Deconstructing Categories: The Exposure of Silent Racism

Barbara Trepagnier
Southwest Texas State University

Although racism remains an enduring social problem in the United States, few white people see themselves as racist. In an effort to study this paradox, the research discussed here explores racism among those in the "not racist" category. Eight focus groups were conducted in which twenty-five well-meaning white women talked openly about racism; subsequently, the women kept journals to record their thoughts on racism. Findings indicate that silent racism pervades the "not racist" category. "Silent racism" refers to negative thoughts and attitudes regarding African Americans and other people of color on the part of white people, including those who see themselves and are generally seen by others as not racist. An apparent implication of silent racism inhabiting the "not racist" category is that the historical construction racist/not racist is no longer meaningful. Moreover, data show that the "not racist" category itself produces latent effects that serve to maintain the racial status quo. I propose replacing the oppositional either/or categories with a continuum that accurately reflects racism in the United States today.

Descriptions of reality are arbitrary, and classification strategies vary across cultures and over time (Zerubavel 1994). Furthermore, categories do not merely sort our experiences; they are infused with meaning (Berger and Luckman 1966; Gould 1989; Minow 1990). Categories of racism in the United States are no exception. Generally, people in this country talk about racism in two categories: racist and not racist. My study explores racism where it presumably does not occur—in the "not racist" category. My findings indicate that racism operates on a continuum, not in discrete categories and, more important, not in binary, oppositional categories.

The categories "racist" and "not racist" are historical, and their meanings have changed over time. In the 1960s, when the civil rights movement was on the rise, overt racism was rampant and the few white people who inhabited the "not racist" category took an unpopular stand for change in race relations. Since then, "not

Direct all correspondence to Barbara Trepagnier, Department of Sociology, Southwest Texas State University, 601 University Drive, San Marcos, TX 78666; *e-mail*: bt03@swt.edu.

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racist" has become a default category in that anyone who does not commit blatantly racist acts or make intentionally racist statements is automatically so categorized. Today, almost all white people see themselves as not racist, yet racism remains an enduring social problem in the United States. My data suggest that the difficulty concerning race relations is not limited to blatant or intentional racism but includes racism concealed by the binary racist/not racist construction. This study exposes that hidden racism; in the process it renders obsolete white America's commonsense notions about racism.

Mainstream views of racism correspond well with the categories under scrutiny. First, white people generally believe that racism is deviant (Blauner 1989; Jaynes and Williams 1989).[1] To the contrary, it appears that much racism is normal, even typical. Second, the idea that racist thoughts do not necessarily lead to racist action—that one's intention to *not* be racist can prevail if one is diligent—is espoused in psychological studies of racism (Devine 1989). Yet data in this study indicate a strong relationship between racist thoughts and racist behavior, regardless of good intentions. In addition to promoting misconceptions such as these, the oppositional categories racist/not racist uphold the racial status quo because they conceal silent racism and its importance. In this sense, the subtlety of silent racism contributes to its danger.

Research for this project took place in northern and central California. Data collection occurred in eight focus groups each composed of four to five "well-meaning" white women who talked openly about racism. Two characteristics define well-meaning white people: they do not commit overtly racist acts or make intentionally racist statements, and they are concerned about racism. Participants also kept a journal following their focus groups. I asked them to record any insights or emotions concerning racism that occurred to them in the weeks following their respective group discussions.

These data indicate that *silent racism*[2] pervades the "not racist" category. "Silent racism" refers to unspoken negative thoughts, emotions, and attitudes regarding African Americans and other people of color on the part of white people. Silent racism results from misinformation and negative ideas about minority groups that permeate the culture. Limited to thoughts and ideas, silent racism does not refer to antiblack statements or actions that result from them.[3]

LOCATING RACISM

The arguments in this article rest on a diverse set of readings. The concept of silent racism is most closely linked to three sociological studies dealing with race issues: Blumer's (1958a) work on the components of racism, Essed's (1991) concept of everyday racism, and Feagin and Feagin's (1994) depiction of indirect institutional racism. In addition, silent racism corresponds in important ways to Wellman's (1977, 1993) concept of white privilege and Frankenberg's (1993) ideas concerning white identity.

Other studies, both inside and outside the purview of sociology, also inform this study. Gidden's (1981) theory of structuration and Arendt's (1970) work on power both illuminate the link between silent racism and the social structure in which institutional racism is embedded. In addition, the symbolic interactionists W. I. Thomas (1923) and Shibutani (1955) provide the framework in which the connection between silent racism and the everyday racism it produces is forged. And finally, the work of Hall (1959) in cultural anthropology demonstrates how silent racism operates outside of people's awareness.

Although not a race theorist, Blumer wrote several papers on the topic (1939, 1955, 1958a, 1958b, 1965). He rejected the dominant 1940s and 1950s view of racial prejudice as an innate characteristic found only in certain individuals and argued that race prejudice arises not from within individuals but from a sense of group position. Its location is actors' attitudes and conduct. Blumer identified four components of racism. First, members of the dominant group see themselves as superior to members of the subordinate group. Second, members of the dominant group see members of the subordinate group as inherently different from themselves. Third, members of the dominant group sense an advantage over members of the subordinate group. And fourth, members of the dominant group are fearful and suspicious of members of the subordinate group who they think want to take away their advantage (Blumer 1958a:4). Taken together, these four points are a "group product and as such a powerful force shaping the personalities, the attitudes, and the behavior of the [dominant] group members" (Killian 1970:190).

Wellman's work follows both Blumer and his teacher Robert Blauner (1972). Wellman maintains that white people justify their relative location to blacks in society to preserve white privilege (1977, 1993). Data in this study reveal a collateral form of race prejudice operating in addition to white privilege. By definition, people who defend white privilege attempt to maintain the racial formation, not change it. With one exception, the participants in this study did not defend white privilege, and yet almost all of them exhibited silent racism. Nevertheless, while silent racism differs from the defense of white privilege, the two concepts are not unrelated. Both silent racism and white privilege emerge from a sense of group position and therefore are characterized by power relations.

