Sociology of Racism

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Abstract
The sociology of racism is the study of the relationship between racism, racial discrimination, and racial inequality. While past scholarship emphasized overtly racist attitudes and policies, contemporary sociology considers racism as individual- and group-level processes and structures that are implicated in the reproduction of racial inequality in diffuse and often subtle ways. Although some social scientists decry this conceptual broadening, most agree that a multivalent approach to the study of racism is at once socially important and analytically useful for understanding the persistence of racial inequality in a purportedly "post-racial" society.

Keywords
Bias; colonialism; discrimination; ethnicity; immigration; inequality; prejudice; psychology; race; racism; sociology; social psychology; stereotyping; stratification

Body text

At root, racism is "an ideology of racial domination" (Wilson, 1999, 14) in which the presumed biological or cultural superiority of one or more racial groups is used to justify or prescribe the inferior treatment or social position(s) of other racial groups. Through the process of racialization (see 3.3), perceived patterns of physical difference—such as skin color or eye shape—are used to differentiate groups of people, thereby constituting them as "races"; racialization becomes rac*ism* when it involves the hierarchical and socially consequential valuation of racial groups.

Racism is analytically distinct from racial discrimination and racial inequality. Racial discrimination concerns the unequal treatment of races, while racial inequality concerns unequal outcomes (in income, education, health, etc.). While racism is often implicated in both processes, contemporary racial inequalities and forms of discrimination are not always the immediate result of contemporary racism (Pager and Shepherd, 2008). The sociology of racism investigates the relationships between these three phenomena, asking when, how, why, and to what extent they reproduce one another. In the post-Civil Rights era, with (overt) racism now widely condemned, one challenge for social scientists is to conceptualize and measure its more subtle and diffuse manifestations and lasting effects.

1. Definitions

Racism cannot be defined without first defining race. Among social scientists, "race" is generally understood as a social construct. Although biologically meaningless when applied to humans—physical differences such as skin color have no natural association with group differences in

ability or behavior—race nevertheless has tremendous significance in structuring social reality. Indeed, historical variation in the definition and use of the term provides a case in point.

The term race was first used to describe peoples and societies in the way we now understand ethnicity or national identity. Later, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as Europeans encountered non-European civilizations, Enlightenment scientists and philosophers gave race a biological meaning. They applied the term to plants, animals, and humans as a taxonomic sub-classification within a species. As such, race became understood as a biological, or natural, categorization system of the human species. As Western colonialism and slavery expanded, the concept was used to justify and prescribe exploitation, domination, and violence against peoples racialized as non-white. Today, race often maintains its "natural" connotation in folk understandings; yet, the scientific consensus is that race does not exist as a biological category among humans—genetic variation is far greater within than between "racial" groups, common phenotypic markers exist on a continuum, not as discrete categories, and the use and significance of these markers varies across time, place, and even within the same individual (Fiske, 2010).

For most social scientists, "race" is distinct from "ethnicity." A major distinction is the *assumption* of a biological basis in the case of race. Races are distinguished by *perceived* common physical characteristics, which are thought to be fixed, whereas ethnicities are defined by perceived common ancestry, history, and cultural practices, which are seen as more fluid and self-asserted rather than assigned by others (Cornell and Hartmann, 2006). Thus, Asian is usually considered a "race," whereas Tibetans and Bengalis are considered ethnicities. Although ethnicity and nationality often overlap, a nationality, such as American, can contain many ethnic groups (e.g. Italian-Americans, Arab-Americans). Yet, all three categories—race, ethnicity, and nationality—are socially constructed, and, as such, groups once considered ethnicities have come to be seen as races, and vice-versa. Moreover, some groups who are now taken-for-granted as "white," such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews, were once excluded from this racial category. The definitional boundaries of race and ethnicity are shaped by the tug and pull of state power, group interests, and other social forces.

From a sociological perspective, it is this social construction of race—not its "natural" existence—that is the primary object of inquiry in the study of racism. Bundled up with eighteenth century classifications of various racial groups were assertions of moral, intellectual, spiritual and other forms of superiority, which were used to justify the domination of Europeans over racialized others. In the North American context, racist ideology served as justification for land appropriation and colonial violence towards Indigenous peoples as well as the enslavement of Africans starting in the sixteenth century. It was later used to justify state-sanctioned social, economic, and symbolic violence directed at blacks and other minorities under Jim Crow laws. In the mid-twentieth century, the American Civil Rights Movement, global anti-colonial movements, and increasing waves of non-European immigration to the West changed how individuals, groups, and nation-states talked about, viewed, understood, and categorized race. A major task for sociologists has been to assess these changes and their implications for racial discrimination and inequality.

