits and to send out black and white testers into work, housing, and other arenas consistently have revealed the racial advantages given to whites (Ayre and Siegelman 1995; Yinger 1995; Turner and Struyk 1991; Schuman et al. 1983). This work has been particularly important in demonstrating the persistence of discrimination in daily life despite its changing forms. For instance, in studying discrimination in housing it would not be enough today only to look for explicit statements of racial preference. Studies that looked only for deployment of restrictive covenants and other overt racist practices of the past would conclude falsely that discrimination in housing has largely been eliminated (e.g., Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997). However, we know from recent audit studies that current patterns in housing discrimination largely take the form of covert processes of steering or of selectively distributing information and are rampant (Yinger 1995; Massey and Denton 1993). These patterns are replicated across multiple social arenas and institutions. More information about the ways in which whiteness works as a form of symbolic capital across a range of settings (workplaces, neighborhoods, schools) and service-oriented settings (malls, car dealerships, restaurants, stores) is crucial and requires creative research strategies.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued that despite the claims of some, all whites in racialized societies "have race." But because of the current context of race in our society, scholars studying whites as racial actors face several difficult theoretical and method-ological challenges, including how to avoid essentializing race when talking about whites as a social collective, how to tap into the differential ways that whites experience and perform race, and how to recognize the complex ways that racial discourse or "culture" intersect with material realities. Only by attending to and by recognizing these challenges will empirical research on whiteness be able to push the boundaries of our understandings about the role of whites as racial actors and thereby also to contribute to our understanding of how race works more generally.

Today many whites continue to live highly segregated lives having little meaningful interaction with people of color. They often are not consciously aware of the racial nature of their experiences and opportunities. Yet just because many whites do not believe race to be a major part of their day-to-day lives does not mean it is not relevant. Though the nature of whiteness often enables whites to go through life without thinking about the racialized nature of their own experiences, it does not mean they are somehow outside of the system they have created and have projected onto others. Racialization is not a phenomenon only for racial minorities. Whites' racialized experiences may well mean, however, that directly asking them about race

may not be the best way to tap into how whiteness and racial privilege work. It is not that whites are trying to fool interviewers; a luxury of belonging to the advantaged racial group is that one's own racialness often is invisible to oneself. It is especially important then, to constantly reinsert them into history. This is particularly vital, for example, in the multiple cases in which whites try to assert individual, decontextualized notions of success and failure. In a recent study by Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000), the authors discuss how white middle-class college students' use narratives of hard work and merit to defend their current status.[30] These narratives are used not only to explain the students' (and their families') status but also to explain the relatively lower status of many racial minorities (in this case the lack of hard work and merit). These college students have little to no sense of themselves as situated socially and historically in ways that differentially reward their "hard work" and/or "merit." They refer also to their parents' hard work that led to them being able to afford to live in exclusive suburbs. They have little to no sense of the hard work millions of others put in that got them nowhere.

Near the end of his semi-biographical novel, *Black Boy*, Wright (1993) discusses a daily exchange he has with two white waitresses with whom he works who are in some ways very similar to the college students Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) discuss. Wright (1993) comments:

> —I learned of their tawdry dreams, their simple hopes, their home lives, their fear of feeling anything deeply, their sex problems, their husbands. They were an eager, restless, talkative, ignorant bunch... They knew nothing of hate and fear... I often wondered what they were trying to get out of life, but I never stumbled on a clue, and I doubt if they themselves had any notion. They lived on the surface of their days; their smiles were surface smiles, their tears were surface tears. Negroes lived a truer and deeper life than they, but I wished Negroes, too, could live as thoughtlessly, serenely as they... How far apart we stood! All my life I had done nothing but feel and cultivate my feelings; all their lives they had done nothing but strive for petty goals, the trivial prizes of American life. We shared a common tongue, but my language was a different language from theirs. It was a psychological distance that separated the races that the deepest meaning of the problem of the Negro lay for me. *For these poor, ignorant white girls to have understood my life would have meant nothing short of vast revolution in theirs.* (1993:319–320, emphasis added)[31]

Wright's words here are immensely important. Within one short paragraph he taps the depth of privilege that creates a gulf of understanding between the races. If Wright had tried to engage these women in a conversation about their "different languages," they might well have claimed not to know what he was talking about. They might well have claimed quite sincerely to be just talking in everyday, "normal" kinds of ways without any regard to the specificity of their dialect and worldview. Perhaps they would have identified something strange about Wright himself but probably would have little sense of the specificity and boundedness of their own life experience.

Part of the privilege associated with whiteness is, in fact, the ability not to think about race at all, not to take any notice whatsoever of its role in daily life. As I argued in the beginning, the seriality of whiteness means that though whites do not necessarily take it up as an active identity, it still fundamentally shapes their lives and, as Wright

[30]See also DiTomaso (2001).
[31]This is an observation that Baldwin (1968) and others have also made.

points out, their feelings, goals, and language. Moreover, it does so in variable ways. We must be vigilant about paying attention to the racialized nature of white lives but must do so without essentializing them as a (self-conscious, cohesive) group (Hartigan 1999). Though more empirical studies of whiteness are needed in order to destabilize color-blind ideologies and to make whites' roles as racial actors more visible, the very nature of whiteness makes it difficult to study substantively. For the most part, if you want to understand the impact of race on African Americans, you can ask them, and they will tell you.[32] Yet whites rarely if ever are asked to articulate or to examine either their racial identities or their positions within racialized institutions. It is quite possible that when asked, they will have great difficulty in answering.[33] Despite these challenges, scholars still too seldom ask. As Carby (1992:193) argues, too much work has marginalized processes of racialization and has given meaning to it only "when the subjects are black." As she and many others (Doane 1997; Omi and Winant 1994; Frankenberg 1993) have argued recently, "we should be arguing that everyone in this social order has been constructed as a racialized subject" (Carby 1992:193). The silence that so often surrounds whiteness leaves white racial selves unexamined and leaves them unchallenged as norms (Frankenberg 1993).

Finally, as I have argued, it is practically impossible to divorce the social category whiteness from its role as a force of domination and subjugation. This makes it essential that studies of whiteness not attempt to discuss racial discourse or "culture" separate from a discussion of the material realities of racism. In fact, studying dominant racial categories requires particular care in order that it not make *white* fashionable or undermine long-fought-for space within the academy for minority scholars and ethnic studies. Studying whiteness or white people absent of social context obscures the precise reason why it is important to focus on whiteness in the first place—in order to remove the cloak of normality and universality that helps to secure continuing racial privilege for whites. The politics of *whiteness studies* not withstanding (see Talbot 1997), it is essential to place whiteness and racial privilege within the purview of social research and under the lens of critical examination. It is important to do so, though, not because it is hip, not because whites have been left out, but because doing so is a necessary step in confronting the continuing reality of racial inequality.

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[32]This does not mean that every African American will necessarily speak about racism or all forms of racism or speak about it in the same way.

[33]It is not that they are trying to fool interviewers. It is the very nature of the way race impacts their lives that they typically have very little to say on the matter.

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