Ironically, Wellman ignores an aspect of racism developed by Blauner. In addition to the rational, economic side of racism captured by the concept of white privilege, Blauner (1972:41) argues that "race consciousness" can also be irrational. For Blauner (1972:41), the psychological holdovers of slavery make "people of color convenient targets for the psychic projection of those characteristic tendencies and desires that Western man (sic) has suppressed in himself." Although I do not explain silent racism in psychoanalytic terms such as projection and suppression, they resonate with Blauner's suggestion that racism is not always rational, as in the case of white privilege.

Frankenberg (1993) illuminates how white women construct identities as *white* women. This study focuses on how well-meaning white women perceive racism—

what it feels like, what they think about it, and what, if anything, they want to do about it. In her work on the role of race in shaping white women's identities, Frankenberg contends that respondents embrace one of three paradigms concerning race matters: essentialism, color blindness/power evasiveness, and race cognizance.[4] Frankenberg's respondents dealt with the concept of white privilege either by denying it, as in the case of women who fit the first two paradigms, or by recognizing it, as in the case of women who fit the third paradigm. Most of the women in my study correlate with those in Frankenberg's third paradigm: they recognize racism as a problem, and some of them also recognize that they play a part in that problem.

Silent racism is closely linked to Essed's (1991) concept of everyday racism in that it constitutes the platform on which most racism is enacted. "Everyday racism" refers to routine actions that go unquestioned by members of the dominant group which in some way discriminates against members of a racial or ethnic category. According to Essed, the everyday actions of individuals maintain institutional racism. The concept of institutional racism refers to systematic practices that produce inequality for people of color (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967). Overemphasis on the structural aspect of institutional racism downplays the role of individuals in its production. Essed (1991:39) questions the wisdom of omitting the role of individuals in institutional racism when she says that "structures of racism do not exist external to agents—they are made by agents." Essed's work inserts individuals into the practice of institutional racism, locating racism within interactions. Silent racism differs from everyday racism in that it refers solely to the thoughts, beliefs, and emotions white people have concerning African Americans and other people of color, not to discriminatory statements or actions taken against them. Although racist statements and actions that proceed from negative thoughts and emotions are often vocal, silent racism itself is not. Given that Essed frames racism as a routine occurrence carried out by ordinary people, her work implies that a more accurate model for characterizing racism would be a continuum rather than binary categories.

Feagin and Feagin (1994) clarify the connection between racism within individuals (both silent racism and everyday racism) and institutional racism when they distinguish four types of institutional racism: isolate discrimination, small group discrimination, direct institutional racism,[5] and indirect institutional racism. They state that indirect institutional racism "is carried out with no intent to harm" the members of the subordinate group affected (1994:122). Hence, well-meaning white people who are sensitive to race issues and who see themselves and are seen by others as not racist nevertheless perpetuate institutional racism, albeit unintentionally. Again, a continuum is implied as the logical representation of the racism described here.

The link between individuals and institutions is elaborated by Giddens in his theory of "structuration." Drawing on Goffman concerning routine conduct, Giddens (1981:172) states that social systems are "structures only in and through their continual and contingent reproduction in day-to-day social life." Giddens also uses Robert Merton's concept of unintended consequences, pointing out that Merton speaks of the social forces operating "behind our backs" that constitute social insti-

tutions (cited in Giddens 1981:172). For Giddens (1981:171), social structure is both the "medium and outcome of the social practices it recursively organizes." The role of silent racism in the structuration process is that it undergirds the "social practices" that constitute the "medium" of social structure. This view of how silent racism operates at the structural level parallels Feagin and Feagin's concept of indirect institutional racism.

The role of power in the operation of institutions is illuminated by Arendt (1986), who echoes Blumer when she says that power (like racism) is not the property of individuals but of groups. Power is communicative, according to Arendt (1970), and held in place within institutions by the consent of individuals who maintain it. Similarly, indirect institutional racism operates through consent. Furthermore, Arendt maintains that power is not necessarily obvious to those who have it (see also Lukes 1986). Well-meaning white people who perform everyday racism generally do not perceive their actions as racist, even though their actions exist within a field that perpetuates institutional racism.

The link between silent racism and the practice of institutional racism rests on the symbolic interactionist concepts "definition of the situation" and "perspective." Definitions imbued with silent racism produce racist actions. Thomas said in 1923 that the process of definition is a "stage of examination and deliberation" that precedes any "self-determined act of behavior" (p. 42). Actors interpret the present situation through self-communication, using what is noticed and drawing on relevant information from the past. Equally important is that one's definition of the situation precedes action. The Thomas theorem, "If [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences," captuers this point (Thomas and Thomas 1928:572). "Consequences" refers to whatever action results from the actor's definition of a given situation (see Ball 1972). Thus, unless what is noticed is problematic—in some way incongruous with expectations—we are likely to use our definitions as a reliable guide to action, including when those definitions rest on racist thoughts and beliefs.

The second symbolic interactionist concept of interest is "perspective," defined by Shibutani (1955:564) as "an ordered view of one's world—what is taken for granted. . . . [One's perspective] constitutes a matrix through which one perceives his environment." Shibutani elucidates how one's view of the world influences one's definition of a given situation. This idea also pertains to silent racism. Just as the concept of perspective explains why definitions vary among actors, it also explains why racism varies among white people. Charon (1998) says that perspectives consist of assumptions and value judgments about what we see. If silent racism is pervasive, and these data indicate that it is, then definitions in general are necessarily influenced by that racism. This aspect of one's definition of the situation—that it is derived from one's perspective and is therefore biased—is mitigated only by the awareness of one's own silent racism. The dim awareness among most white people of their own racism helps to explain how people whose definitions are racist manage to see themselves as not racist (see Altheide 2000 for a discussion of the definition of the situation and identity).

The idea that racist thoughts do not necessarily lead to racist action ignores the strong relationship between an action and the definition that precedes it, focusing instead on people's intentions. This psychological view disregards the unintended effects of behavior, projecting the idea that well-meaning white people are not racist even in cases when their actions produce negative effects for African Americans and other people of color.

The concepts "definition of the situation" and "perspective" explain the link between silent racism (in the minds of white people) and institutional racism. As white people construct their definitions of situations, they use the silent racism embedded in their perspectives. The actions that proceed from definitions and perspectives imbued with racism are the everyday racism that constitute institutional racism (Essed 1991).