2. Intellectual History

There are at least two distinct phases in the sociology of racism, demarcated by the changing nature of race and racism as constructed by social actors and social forces after the Second World War. The first phase—from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century—typically considered racism as a set of overt individual-level attitudes; the second phase—from the mid-twentieth century to the present—considers racism as not simply explicit attitudes, but also implicit biases and processes that are constructed, sustained, and enacted at both micro and macro levels. While the first phase focused on the direct relationship between racism and racial inequality, the second phase considers diffuse relationships between these concepts and the ways in which historical, unconscious, institutional and systemic forms of racism interact with other social forces to perpetuate racial inequality.

In the late nineteenth century, as sociology emerged as a social scientific discipline, few scholars studied racism. (One notable exception was W.E.B. Du Bois, who analyzed the political economic roots of racism and its perverse impacts on Western institutions and psyches.) Instead of studying racism as a social problem, many social scientists—truly products of their time—maintained racist attitudes and incorporated racist assumptions into their explanations of racial group differences in social outcomes. Racism pervaded society, including sociology, and was legitimated by dominant scientific discourses such as Social Darwinism, which misapplied the concept of natural selection to the social world to account for why some (racial, class, etc.) groups excel more than others.

Beginning in the 1920s, when the scientific validity of "race" came under closer scrutiny, some sociologists—primarily associated with the Chicago School—began to view racism as a distinct social problem worthy of study. The issue took on greater urgency during and after the Second World War when the devastating consequences of racism reached their ugly peak. This period can be characterized as the first phase in the sociological study of racism, in which dominant theories, drawing on psychology's emphasis on individual prejudice, conceived racism as a set of explicit individual-level beliefs and attitudes that were a historical relic (as opposed to a systemic social process) that would inevitably fade with time. This assumption of inevitable attenuation was most evident in theories of immigrant assimilation, which proposed an inexorable straight-line process, whereby "ethnic" European immigrants originally racialized as "other" would gradually assimilate into the American mainstream as full-fledged, "white" citizens.

In this first phase, defining racism as prejudicial beliefs and attitudes provided little difficulty for the social scientist, as individuals, organizations, and the state were explicit about how race mattered for the distribution of material and symbolic resources. For example, income inequality between whites and blacks could be readily explained by workplace discrimination and policies excluding blacks from well-paid jobs; differences in educational attainment could be explained by legally segregated schools; etc. The 1950s and '60s, however, witnessed a shift in how individuals, groups, and nation-states used race in everyday life and social systems. In the West, the confluence of the Civil Rights Movement, increasing immigration, the fall of colonialism abroad, and the economic rise of developing nations coincided with the precipitous decline in overtly racist attitudes, as measured by representative opinion surveys. As racial prejudice declined (unevenly) in the United States and the world (Bobo et al., 1997), theories arose to explain why racism, racial discrimination, and racial inequality persisted, emerged, or changed form in some places more than others.

This moment may be characterized as the start of the second (and contemporary) phase in the sociological study of racism. It has witnessed the (re-)emergence of once-ignored critical and structural analyses of racism (à la DuBois) as well as manifold new theories to account for the subtlety of present-day racism. These theories often focus on group-level processes and social structures as opposed to, or in interaction with, the individual. For example, whereas earlier scholars defined racism as primarily an individual problem of overt hostility that could be diminished through interracial interaction (e.g., Allport, 1954), later sociologists viewed racism as fundamentally rooted in political, economic, and/or status resource competition (e.g., Blalock, 1967; Blumer, 1958); under these conditions, intergroup contact could exacerbate the perceived group threat that, in this view, drives racial prejudice and discrimination (cf. Nagel, 1995). Building on this latter perspective, other scholars have examined the intersections of racism with colonialism (e.g., Blauner, 1969), class conflict (e.g., Bonacich, 1972), and gender (e.g., Collins, 1990). In the 1980s and '90s, various theories of "new racisms" (3.1) and implicit biases (3.2) emerged, suggesting that racism itself has transformed into more covert forms. Sociologists have also elaborated theories of institutional racism (3.4), exploring how racist ideologies and discriminatory practices have become embedded in taken-for-granted laws, policies and norms that systematically (dis)advantage certain groups. And since the turn of the century, social scientists have turned attention to the social processes whereby race, racism, and racial inequalities are constructed and challenged at micro, meso, and macro levels (3.3, 3.5).

