INTRODUCTION

Four-hundred years since slavery was first introduced to the American continent, the pseudo-scientific doctrine of racial superiority and the structural arrangements that promote the systematic support of racism continue to persist. Over the course of the history of race relations in the United States, successive policies and legal measures aimed at uprooting the blight of racism and discrimination have failed to bring about full integration and equal access. The very nature of the policies created to quell systemic racism have, in most cases, either maintained the status quo or further segregated and discriminated against minority populations.

The destructive impact of systemic racism, and the application of this lens to policies addressing opportunity, inequity, and poverty, illuminates the ongoing damage to society. The structures of American society are not neutral, and the impact of the ingrained racism in these structures is cumulative. Racist and race neutral policies are identified as “opportunity killers,” and the disparities created by these policies are both effects and symptoms of existing institutional arrangements that sustain racism. The impacts of this structure and the policies created within it build up over time and generations, and the effects of this accumulation are critical to understanding how our systems perpetuate unequal opportunity, poverty, and inequality in education, housing, health, and the criminal justice system.

With the election of President Barack Obama, many claimed that the United States was finally post-racial and that Americans could take pride in being a true color-blind society. However, a rise in hate crimes and recent incidents such as the A.M.E. Church Massacre in Charleston, SC, L.A. Clippers owner Donald’s Sterling’s racist outbursts, the killings of George Floyd, Breonna
Taylor, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Relisha McBride, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, and Korryn Gaines as well as the protests and riots in Minneapolis, MN, Ferguson, MO, Baltimore, MD and elsewhere have shown that a post-racial America is a farce. Many assert that the presidential election of Donald Trump, his “Make America Great Again” mantra, and his immigration policies and divisive rhetoric further illuminate how far the United States has yet to come. Some may simply dismiss these incidents as individual acts of a few lingering racists or “bad apples,” ignoring the systemic interconnectedness of these incidents.

Incidents in 2020 and 2021 further highlight the detrimental effects of systemic racism. COVID-19 has infected millions of people worldwide with the United States representing a substantial number of cases and deaths. Black and Latinx people are dying at disproportionate rates from COVID-19. The structural location of Black and Latinx communities leads to overexposure to virus risks. Members of these racial groups are more likely to live in densely populated areas, work “essential” frontline jobs, and have less access to healthcare. Even when Blacks have access to healthcare, they are more likely to be turned away from COVID-19 testing and treatment. Not only are Blacks about three times more likely than Whites to be killed by police, but they are also about three times more likely to die from COVID-19.

The year 2020 highlighted two pandemics ravaging America—COVID-19 and policy brutality. Both issues center on systemic racism. Still, people have a difficult time admitting, recognizing, and conceptualizing that systemic racism is alive and well. We argue that a central problem is that most people only see racism as operating in individuals’ minds rather than in structures that facilitate or inhibit movement through institutions (like from a neighborhood to a school to a college to a job). Despite the over-individualization of racism, it operates primarily on three main levels. First, racism operates on an individual level via attitudes and face-to-face social interaction. We see this in schools where teachers in McKinney, Texas, Camden County, North Carolina, and Atlanta, Georgia were recently recorded making racist statements about Blacks (Ray 2015).

Second, racism operates via processes and mechanisms such as racial composition, which create boundaries that shape social interaction and establish control over social environments (Ray and Rosow 2012). For example, Ray’s research on physical activity among middle class Blacks and Whites finds that Black men are less likely to exercise in predominately White neighborhoods (Ray 2017). Ray’s results suggest that middle class Black men in predominantly White neighborhoods, compared to middle class Black men in predominantly Black neighborhoods, are more likely to be criminalized, profiled, and monitored.

Third, racism operates on a structural level via social institutions. As explained by critical race theory, race permeates social institutions to maintain systemic forms of inequality. Under the critical race theory framework, racism not only
operates through social interaction stemming from individual prejudice but also through institutional conditions rooted in the culture of social life. Entrenched in White privilege, these conditions maintain an ideology of inferiority among minorities that dictate status, power, and prestige structures. In addition to focusing on what race is, critical race theory focuses on what race does, how it is used, and how it operates via individual, social/cultural, and institutional conditions that manufacture and maintain racial inequality within political, social, and economic spheres. Correspondingly, race is treated as a social process rather than simply a variable to control for in a statistical model. In this social process, race operates not only as a point of departure to differentiate individuals and groups but also as socially constructed destinations: that is, we all experience an ongoing process of racialization in our daily lives.

For example, Blacks (and Black women in particular), compared to Whites, receive lower income returns in the labor market for having a bachelor’s degree (Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey 2012) and are less likely to be administered medication and provided adequate healthcare because providers perceive their pain threshold as higher (Hutson 2014). In education, Black preschoolers are more likely than Whites to be suspended for normal childlike actions (Heffling and Holland 2014). In the criminal justice system Blacks are more likely than Whites to be stopped and killed by police even when unarmed. Blacks are more likely than Whites to get convicted and receive longer prison sentences for similar crimes (Ray 2015a). Blacks are more likely to die from COVID-19 because of the neighborhoods they are embedded within. Some neighborhoods are just as segregated as they were decades ago, highlighting the persistent role of redlining and Jim Crow. The Department of Justice’s $82 million ruling that the Bank of America and Chase Bank co-opted in predatory lending toward individuals living in predominately Black and Latinx neighborhoods, as well as the Department of Justice reports on Ferguson and Baltimore that found that their police departments engaged in racial discrimination by targeting Black motorists shift race to a systemic issue. This suggests that racism operates in our social institutions and not just in the beliefs, ideologies, and behaviors of a few racists.