"Modern racism" refers to the idea that overt racism has mutated into subtler forms since the civil rights movement. An aspect of modern racism that is closely related to silent racism is aversive racism, that is, a sense that any racist feeling or thought is deplorable and must be suppressed (Gaertner and Dovidio 1986). The tendency to avoid mentioning race is acknowledged by several of the participants in my study. I argue that the aversion in these cases results from two negative effects of the "not racist" category itself: confusion about what is racist and apprehension about being perceived as racist.

Hall's (1959) theory of culture is pivotal to explaining how silent racism operates and why it is pervasive. Hall differentiates between formal and informal learning. Formal learning involves both teacher and student, with the teacher playing an active role in correcting the student when a mistake is made. Informal learning, in contrast, often occurs "out of awareness" (Hall 1959:96), with the learner modeling after others without any of the parties being aware of it. We are taught formally that racism is wrong; however, we learn the negative thoughts, emotions, and attitudes that comprise silent racism informally through the modeling of parents, teachers, peers, and the media.

Silent racism, deriving from Blumer's depiction of race prejudice, specifically refers to stereotypical images that set blacks, as a group, apart from whites and to paternalistic assumptions that denote a sense of superiority in some whites in comparison to blacks. Data in this study show that both aspects of silent racism inhabit the definitions and perspectives of white people, including those people generally categorized as not racist and regardless of whether or not they are aware of it.

This study differs from those preceding it by exploring racism explicitly from the vantage point of people in the "not racist" category. Another fundamental difference between this and other studies is the recommendation that we change the way we talk and think about racism. Collapsing the oppositional categories in the public's consciousness would more accurately reflect the reality of racism in the United States that is exposed in this study. This shift would eliminate the question of who is racist and who is not racist, portraying instead the idea, expressed by Blumer in 1939, that white people are racist in varying degrees.

In addition to being a more accurate portrayal of racism, the shift from oppositional categories to a continuum would allow a more meaningful difference among white people, namely race awareness, to become apparent. And finally, replacing the historical binary categories with an unbounded continuum depicting greater and lesser degrees of racism would ameliorate the negative effects produced by the "not racist" category, such as confusion about racism and apprehension about being perceived as racist. Both of these negative effects are discussed below.

METHOD AND SAMPLE

My goal in designing this study was not to measure racism but to explore how it is constructed, an earmark of qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). I wanted to discover how white women who care about the issue and who are not overtly racist can still construct racism. Despite my sympathetic approach, it is doubtful that all of the participants would agree with my analysis of the racism expressed in the groups. My method is also reflexive in that I conducted the research keeping in mind and acknowledging my own position vis-à-vis the topic (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

In an attempt to appeal to women who were concerned about racism, I distributed fliers titled "Women Against Racism" in women's political organizations, bookstores, lesbian centers, and university women's centers at several California campuses. I also employed snowball sampling, and several women joined the study on the recommendation of a friend who had participated.

Group interviews increase the richness and detail in data (Churchill 1988). The synergism among group members produces a wider range of information and insight than researchers can garner in individual interviews. The eight videotaped focus groups in this study each consisted of four or five white women, including me. I participated actively in all of the focus groups, disclosing examples of racism from my own experience. In this way I attempted to discourage an atmosphere of interrogation (Bristow and Esper 1988), encouraging instead self-disclosure (Melamed 1983) and self-exploration (Oakley 1981). To spark the discussions I asked questions about topics such as early messages about race, experiences and relationships with African Americans, one's own racism, and what should happen concerning racism in the United States.[6]

Two critical methodological decisions were to limit the groups to women and to limit the discussions to racism against African Americans. A frank discussion about racism and the meanings attached to it relies on a context of safety, a feature that is increased in small, homogeneous groups (Aaker and Day 1986; Churchill 1988). Because I am a white woman and would be facilitating all of the focus groups, limiting the study in terms of gender was deemed appropriate. In addition, limiting the groups to women ensured that gender difference concerning racism, which was not an aspect of the research problem, would not confound the data.

The decision to limit the topic to racism directed solely at African Americans

when other minority groups are also discriminated against routinely also relates to data analysis. My first concern was to keep the discussions focused. Because the unique history of minority groups in the United States ensures that racism against each group differs in many ways (Farley 1988), limiting this study to one minority group kept the data from being overly complicated. Because much of the literature on which this study is grounded concerns racism toward African Americans, I chose to focus on this group. A secondary concern about including other forms of racism in the discussions involved the political conflict over the issue of immigration prevalent in California in the early to mid-1990s. Data on racism against Mexican Americans might have been tainted by rhetoric saturating the political climate in California at the time.

Despite these methodological constraints, the concept of silent racism is not limited to the definitions and perspectives of white women or to stereotypes about African Americans. First, there is no evidence that women are more racist than men; it follows then that silent racism likely exists in the minds of men as well as women. Second, although images about other minority groups differ from those about African Americans, stereotypes exist and are likely to be learned informally. Hence, stereotypical images likely operate in a fashion similar to silent racism.[7] Viewing racism in terms of a continuum, rather than oppositional categories, could be considered appropriate in terms of other forms of intolerance as well, for example, sexism, elitism, ageism, and heterosexism.

In addition to discussing race issues, I requested that participants keep a journal following their respective focus groups. I asked participants to tell about their experience in the focus group and to write about any insights, thoughts, or emotions concerning race or racism that occurred in the three weeks following their group session. Each participant was given a bluebook and a stamped addressed manila envelope as encouragement to take part in this aspect of the study. Return rate of the journals was 75 percent.

The sample for this study is young and highly educated. More than half—fourteen of the twenty-five women who participated—are young adults (between 18 and 29 years old); eight women fall into a middle range (34 to 47 years); and three women are elders (68 to 76 years old). Twenty of the twenty-five participants have college degrees. Seven of the women who have graduated from college are in graduate school, and three have master's degrees.