3. Contemporary Definitions of and Approaches to Racism

Contemporary approaches to racism center on explaining the well-documented persistence of racial inequality and racial discrimination in an era of declining overtly racist attitudes. Without explicit ideologies of racial domination as a direct cause, how can we explain persistent racial inequalities in criminal sentencing, health, and wealth; persistent rejection of policies meant to alleviate racial inequalities; and persistent racial discrimination in hiring, credit markets, and housing (Bobo et al., 1997; Fiske, 2010; Massey and Denton, 1993; Pager and Shepherd, 2008)?

Various theories have arisen to account for this paradox. Some scholars point to the (alleged) cultural deficiencies of people of color—in particular, inner-city blacks. These theories often acknowledge the history of racism in shaping contemporary inner-city black culture but argue that subordinates' cultural behaviors are at least one immediate cause of continuing racial inequality (e.g., Moynihan et al., 1967; Patterson, 1998). Instead of focusing on the cultural problems of historically oppressed groups, other scholars have attempted to explain persistent inequality by showing how racism endures today—if not so much within individuals, then at least within institutions and organizations, and if not so much as explicit attitudes, then at least as implicit or covert biases. While some social scientists claim this "broadening" of the concept of racism serves a "political agenda" (van den Berghe, 2001, 12721), most consider it a necessity—offering an empirically and socially useful toolkit of approaches for understanding the durability of racial inequality in the twenty-first century. We now turn to these approaches.

3.1. New Racisms

One major line of work in the contemporary sociology of racism examines whether the observed decline in racist attitudes on opinion surveys represents an actual decline in racism or merely a decline in the social acceptability of expressing such attitudes; perhaps some individuals consciously hold racist attitudes but withhold them when surveyed. Since the 1970s, social scientists have developed various techniques—from more subtle questions to new forms of discourse analysis—to alleviate respondents' hesitancy to report socially undesirable attitudes and to draw out the deeper meanings behind ambiguous or contradictory responses.

Using these techniques, sociologists have uncovered new forms of racism that are expressed not in avowed racist attitudes, but rather in contextually-specific moral and symbolic principles that stereotype subordinated racial groups as undeserving, and thereby justify existing racial inequalities. For example, surveys repeatedly show that many whites support racial equality in principle but resist policies to implement it (e.g., affirmative action, reparations). Kinder and Sears (1981) attribute this principle-implementation gap to "symbolic racism," which merges a genuine belief in the universalistic principles of Western liberal democracy with stereotypes and moral resentments (rooted in childhood socialization) towards "irresponsible" blacks. Bobo et al.'s (1997) concept of "laissez-faire racism" also highlights persistent anti-black (and anti-native) stereotyping and a tendency to blame blacks (and other minorities) for their social problems despite increased support for racial equality in principle. Unlike symbolic racism, however, they argue that (white) opposition to racial equality policies is rooted in perceived racial group threat (Blumer, 1958), which is "triggered when the dominant group's sense of entitlement to resources and privileges appears threatened by subordinate group gains or aspirations" (Denis, 2012, 456). Similarly, "colorblind racism" refers to a set of frames, styles, and scripts that are used to explain and justify the racial status quo without sounding racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). (For additional variations on the new racism theme, see Quillian, 2006.)

Despite this outpouring of research and theorizing, some critics (e.g., Sniderman, 1997) argue that the problem is not "hidden" racist sentiments or cultural stereotypes; rather, many whites reject policies such as affirmative action because of principled opposition to government intervention. Yet, regardless of whether racism or "political principle" directly motivates opposition to policies intended to advance racial equality, such opposition effectively replicates racial inequality (see 3.4). In short, although the observed decline in overt racist attitudes shows that racism is socially unacceptable in much of contemporary society, the extent to which individuals still hold racial stereotypes, prejudices, or ideologies – and the precise form(s) these take – remains contested.

3.2. Implicit Bias

Another explanation for persistent racial discrimination and inequality despite the decline in overt racist attitudes can be found in the growing literature on implicit bias. An implicit bias is an unconsciously triggered belief in the inferiority of, or negative attitude toward, a group(s). The assumption, drawing from recent findings in cognitive psychology and its nascent interaction with cultural sociology, is that implicit biases can impact expectations and actions. As such, unconscious negative beliefs and feelings about racial groups may not appear on a survey but may be revealed in everyday interpersonal interactions at work, at school, or on the street.