Racism on a systemic or structural level is rooted in policies, laws, and legislation that facilitate differential treatment of individuals based on socially ascribed racial categories. In addition to the examples above, teachers are being targeted for teaching racism in the classroom (Ray and Gibbons 2021). The policies in place allowed for her removal because they do not include legislation that protects teachers for speaking out against injustice. Unfortunately, these policies lead to other teachers, just like some cops, to commit one of the ultimate acts of solidarity with racists—silence as acceptance.

The former quarterback and professional football player for the San Francisco 49ers, Colin Kaepernick, engaged in a protest against racial injustice by not standing for the US national anthem before games. Although some other football
players and veterans support him, the backlash Kaepernick has received from racists and some veterans has been swift. As a free agent, Kaepernick has yet to be signed by a National Football League team, which is likely a result of White backlash to his activism. Furthermore, one high school football game announcer in Alabama stated that a person who does not stand for the national anthem should have to stand in front of a fence and be executed with guns, similarly to how members of the Nazi Army killed some Jews during WWII. In February 2019, Kaepernick and former teammate Eric Reed settled a discrimination lawsuit with the NFL for between $60 and $80 million.

Though some people like to claim that individuals like Dylann Roof, or cops who kill Blacks without cause, like in the murder of Walter Scott, are lone wolves, we beg to differ. The behavior of these individuals did not just come into their minds. The attitudes that influenced their behavior were molded and left unchecked by their social and structural environment from their families and friendship networks, to their schools and mainstream media outlets on TV and in social media. For example, Dylann Roof was apprehended without any violence and even taken to a Burger King on his ride with police to the station for his arraignment for massacring nine Black people at the historic Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC. Yet, police killings are a leading cause of death for young Black men (Edwards, Lee and Esposito 2019).

Collectively, the tragic events discussed above show that if we really want to get past racism, we have to directly address it. You cannot go around it. You cannot dodge it. You have to walk into it and dismantle it. We cannot continue to see these non-isolated events in a vacuum. And honestly, we have to question the attitudes and motives of people who cannot admit that incidents like the AME massacre are an act of domestic terrorism.

This book assembles some of academia’s most well-respected and thought-provoking social scientists to help us make sense of these incidents. The book is organized in three sections: (1) Systemic Racism and Social Theory; (2) Systemic Racism and Education Inequality; and (3) Systemic Racism and Social Change. Section 1 on social theory features Hoda Mahmoudi, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Liann Yamashita, Aldon Morris, Matthew Hughey, and Michael Rosino. Mahmoudi begins the section by detailing what she calls the “evil of prejudice.” She challenges us, particularly Whites, to help end systemic racism by looking deep within ourselves and then working out to the social institutions we dwell in. In Chapter 2, Bonilla-Silva and Yamashita discuss a new prejudice that works to operate in social institutions. In Chapter 3, Morris argues that the academy, particularly sociology as a discipline, cannot help lead the way with its social theories, empirical knowledge, and policy prescriptions, unless it has a racial reckoning and comes to the realization that marginalized scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois are founders of the discipline and must
be formally included in the traditional canon of scientific knowledge. To end Section 1, Hughey and Rosino assert that the election of Donald Trump in the 2016 US Presidential Election was neither a blip nor an accident. Rather, the 2016 election is right in line with White supremacist praxis that allows for systemic racism to proliferate.

Considering that education is a social institution that is simultaneously heralded as the primary beacon of hope for racial progress as well as racial regression, Section 2 focuses exclusively on it. The section features Prudence Carter, Odis Johnson, Jr., Earl Edwards, and Pedro Noguera. Carter and Johnson both tackle the education achievement gap. Carter argues that the narrow focus on the achievement gap and standardized testing has stalled educational progress. Johnson highlights macro-level structures of race and social class that undergird racial disparities in education. His overall assessment is that the United States has failed at implementing policies that will reduce the achievement gap. Edwards and Noguera end Section 2 by addressing an often-overlooked factor in maintaining the racial gap in academic achievement—homelessness. These scholars argue that systemic racism has contributed to increasing the homeless rate among Black and Latinx youth and indirectly contributes to racial differences in education outcomes.

Frequently missing from discussions about systemic racism are solutions to it. Featuring Chandra Reyna, Simone Durham, Beth Cohen, and Rashawn Ray, Section 3 takes up this mantle by documenting some of the ways that various groups, including the marginalized and the privileged, aim to solve systemic racism. Reyna demonstrates how universities and organizations that focus on diversity face more or fewer challenges implanting change based on how much their goals align with university administration. Using data from a larger content analysis project, Durham documents how liberal and conservative media outlets take divergent positions on issues related to the Black Lives Matter Movement. Cohen shows how privileged students across a host of social identities aim to build solidarity with marginalized groups. Cohen provides a typology for various types of solidarity that students engage in. Ray concludes the section by formulating a “racially-inclusive sociological imagination framework.” In doing so, he challenges us to progress from being “racial equity learners” to becoming “racial equity advocates and racial equity brokers.”

References


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