Other demographics of interest are occupation and region. Seven of the full-time students did not mention any other line of work. Occupations of the remaining eighteen participants are clerical work and business (10 participants), the health and mental health fields (3), teaching (2), service (2), and full-time homemaking (1). Eleven of the twenty-five women interviewed have lived in California most of their lives. The remainder lived in the Northeast, the South and Southwest, the Northwest, and the Midwest before moving to California. Of these demographic variables, only region appears to correlate with silent racism: three of the four participants who reveal paternalistic assumptions were originally from the South.

SILENT RACISM

Two forms of silent racism emerge in the study—stereotypical images and paternalistic assumptions. These correspond with Blumer's characteristics of race prejudice as a belief held by members of the dominant group that members of the subordinate group are inherently different from them (stereotypical images) and feelings of superiority in the dominant group (paternalistic assumptions). Stereotypical images concerning black Americans refers to the misinformation and false images learned informally by white Americans and that distinguish blacks as "different." Paternalistic assumptions refer to a condescending attitude toward blacks characterized by a sense of false responsibility. The fundamental difference between the two forms of silent racism is that stereotypical images are ideas about a "conceptualized group" (Killian 1970:184), whereas paternalistic assumptions emerge in close relationships between blacks and whites. Both aspects of silent racism are often held outside of one's awareness.

Stereotypical Images

Spawned by the media, racial stereotypes are maintained through "talk, tales, stories, gossip, anecdotes, . . . and the like" (Blumer 1958a:5). Statements or experiences of twenty-two of the twenty-five participants portray stereotypical images of African Americans. The stereotypes held by the participants in this study are not unique. What is remarkable is that the women who disclosed them are reasonably categorized in the binary construction as not racist.

Stereotypes were often revealed unintentionally. When I asked the participants if they had ever realized after the fact that something they had said or done was racist, Martha responded:

> Just yesterday I was tutoring a student and she pointed out that she was born in Uganda, [a fact that] made her very different—her perception of the world was international. I said, "Gosh, that's wonderful, because when other people see you they might just think *African American*, but really you've got this other quality." And I didn't know whether to apologize or just take my foot out of my mouth and go on. (Focus group 2)

In acknowledging that what she said was racist, Martha demonstrated that she is highly race aware. Her statement indicates a devaluation of African Americans compared to Africans, exoticizing the latter. Both references—the discrediting one toward African Americans and the complimentary one toward Africans—are based in stereotypical images that saturate the racial discourse. Martha's comment illustrates that people who are highly aware of racism also adopt fragments of a racist ideology based on group position, a point exemplifying Hall's (1959) theory of culture. That Martha gave voice to the stereotypes illustrates Thomas's (1923) point that actions proceed from definitions, regardless of good intentions.

Anne spoke about a black family who lived next door to her family in New York

when she was growing up. She said that Cassie, a girl her age, became a close friend but that she was "messed up. . . . [H]er [single] mom was poor and had a lot of problems, including drugs" (focus group 3). Anne subsequently talked to her mother about her old neighbors and discovered that, in fact, Cassie had a stepfather, her family was middle class, and her mother was not involved with drugs. In her journal Anne expressed dismay that she had been so thoroughly affected by racist discourse that she unwittingly changed her childhood memories to accommodate it.

Both Martha and Anne expressed a high level of awareness about the stereotypes that shape their views of the world. Martha immediately recognized that her behavior had been racist, guided by the silent racism embedded in her perspective. Similarly, Anne recognized that she had adopted stereotypes from society that influenced her perception of the past. These cases depict how silent racism differs from white privilege, as defined by Wellman (1993). Regret on Martha's part and surprise on Anne's suggest that these participants are not interested in maintaining the racial status quo, an earmark of those who defend white privilege.

Katie and Vanessa also exhibited stereotypical images; however, their examples were far more egregious than those of Martha and Anne. Seemingly unaware that her suggestion was racist, Katie earnestly asked why returning to Africa is not a viable solution for the plight of African Americans in this country. She said, "[S]ometimes I wonder, why do they stay [in the United States]? Why don't they give up? It would suck to have this [racism] to overcome!" And Vanessa expressed the following view rooted in biological determinism:

> [S]o there *are* differences among the races. Maybe the black race is not as verbally developed but more developed in other ways. . . . It wouldn't be all that surprising if one or another trait became better in one group than another. I don't see that they should be looked down on because of that. (Focus group 5)

By virtue of being in the study, both Katie and Vanessa see themselves as "women against racism." Yet both expressed views that are highly racist by most standards. Vanessa's view especially is closely aligned with Blumer's (1958a) depiction of racism as the belief that the subordinate group is fundamentally different.

When Katie's and Vanessa's examples of stereotypical images are contrasted with Martha's and Anne's, the importance of race awareness is highlighted. Martha and Anne are aware of having acted on racist assumptions; Katie and Vanessa are less aware. Katie especially seemed to be unaware of the implications of her argument that African Americans should move to Africa. Although Vanessa knew that she raised a controversial point, she appeared to view biological determinism as a viable explanation for difference.

An example of other stereotypical images expressed by participants is Ruth's acknowledgment that at times she has unintentionally spotlighted race unnecessarily, such as when she referred to a good student in her class as "a bright black student." Ruth seemed aware that the bright student's race is noteworthy solely because of stereotypes of African Americans as not as bright as whites. Kelly, by contrast, appeared

to draw unconciously from several stereotypical images about African Americans. She said that some black women in the ghetto of Los Angeles are "unintelligent and not literate" and are "somehow implicated in the violence within the ghetto."

The comparison of Ruth and Kelly also underscores the point that silent racism operates in people regardless of their level of race awareness. Acknowledgment of having "slipped" in the comment about her student indicated that Ruth has a high level of race awareness. However, Kelly did not appear to be aware that her statements have racist overtones. This does not imply that race awareness is not important, but that white people act on racist definitions regardless of their level of race awareness.

Stereotypical images may appear to some as harmless mistakes. However, practices including racial profiling are influenced by silent racism. In addition, especially when coupled with a low level of race awareness, silent racism contributes to a culture of denial, a social condition that results in the persistence of the racial status quo (Pincus and Erhlich 1994).

Stereotypical images often have an emotional component. The fear of black men derives from the stereotype that they are dangerous and threatening (Clark 1991; hooks 1990). The historical notion of black men as "beasts" was often used to justify lynching in the South (Fredrickson 1971:275). Jean shared the following story about a visit to San Francisco.