Relying on psychological experiments, and an Implicit Association Test (IAT), scores of studies have considered the association between race and various attributes and judgments, revealing that, on average, individuals more readily associate positive attributes and stereotypes with whites than with other races, particularly blacks (Banaji and Greenwald, 2013). Furthermore, these biases predict distinct (especially spontaneous, non-verbal) behaviors and emotions that could affect interpersonal interaction (Lane et al., 2007). More recent work has shown that minorities (not just whites) sometimes hold implicit biases against their own group despite articulating explicit beliefs in racial equality (Livingston, 2002). The implicit anti-black biases of many blacks, for example, may be interpreted as a form of internalized racism, in which members of a subordinated racial group accept the negative stereotypes and attitudes toward their group. While inquiry into internalized racism has been criticized as victim-blaming and racially essentialist, Pyke (2010) argues that this work is critical to understanding the mechanisms whereby racial inequality is reproduced and can even be empowering, as it demystifies an insidious element of white privilege and systems of power.

Research on implicit biases has its limitations. Some scholars have questioned the reliability and validity of the IAT. Others suggest that laboratory experiments on non-representative participants may not generalize to real-world contexts where behavioral and attitudinal dynamics may differ. Moreover, studies of implicit biases would benefit from deeper engagement with macro-sociological research on the media and other institutions that could shape implicit attitudes, and new institutional theories that view contemporary workplaces as contexts in which ostensibly neutral scripts and procedures could moderate auto-cognitive processes.

3.3. Racism as a Social Process

The upheavals of the post-World War II period made plain the mutability of racial classifications and racism. While research on new racisms and implicit biases documents the changing content, character, and implications of new forms of racism, another line of scholarship seeks to identify and explain the social processes and actors that account for change (and persistence) in racism. Within this broad, process-based approach there are two major lines of research—one that considers racism in historical context, focusing on general mechanisms that account for macro-level changes over time, and another that considers micro-social processes that operate in interpersonal interaction.

The term "racialization" tends to designate theories of racism as a macro-level historical process. Racialization is the process of constructing racial meaning, including the creation of racial categories and the signification of these categories in relation to people, objects, and ideas (Murji and Solomos, 2005; Satzewich, 2011). Racialization's focus on the constructed-ness of racial meaning shifts analytic attention away from the content of racism and toward the individuals, groups, and social forces constructing and signifying race. The increasing focus on racialization, as a process, is part of the growing sociological focus on uncovering general social processes and mechanisms (Lamont et al., 2014). Indeed, research on racialization has revealed fundamental processes and mechanisms that contribute to the persistence of system-wide racial inequalities—from cognitive classification processes that allow humans to identify and categorize others (Massey, 2007) to nation-state bureaucracies and methods (such as the census or standardized education) that categorize, define, and distribute resources to groups at the macro level (Omi and

Winant, 1994; Wimmer, 2013). One benefit to the study of racism as a social process is attention to the fluidity of racial categorizations and their embeddedness in power relations (e.g., Saperstein and Penner, 2012). One difficulty of macro-level approaches is their tendency to present "grand" narratives that abstract or totalize the way race operates. We may lose explanatory precision on the nuanced operation of race in particular contexts, institutions, and organizations at particular times and places (see Hall, 1980 on "historically specific racisms").

Another process-oriented approach considers how micro-level social processes maintain and change racial categories, stereotypes, attitudes, and beliefs. Drawing on Goffman and the symbolic interactionist tradition, some scholars explore how racial identities and statuses are embodied and enacted in interpersonal interaction through distinctive habits, styles, scripts, and modes of self-presentation that inadvertently reproduce racial inequalities (e.g., Anderson, 2000). More broadly, Schwalbe and colleagues (2000) have identified generic processes in face-to-face interaction and meaning-making pursuits – othering, subordinate adaptation, boundary maintenance, and emotion management – that create and reproduce inequalities, including racial inequalities. Similarly, cultural sociologists examine how symbolic boundaries are constructed against racialized others, often translating into social, spatial and temporal boundaries at the meso (e.g., neighborhood) level that perpetuate racial segregation (e.g., Small, 2004). In a small-town ethnography, Denis (2014) illustrates how the mutually reinforcing processes of subtyping, ideology-based homophily, and political avoidance norms enable many white Canadians to maintain laissez-faire racist attitudes, despite frequent positive contact with Indigenous peoples. In social psychology, status characteristics theory considers how status characteristics (e.g., race, gender, age) shape the influence and prestige of individuals in small group settings; it highlights the role of self-fulfilling prophecies, as lower status members are viewed and treated in terms of, and may even conform to, the stereotypical low expectations of their group (Fiske, 2010). While setting aside the question of why "race" initially became a salient marker, all of these micro-level studies offer insights into how racial inequalities and stereotypes are reproduced in concrete settings. Much of this work also considers the everyday responses of historically marginalized groups to racism, and how these responses perpetuate or challenge the racial status quo (see 3.5).