> Two other white women and I had attended a stage show when we found ourselves in the rain, blocks from our hotel. An African American man with an airport van waved, offering us a ride. I went into a panic. I thought, Well? I really thought about that, you know, like, did I have a reason to be afraid? I don't have to take a taxi a lot, so I'm not used to getting into a vehicle with other people. But if he had been white, would I have felt differently about it? It made me think for weeks after that, trying to come up with an answer. (Focus group 5)

Jean's phrase, "I went into a panic," signifies the emotionally charged aspect of her reaction. Individuals construct emotions, and their definitions and interpretations are "critical to this often emergent process" (Shott 1979:1323). Whatever inner cues Jean experienced—rapid breathing, increased heartbeat, or some other sensation—she interpreted them as fear. Her acknowledgment that she might have reacted differently if the driver had been white indicates that her intense emotional reaction resulted from the stereotypical image of black men as dangerous (Clark 1991). Jean considered her reaction to the van driver both inappropriate and troubling; she defined her reaction as a negative emotion and knew that black men encounter such reactions repeatedly in their everyday lives (Cose 1993).

Several other women told similar stories. For example, Violet said, "I know I react more to black men, I'm more afraid of them than other men . . . [and] I classify it as irrational" (focus group 7). Like Jean, Violet implied that she regards her fear as inappropriate. Joan, on the other hand, seemed to feel that her fear of black men was appropriate and rational: "When I realized [the men] around me were black, I was really nervous, and I . . . it is something that just was" (focus group 7). Although

Joan acknowledged the source of her fear, she did not perceive the change in her response as "irrational," even though she could not explain it.

The data in this section indicate that stereotypical images exist in the minds of well-meaning white people. Some are aware of the stereotypes; others are not. And awareness does not preclude action based on a stereotypical image, even though it may well lessen it. There is no reason to think that these stereotypical images remain dormant and do not influence the actions of the white people whose definitions contain them. Rather, it is logical to assume that stereotypes do affect behavior, as acknowledged by the more race aware participants.

Paternalistic Assumptions

Paternalism began as a sympathetic attitude toward blacks, one adopted by liberal, southern, well-meaning whites (Fredrickson 1971). Today, paternalistic assumptions are found in close black-white relationships characterized by a patronizing attitude on the part of the white person. Paternalistic assumptions are seen most often in white families with black employees (Rollins 1985). Like stereotypical images, people learn paternalistic assumptions informally, through noticing others. Therefore, these assumptions are often outside one's awareness. Four of the participants, including myself, told about experiences rooted in this form of silent racism.

I shared with some of the groups the following memory about my childhood that illustrates paternalistic assumptions:

> When I was growing up a young man named James worked for us—in fact, he came to work for us when he was fifteen or sixteen. He did stuff for my dad, and he taught me [and my sisters and brother] how to drive. He became like—and I'm using the words that came right out of my family—part of our family. And when my dad died twenty-five years ago, he sat with us at the funeral. He felt that much a part of our family. That's the kind of racism that I was brought up with. It was very patronizing, and it's so slippery that it's hard to call it racism, but it is racism. (Focus group 7)

I later asked my mother (age eighty-six at the time) what it meant that James was "part of our family." She said, "Your father and I treated James the same as we treated all of you kids—we trusted him and we expected him to behave. He was the grown-up kid in the bunch" (pers. com., May 1995). James worked for my family until he was well into his thirties, and yet my mother still thought of him as "one of the kids." She continued to look upon him as "childlike," regardless of the fact that he and his wife (a teacher) had since raised three children and he had served as a member of the city council in their small town for more than 15 years.

Hierarchical relationships, like the one between my family and James, are governed by asymmetrical rules that are a ceremonial expression of relative status positions (Goffman 1967). In addition, members of oppressed groups often transform the meaning of dominant/subordinate relationships into a "dependency-bond, a relationship that is justified by responses and agreed-upon rights" (Wolf 1994:374).

By sitting with us at my father's funeral, James acknowledged the morality of his relationship to our family. Clearly, the affection experienced and expressed between James and my family was sincere. Goffman (1967:59) says that affection and "belongingness" are earmarks of deference. And while sincerity and affection do not mitigate the racist structure of similar hierarchical relationships, they illustrate the complexity found in some of them.

Paternalistic assumptions in families illustrate how some well-meaning white people operate within and sustain racist institutions. Current protocol within a given institution is executed daily by people no less well intentioned than my parents. Nevertheless, African Americans and other people of color, perceived as less capable or less mature than their white counterparts, are frequently passed over for promotions with no intention to harm (Feagin and Feagin 1994).

I repeated the story about my family's relationship with James in focus group 4. A member of that group, Sharon, had also been raised in a family that employed an African American domestic worker for many years. Sharon contrasted her family's relationship with Anna to my family's relationship with James:

> We had Anna; she worked for us for years. My mother would go to work—she didn't clean house, she hated to clean. Anna did it. She was in a way part of, I mean, she came in two or three times a week and we just accepted her. I took it for granted; she was there and we were so grateful to have somebody who worked well and did a good job. I think my mother probably paid her well, but I don't think anybody patronized her. There wasn't a feeling of her being a part of the family or anything. I mean, she would never have come to a funeral or anything like that. (Focus group 4)

Sharon explicitly stated that her family was not patronizing; in fact, she downplayed any emotional aspect of the relationship with phrases like "we just accepted her," and "I took it for granted." Yet she began, "We had Anna," a common reference to African American domestic workers that implies ownership. Sharon also interrupted herself midsentence when she said that Anna was "in a way part of" and then shifted to "she came in two or three times a week." Sharon was probably about to say that Anna "was part of the family" but stopped when she realized what such a statement implied: her family was indeed somewhat like mine. The paternalistic assumptions in Sharon's family were less pronounced than they were in my family, perhaps because she grew up in the North. Nevertheless, Sharon's words betray paternalistic assumptions, in terms of both possession and inclusion. Quite possibly, the difference in the two cases concerns Anna and James more than the white families they worked for. Unlike James, Anna presumably did not portray a sense of relative advantage (Wolf 1990) or the dependency bond mentioned in reference to James. In this sense, Anna did not reciprocate paternalism and James did.