3.4. Institutional Racism

One major departure from past scholarship is contemporary sociology's shift from locating racism in individual beliefs and attitudes to considering it as primarily a phenomenon of non-human entities, such as social processes, social forces, and institutions. Rather than explaining racial inequality via individual-level racism (conscious or otherwise), theories of institutional racism give analytic primacy to the taken-for-granted policies, practices, and norms of organizations, systems and structures.

First defined by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967), institutional racism refers to particular and general instances of racial discrimination, inequality, exploitation, and domination in organizational or institutional contexts, such as the labor market or the nation-state. While institutional racism can be overt (e.g., a firm with a formal policy of excluding applicants of a particular race), it is more often used to explain cases of disparate impact, where organizations or societies distribute more resources to one group than another without overtly racist intent (e.g., a firm with an informal policy of excluding applicants from a low-income, minority neighborhood

due to its reputation for gangs). The rules, processes, and opportunity structures that enable such disparate impact are what constitute institutional racism (and variants such as "structural racism," "systemic racism," etc.).

The literature on institutional racism is diffuse but coheres on the point that macro structural processes, as opposed to individual acts, provide more meaningful explanations of contemporary racial inequality. Bonilla-Silva (1997)'s structural conception of "racialized social systems" emphasizes how political, economic, and social arrangements are structured by racial hierarchy and supported by colorblind ideology. Similarly, Feagin (2010) analyzes the institutional spaces, societal norms, and "white racial frames" that can be traced back to sixteenth century slavery and imperialism, concluding that American society is fundamentally racist. Another variant is the (internal) colonialism model, in which one racialized group imposes its ideas, systems and lifestyles on another via policies (such as Canada's *Indian Act*) and practices (such as the Indian residential school system) that are justified by the former group's presumed superiority (Frideres and Gadacz, 2008). These conceptions of institutional racism and systemic racial/colonial oppression are similar to macro-historical process-centered conceptions in their totalizing nature (see 3.3); they suggest that race and racism operate on various levels and in various corners of the social system, which is "racialized" as such. They have been criticized for downplaying diversity within both dominant and subordinate groups, whose life-chances vary considerably by class, gender, and other cross-cutting categories (Satzewich, 2011).

Alternative approaches to institutional racism are less totalizing. Audit studies, for example, seek to measure racial discrimination at the firm or organization level by sending equally-qualified resumes or research participants to employers, creditors, landlords, and the like. These studies have found that racial discrimination still exists in hiring, credit, and housing markets (Quillian, 2006; Pager and Shepherd, 2008). While audit studies suffer from uncertain generalizability (case studies do not tell us about all firms) and cannot specify the mechanisms that account for racial discrimination (e.g., employers' implicit biases or uncontrolled differences between research participants?), they do enable us to identify precise levels of discrimination in specific firm contexts. Moreover, when coupled with complementary evidence about labor market processes, such as Kirshenman and Neckerman's (1991) analysis of employers' statistical discrimination, we gain insight on important avenues through which racial discrimination and inequality persist.

Still other approaches focus on state and non-state institutions—such as the criminal justice and education systems and the media—assessing the rules, regulations, norms, laws, discourses, and procedures that account for pernicious and racialized differential treatment and outcomes. While an institutional racism perspective highlights the general systems and processes that maintain racial inequality, one criticism is that it dilutes the meaning of racism (Miles, 1989) and attaches moral condemnation where it is undue (van den Berghe, 2001). Is it fair, or even accurate, to label an institution, organization, or society "racist" if such intent is lacking? On the other hand, Allport (1954, 12) reminds us, "The unpleasant flavor of a word should not mislead us into believing that it stands only for a value-judgment"; the point of these theories is not to blame the innocent but to improve understanding so that the policies, practices and ideas that perpetuate racial inequality can be identified and dismantled. Conversely, institutional racism's focus on the extra-individual might obscure and absolve the role of individual actors in maintaining racism.