Katie also talked about an aspect of paternalistic assumptions in her focus group:

> I used to feel so sorry for them. . . . [T]hat's the attitude I grew up with. The relationship between white people and black people [is] like a master/servant relationship. For a long time we had this old black woman who came and cooked

> and did the laundry and stuff, which is like all of my friends, I mean they all had an old black woman who came in. It was kind of the normal thing, you know? (Focus group 2)

Katie's reference to a "master/servant relationship" corresponds with Rollins's (1985) depiction of maternalism and deference. Rollins bases her work on Goffman's (1967) idea that how people act exposes both how they see themselves and how they expect to be seen by others. Rollins points out that paternalism (or maternalism, in Rollins's work) reveals not only arrogance on the part of the person displaying it but also an expectation of gratefulness from the receiver.

Sometimes paternalistic assumptions exist in friendships between white and black people. In response to the question about a time when participants had said or done something that they now think is racist, Karen described an incident that illustrates paternalistic assumptions:

> [I]n high school my friend Belle, who was black, and I would go places and I would try and do everything [for her], especially in establishments where it was all white. One time I asked her what she wanted and I ordered her ice cream for her. She looked at me and said, "I can order for myself." And at the time I felt that I had messed up or whatever. (Focus group 3)

Karen's trying to "do everything" for Belle suggests that she was operating according to paternalistic assumptions. Ordering Belle's ice cream illuminates both Karen's good intentions *and* an offensive, patronizing attitude that Belle rebuffed. Friendships are normally governed by symmetrical rules that dictate equality (Goffman 1967). Only hierarchical relationships operate according to asymmetrical rules. Paternalistic assumptions led Karen to define her relationship with Belle as hierarchical. From Karen's point of view, ordering Belle's ice cream was a generous gesture—one she thought would be appreciated. At the same time, her action clearly insulted Belle because it devalued her standing in the relationship.

Karen's attempt to buy Belle's ice cream proceeded from her definition of the situation, illustrating the Thomas theorem. Her surprise at Belle's curt response indicates that she had no idea beforehand that her action would be offensive. Her experience also illustrates how silent racism leads to behavior that is unintentionally offensive to people of color, a characteristic of everyday racism.

The paternalistic assumptions illustrated above make it evident that racism is not fundamentally hateful; indeed, it often arises from goodwill. Nevertheless, paternalistic assumptions embody Blumer's (1958a) idea that race prejudice is characterized by dominant group members perceiving themselves as superior to those in the subordinate group. This self-assured sense of superiority is the "matrix" (Shibutani 1955:564) through which some white people perceive their close relationships with black people.

Paternalistic assumptions engender a sense of self-satisfaction in the people who operate within them. For example, another participant, Mary, told about going to lunch with a Chicana friend who picked her up at work. Mary acknowledged the following about her realization that coworkers would observe her with her friend:

> I found myself thinking how proud I was of myself that I have this woman of color coming to see me and that she's a friend—and I realize that I'm thinking this. It was a real humbling experience. I think there are a lot of us who think, when we're hanging around with our friends who are people of color, Oh, I'm so cool. (Focus group 6)

Mary made this comment with a great deal of self-awareness, which may be the first step toward lessening the paternalistic assumptions that generate it.

Paternalistic assumptions are not as prevalent in the data as stereotypical images, which are evident in almost all of the participants. However, paternalistic assumptions emerge in close black-white relationships, and only seven of the participants had had a close relationship with a black person. Because stereotypical images are held about an abstract group and no personal relations are necessary in their case, they are far more common than paternalistic assumptions.

The data on stereotypical images and paternalistic assumptions indicate that the silent racism lodged in white peoples' perspectives influences their commonsense interpretations., If so, we live in a "comprehensively racial society" (Omi and Winant 1986:62). Both aspects of silent racism fit the description of what Schutz calls "natural attitudes" (see Wagner 1970:320), which are taken for granted and go unquestioned (McHugh 1968). Natural attitudes provide us with what we know, or think we know, to be true. We assume that others share our definitions, and we act according to them as if they make up the structure of reality (Garfinkel 1967). Like other natural attitudes, those attitudes comprising silent racism embody the "mental stance" taken by people in their "spontaneous and routine" pursuits (Wagner 1970:320). Pincus and Ehrlich (1994:5) express this point when they say, "Every child born into this society comes to learn its traditions and norms. Prejudice and discrimination are included among those traditions and norms. They are part of our cultural heritage. . . . [N]o one can escape."

Two participants, Janice and Corrine, stand apart from the others. Janice alone portrays a defense of white privilege that illustrates how it differs from silent racism. She requested a post-focus group interview instead of writing her thoughts in a journal. She related that she felt upset during her focus group discussion when Charlotte had used the phrase "so white" in reference to her own upbringing:

> [T]hose are the kinds of things that really bug me. I always thought, But what does that mean? to say something like "*so* white"? It's always said with a certain tone; it's definitely a negative thing. And yet I thought, if anyone said, "Oh, that is *so* black!" they would be the first to jump in and say, "Oh, that's racist." I felt offended by that phrase. (Focus group 8)

Janice's emotional response to Charlotte's expression "so white" reveals a defense of white privilege grounded in the conservative position that "so white" and "so black" are equivalent, an argument that ignores discrimination against blacks and the corresponding privilege accruing to whites. In her focus group, Janice's statements were often color evasive, meaning that she avoided or deflected any ques-

tions that required her to deal with racism. Janice's defense of white privilege and her avoidance of race when asked about it differentiate her from all of the other participants. Even Katie's and Vanessa's statements, as inflammatory as they are, do not defend white privilege as Janice does.

Corrine did not defend white privilege as Janice did. But neither did she say anything that could be traced to silent racism. Corrine was in the pilot focus group before the question "Have you ever done anything that you now would consider racist?" had been added. The absence of this question in Corrine's group and her reticence during the discussion group may in part explain her difference from the other participants.

The data presented to this point support the claim that the "not racist" category is meaningless because silent racism abounds in the definitions of those who inhabit it. The following data support the assertion that the "not racist" category itself produces effects that perpetuate the racial status quo.