3.5. Responses to Racism

While the contemporary sociology of racism focuses mostly on the processes, people, and organizations that perpetuate racism, increasing attention is being paid to those who experience racism. The literature on internalized racism (see 3.2) illuminates how the targets of racism may accept dominant racist ideologies and engage in habitual interactions that perpetuate their own subordination. Yet, a growing literature also interrogates the multiple experiences, knowledges, and practices of subordinated racial groups. Increasingly, studies of "everyday racism" (Essed, 1991) and responses to stigmatization (Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012) are providing insights into the effects of, responses to, and strategies for combatting various forms of racism.

In one groundbreaking study, Essed (1991) examined how black women in the Netherlands and California navigate everyday racism, showing how it covertly shapes their daily life routines but also illuminating their diverse and often subtle forms of resistance. She argues that these women's narratives are important knowledge *ipso facto* because their unique social positions and experiences (raced, classed, gendered, etc.) offer unique perspectives on the inner-workings of oppression and resistance (cf. Collins, 1990); from a sociology of knowledge standpoint, subordinated groups' knowledge serves as a corrective to the elite, Western knowledge systems of dominant social scientists (Feagin, 2010). Building on this work, Lamont and Mizrachi (2012) systematically compare the responses of stigmatized groups in Brazil, Israel and the United States, arguing that the study of responses illuminates how institutions, ideologies, and varying national contexts constrain and enable individual opportunities. Other scholars have assessed anti-racist and multicultural policies and affirmative action and diversity programs at the state and organizational levels (e.g., Henry and Tator, 2010). Still others have examined the conditions under which racial minority groups and their allies mobilize in social movements for racial justice (e.g., McAdam, 1982).

This (increasingly comparative and cross-national) work on responses to racism has blossomed alongside a robust sociology of immigration literature, which highlights the agency of immigrants in shaping their incorporation into host societies (Alba and Nee, 2003). Different immigrant groups employ varying strategies, seize unique opportunities in the form of ethnic niches, and encounter different obstacles. Contemporary assimilation is variegated and the incorporation of new, often racialized, groups has proven anything but straightforward. Moreover, competition and tension between native-born minority groups and recent immigrants has highlighted racial discrimination between subordinate groups (Bobo and Hutchings, 1996; Waters et al., Forthcoming). Indeed, the relative ease with which some immigrants (despite being racialized) have integrated into the mainstream economically and socially only underscores the uniquely pernicious nature of anti-black and anti-Indigenous racism in North America (Dixon, 2006). Numerous studies, for instance, have documented the stigmatization and racism faced by upwardly mobile middle-class blacks (e.g., Feagin and Sykes, 1995) and Indigenous peoples (e.g., Denis, 2012), as well as the creative strategies they use to cope with and respond to racism.

One criticism of these studies is that they appear to place the burden of overcoming racism on the shoulders of the targets of racism rather than on the actors and institutions that perpetuate it. Yet, until racism is eliminated, it is important to investigate how the targets interpret and respond

to it in order to understand how racism affects them, ensure their voices are heard, and develop more effective strategies to combat racism itself.

4. Challenges and Future Directions

"Racism" today is a dirty word; yet, significant racial inequalities in socioeconomic, health, and other outcomes persist; racial minorities around the world continue to report frequent experiences with racial discrimination; and racial flashpoints—from the recent backlash to First Nations protests in Canada, to the Trayvon Martin shooting and trial in the U.S., to ongoing European debates over immigration reform—abound. Our contemporary moment presents theoretical and methodological challenges. What is the most productive way to study race and racism in an era when openly espousing racist views is anathema?

Rather than simply studying overt categorical hostility or explicitly racist laws and their effects, some sociologists have developed more nuanced understandings of what racism means, how it operates, and how it relates to racial inequality. These concepts include the multidimensional "new racisms" (laissez-faire, colorblind, etc.), systemic and institutional racism, and even unconscious or implicit racism, which are often studied through experiments, audit studies, critical discourse analysis, and other innovative techniques. Other scholars eschew consideration of the proper definition of racism and instead examine the processes that construct racial categories, responses to racism by historically marginalized groups, and the (deliberate) strategies and (taken-for-granted) routines that reproduce (or challenge) racial inequalities.

From a pluralistic and pragmatic standpoint, we urge continued attention on all fronts. Greater interchange between these literatures should also lead to creativity and innovation as scholars seek to bridge levels of analysis and make sense of seemingly contradictory themes and trends. Although some scholars decry the conceptual broadening of "racism," the sociology of racism is best served by this pluralism. As Western countries incorporate more "non-white" immigrants and racial boundaries collapse, transform, and (re-)emerge, scholars must use multivalent approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the nature, causes, and consequences of contemporary racism, racial discrimination, and racial inequality.

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