LATENT CONSEQUENCES OF THE "NOT RACIST" CATEGORY

I found three latent consequences of the "not racist" category: first, people evidence confusion about what is racist and what is not; second, people express apprehensiveness about being perceived as racist; and third, important differences within the "not racist" category, such as level of race awareness, are suppressed. All of these negative effects support the argument that oppositional categories are no longer a useful representation of racism today.

Confusion remained about whether acknowledging "difference" is racist. To illustrate, Anne, the New Yorker mentioned above, reported a conversation she had with her mother in reference to a New York City baseball announcer: "[M]y mom asked me, 'Who's Bill White?' I didn't want to say he was black—I thought it would be racist" (focus group 3). Anne attempted to avoid using color as a marker for distinguishing among the sports announcers, believing that noticing, or more specifically mentioning, race would have been racist. After mentioning many details about Bill White—color of hair, size, and so on—Anne finally told her mother that he was the "black" announcer. Anne's reluctance to use race as an indicator illustrates both confusion about what is racist and apprehension about being seen as racist. Together, the two can have a paralyzing effect. These effects of the "not racist" category maintain racism by inducing people to ignore it rather than diminish it through both acknowledging the fear of being racist and understanding what is and what is not racist.

Following Goffman, Omi and Winant (1986:62) call everyday rules regarding race matters "racial etiquette." These rules are imbued with myriad meanings regarding race and racial difference that produce apprehension in white people. Elaine articulated her self-consciousness in dealing with black/white difference when she shared a story about meeting Dorothy, the friend of a friend, at a barbecue: "I opened the door and she's *black*. Oh! And I was just so mad at myself, and

embarrassed for thinking that. I mean like, oh, did that show? Really worrying about it; just never getting past that" (focus group 7). Elaine's surprise that Dorothy was black was exceeded only by her embarrassment about being surprised. Based on her experience, Elaine expected to see only white people at the barbecue. The racial etiquette that Elaine learned in her "all-white" upbringing may have left her unsure about how to navigate a black-white social setting. The phrase "Did that show?" indicates that Elaine was afraid Dorothy might have noticed her surprise and interpreted it as racist. Apprehension about being perceived as racist troubled Elaine quite a bit, as evidenced by the comment, "Really worrying about it; just never getting past that."

Apprehension about being perceived as racist was mentioned explicitly by several participants. For example:

> People silencing themselves out of the fear of not saying the right thing [means] not being able to talk, and therefore not being able to change. . . . Making actual change may mean making a mistake, saying the wrong thing, and having somebody call you on it and having to own that. (Loretta, focus group 7)

Loretta's statement shows insight into the paradox of being unable to discuss racism for fear of being perceived as racist. Elaine added, "Racism has such a stigma attached to it that yes, we fear it. We don't want to be associated with [it]—we are not supposed to be making any mistakes" (focus group 7). The "not racist" category suppresses curiosity and spontaneity for fear of losing one's status as not racist.

The fear of being perceived as racist not only silences people, it also keeps people from finding out more about racism. Anita made this point when she said, "[The] fear of saying anything that's going to label you racist, . . . you're not really dealing with. Well, is it or isn't it [racist], and why do I feel like that?" (focus group 8). Lucy makes a similar point:

> [S]omething that gets in my way [of dealing with my own racism] is feeling that I've got to be cool, or good, or maybe it's feeling like I try too hard or I care too much. I think it gets in my way because it prevents me from . . . acknowledging that I am human. (Focus group 5)

I think what Lucy means by "acknowledging that [she is] human" is that inevitably she will at times be unwittingly racist. In other words, the need to see oneself and be seen by others as not racist contradicts the very goal of antiracism. If the intent to be seen as not racist prevents us from acknowledging our own racism even to ourselves, then we can only contribute to its perpetuation.

The third latent effect of the "not racist" category is that it obscures internal differences. An especially important difference among people in the "not racist" category is their level of race awareness. A comparison of statements by Martha, who is highly race aware, and Sharon, whose race awareness is low, highlights the importance of this effect. When asked, "Can you think of a time when you did or said something that you now think is racist?" Martha quickly replied with an example from the week before concerning the student from Africa. Sharon, on the other

hand, when faced with the same question, could not think of a time when she had ever said or done anything racist.

A question about lessening racism sharpened the difference between Martha's and Sharon's responses. Martha said, "It means that I would want to make people aware of the racism that exists, including when it exists in me." Sharon answered, "I'm not doing anything. . . . [I]t's partly out of no connection with my life that I don't get involved." Martha's awareness of her racism and her desire to increase awareness in others contrasts with Sharon's disconnection from the issue altogether. Martha is antiracist—that is, she takes an active stand against racism. That does not mean that she is not racist; she openly acknowledged the racist comment she made to the student from Uganda. Sharon, however, remains passive in regard to racism, and, to paraphrase Arendt (1986:63), passivity is an ally of racism. Collusion through passivity holds the racial formation in place. The binary categories obscure this important difference between Martha and Sharon by casting them both as not racist. Thus the "not racist" category conceals passivity just as it conceals silent racism.

Eliminating the "not racist" category would inevitably produce latent effects as well. One possible effect is captured in the question: Would not racism increase if white people whose behavior is normally not racist have permission to express racist thoughts? We see this effect in Vanessa, who expressed the racist belief that African Americans are essentially different from white Americans. Despite this belief, Vanessa expressed pride in her antiracist heritage when she told about her great-grandparents who helped "slaves escape to the North" (focus group 5). Vanessa invokes both racist and antiracist sentiments, shifting between the two. Drift, a concept developed by Matza (1964:28), explains juvenile delinquents' movement between two cultures, "convention and crime." That the focus groups granted permission to talk about race and racism likely explains Vanessa's "drift" into racism.

The following exchange took place when I expressed concern about Vanessa's point that blacks and whites are essentially different:

> BT: I think biological arguments about race are very dangerous. Arguments about men and women being biologically different are used against women, to hold them back.
>
> Vanessa: Exactly, I just feel safe in saying this. I've never said it anyplace else. . . . As a psychologist, I wouldn't dare say [elsewhere] what I just said. But, I really do question what people are so quick to say—that all races have to be equally endowed. (Focus group 5)

In her journal entry, Vanessa explained her statement on biological determinism:

> I felt a kind of exhilaration in being able to talk openly about a loaded subject. Also, being with others who seemed to totally share my general [antiracist] attitudes . . . was a pleasure. I soon began to view them all with admiration as the stories came forth. Although I told of attitudes and beliefs the others might not agree with offhand, I had the feeling it was a good place to share them—[I thought] they would be fairly considered.

Vanessa appears to offset her statement about biological determinism by stating that she had never said it "anyplace else," that she "wouldn't dare," and that she felt "safe" saying it in the focus group. Vanessa's use of a neutralization technique—a technique intended to rationalize or justify delinquent behavior (Sykes and Matza 1957)—illustrates her awareness that what she said is not acceptable under normal circumstances. Her statement verifies the concern that removing the "not racist" category and its tendency to silence those in it would increase the expression of racist ideas. However, concern about this effect is based on the dubious assumption that suppressed racism is preferable to overt racism. I would argue that even if racist statements like Vanessa's increased, the benefit of increasing race awareness would outweigh that consequence. As seen in the comparison of Martha and Sharon, when race awareness increases, passivity with regard to racism decreases. Race awareness, then, is of paramount concern, far more important than the danger of outright statements about what is already in people's minds. The drift into racism exemplified by Vanessa should not be reason to dismiss rethinking the binary construction; to the contrary, it stands as evidence that more open discussion about racism is needed. The expression and discussion of racist ideas would be more conducive to understanding racism than the confusion and apprehension that now govern us. Public forums about race and racism are springing up around the country and are reminiscent of Habermas's (1984) call for democratic discourse—conversations intended to increase understanding, trust, and consensus within interaction.[8] Rethinking racism would facilitate these discussions.

To discover how institutional racism operates—especially indirect institutional racism that well-meaning white people perpetuate—awareness of race issues is a much more useful variable than whether or not people are racist. Sharon's detachment from the issue makes her more likely than Martha to unconsciously act on everyday racism that underpins indirect institutional racism.

CONCLUSION

The shift from a categorical modern form of thought to a more fluid postmodern approach is consistent with the pragmatic tradition that uses language to effect change (Rorty 1989). According to this view, change results from using language differently, rather than from merely presenting cogent arguments. The shift suggested here would necessarily alter how well-meaning white people think about racism and, as a result, how they approach the issue in their everyday lives.

Theoretically, the exposure of silent racism identifies a phenomenon that has previously gone unnamed. Because silent racism is hard to detect, it does its damage undisturbed, obscuring the link between individual racism and institutional racism. Collapsing the binary categories "racist" and "not racist" into an unbounded continuum labeled "more racist" and "less racist" illustrates that racism is a matter of degree and illuminates the fact that, like the women in this study, no one is literally "not racist." The continuum suggests that racism is routine, informing our con-

duct generally as we go about our everyday lives. Rethinking racism in this way, while implicit in many contemporary race theories (Blumer 1939; Essed 1990; Feagin and Feagin 1994; Frankenberg 1993; Omi and Winant 1986; Wellman 1993), has not been proposed explicitly until now. As a consequence, racial common sense in the public imagination, which employs the oppositional categories, lags far behind race theory instead of reflecting it. Because explicitly stating that the "not racist" category is meaningless goes against the grain of racial common sense, the theory of silent racism may be resisted by some. Nevertheless, both silent racism and the obsolescence of oppositional racial categories accurately reflect the current status of racism in the United States, and both are theoretically sound.

In addition to theoretical implications, the exposure of silent racism and the consequent shift to a continuum have significance in terms of practice. The theory of silent racism gives white people permission to explore their unaware racism. Instead of asking, "Am I racist or not?" the well-meaning white person will ask, "How am I racist?" Understanding one's connection to the racial status quo will increase race awareness. This, in turn, although it will not erase silent racism, will lessen everyday racism that goes unnoticed by the white people who unwittingly perform it. An increase in race awareness, then, will lessen indirect institutional racism. These changes will occur at the "less racist" end of the racism continuum. No change is expected at the "more racist" pole or even at the midpoint. Nevertheless, the increase in race awareness among well-meaning white people will be the linchpin that lessens indirect institutional racism and upsets the racial status quo.

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NOTES

1. For example, Jaynes and Williams report that by the mid-1970s public opinion held that discrimination against African Americans had been largely eliminated. Blauner's research substantiates the finding.
2. The term "silent racism" was first mentioned by my adviser, Kum-Kum Bhavnani, during a discussion about the early interviews for this study. I adopted the term and elaborated its meaning.
3. Silent racism both resonates and contrasts with the view of racism held by advocates of the black power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In his early writings, Malcolm X expressed the belief that all white people were "racist devils." Although silent racism appears to occur in virtually all white people, it differs from that implied by Malcolm X in that it is often held unconsciously by well-meaning white people who believe in antiracist policies.

4. Essentialism refers to using biological explanations for race inequality. Color blindness/power evasiveness is the assimilationist view that everyone is the same and that race does not matter. Race cognizance acknowledges race difference, with particular emphasis on race privilege bestowed on white Americans through institutional racism.
5. According to Feagin and Feagin, "isolate discrimination" refers to an individual intentionally harming a member of a minority group without the organization's knowledge and support; "small group discrimination" refers to a small group intentionally harming a member of a minority group without the organization's knowledge and support; and "direct institutional discrimination" refers to an action that intentionally harms a member of a minority group and that is known about and supported by the organization.
6. Questions posed to each of the groups were as follows: What early messages did you get in your family concerning race issues? What experiences or relationships have you had with African Americans? Can you think of a time when you did something that you now consider racist? What is your reaction if someone around you says or does something that is racist? What do you think needs to happen concerning racism? What role would you play?
7. The exception is paternalistic assumptions, which are likely to be limited to close relationships between white people and African Americans.
8. Habermas's theory of communicative action has its detractors as well. Feminist critiques point out that it gives little or no attention to fundamental differences of experience that might impede understanding. Categories that ignore sex may also ignore race (Young 1986).

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