I'm Color-blind But What Are You, Anyway?

Kathleen Korgen
KorgenK@wpunj.edu

Eileen O'Brien

Abstract

Using primary data from interviews conducted with 1) close black-white friends and 2) biracial Americans, we examine the relationship between the traditional fixation on racial categorizations and the current emphasis on color-blindness. In doing so, we reveal that, instead of indicating a decline in the importance of race, the color-blind ideology acts as both a cover for the obsession with race in U.S. society and a subtle but effective reinforcement for it.

Racism in the United States exists under a relatively new guise. Where once the "one drop rule" supported overt racial discrimination, a "color-blind" racial ideology now supports a more covert system of racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2003, Carr 1997; Frankenberg 1993).

A dominant ideology is a belief system that supports and rationalizes current social arrangements. Those who maintain a color-blind perspective on race 1) maintain that success in life is primarily based on individual effort rather than group membership and 2) refuse to acknowledge racial differences or talk about racial issues (for fear of appearing racist) (Schofield 1986). Color-blind Americans make "efforts to 'not see' race differences despite [race's] continued salience in society" (Frankenberg 1993:149).

This new racial ideology in the United States (from about the mid-1980s to the present) is connected to what Bonilla-Silva (2003) refers to as color-blind racism. He outlines four main "frames" of color-blind racism: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. (1) *Abstract liberalism* uses the language of equal opportunity and free choice for all as a basis for opposing many concrete policies of anti-discrimination. The assumption is that if we all just believe in these

ideals, no particular policies or interventions will be necessary to combat the centuries of legal racial discrimination, disenfranchisement and exclusion. (2) *Naturalization* explains away patterns such as racial segregation in housing and endogamous social networks and marriages as "just the way things are" since people somehow automatically gravitate toward "their own kind." The assumption is that it is "just natural" (not socially prescribed or conditioned) that people avoid others who are racially unlike them. As with abstract liberalism, the resulting line of thinking is that nothing in particular needs to be done or should be done about something as "natural" as segregation. (3) *Cultural racism* describes people of color as lacking in family values, discipline, work ethic and morality. These traits are seen as learned in impoverished or unsuitable communities rather than as inborn. Yet again, this ideology steers one away from supporting antiracist policy initiatives, since "values" are not seen as able to be changed through public policy. (4) *Minimization of racism* is simply the outlook that racial discrimination is rare, and occurs only in isolated, fluke incidents, if at all. What follows from this is that people of color are seen as whining, complaining, and over-exaggerating discrimination (Bonilla-Silva 2003:28-29).

An ideology is only successful to the extent that it can permeate an entire culture, both dominant and subordinate groups. Both Carr (1997) and Bonilla-Silva (2001, 2003) used data to show that, while whites express color-blind ideology much more than do blacks, a good number of blacks[1] also at times subscribe to the color-blind ideology. Thus, when referring to color-blind ideology, we are referring not only to some commonalities in whites' views on race, but to an entire belief system which upholds and rationalizes the given power structure of a society.

People from all political perspectives have embraced the concept of color-blindness and argue that it is the cure for race-based problems in our society. Bonilla-Silva (2003) points out that there are specific storylines, rhetorical devices, and language patterns common across the US that form the basis of this color-blind ideology. People often use the language of equal opportunity and free choice for all as a basis for opposing many concrete policies of anti-discrimination. For instance, growing numbers of conservative politicians, pundits, and scholars advocate a color-blind perspective towards social issues. Many, such as George Will, David Horowitz, Charles Krauthammer, Newt Gingrich, and Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom sprinkle their anti-affirmative action arguments with the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: we should "be judged by the content of [our] character rather than the color of [our] skin." They argue that race-based policies are inherently racist (Rockwell 1995, Will 2002, Thernstrom & Thernstrom 1997).[2]

Many left-leaning Americans are also drawn towards a "color-blind" view of society (Brown et. al 2003). These proponents of color-blindness tend to believe that if we act as if race does not matter, it will not matter. In fact, many social scientists say "the idea of color-blindness has become the orthodox view among most Americans." (Carr 1997; Frankenberg 1993; Williams 1998, Hitchcock 2002, Bonnilla-Silva 2003). Increasing numbers of Americans, on all sides of the political spectrum, have come to the conclusion that a color-blind ideology is the solution to racial problems.

Believers in color-blindness argue that "race should not and does not matter" (Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, and Browne 2000). They say that blacks and whites should be viewed, described, and treated simply as individuals rather than members of particular races. Following this line of reasoning, proponents of color-blindness argue that social science has not caught up to the changing times. In fact, many say that social scientists, by studying issues of race, actually perpetuate racism by giving credence to the notion that race matters.[3] Conference panellists discussing their research on racial issues are sometimes accused by some audience members of worsening racial problems through their work.[4]

Color-blindness has influenced U.S. society at all levels. Structurally, civil rights legislation and Affirmative Action (AA) programs have been struck down in the courts and through the ballot box (Brown et. al 2003). Culturally, we have seen the color-blind ideology disseminated throughout the media (Demott 1995, Korgen 2002). Individuals' opinions about racial issues and even conversations about race have been influenced by this increasingly dominant ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Even the interactions between close cross-racial friends reflect the influence of the color-blind ideology (Korgen 2002). This reluctance to speak about racial issues on the individual level leads to and supports color-blind policies and laws on the structural level. Structures that protect white racial privilege remain firmly protected under the cloak of color-blindness. If color-blind perspectives towards race exist even among whites with close cross-racial friends, structural racial inequities will remain ignored and in place.

Reality: Americans' Need to Racially Categorize People

In reality, Americans cannot be color-blind even if they want to be. We all classify people, as soon as we encounter them, on the basis of their appearance. This is not an inherently negative phenomenon. Ruth Frankenberg maintains that recognizing a person's racial background can help us know something about that person based on the "historic, political, and social" differences between racial groups. People who are "race-cognizant" understand "first, that race makes a difference in people's lives and second, that racism is a significant factor in shaping contemporary U.S. society" (1993:157). Knowing the racial background of people we meet can help us have some understanding of the structural realities that helped shape them. In doing so, it alerts us to the fact that their reality may be different than (or similar to) ours in certain race-related ways. However, without the historic and structural understanding that Frankenberg includes within her concept of racial cognizance, many Americans make judgments about those they racially classify on the basis of racial stereotypes.

Black Americans have faced some of the most negative stereotypes in U.S. society. While all groups of Americans of color have faced racial prejudice and discrimination, black Americans have confronted racial vitriol and negative imagery to an unparalleled degree (Frankenberg 1993, Feagin 2001). Historically, many pre-Civil Rights Era films unabashedly portrayed blacks as simple minded, animalistic, lawless sexual predators

that must be controlled (Snead 1994). These classic images of black criminality now appear in updated forms in current rap videos and news shows (Rome 2004). Such negative portrayals affect the interactions of whites and blacks and influence the image of blacks in U.S. society today (Wachtel 1999). Few people understand this as well as black/white biracial Americans who do not appear black. Many such persons Korgen (1999) interviewed spoke of how they were privy to anti-black remarks made by whites unaware of their black racial heritage (Korgen 1999). Almost all are very aware that being black still means being seen as something less than white.

Good research has been conducted on the structural (Anderson 2001, Brown et. al 2003) and cultural (Demott 1995) ramifications of a color-blind ideology. However, little has been written on the repercussions of color-blindness on the individual level or the connection between the various levels of color-blindness. Nor is there much research that examines the interaction between Americans' persistent need to racially categorize people and the color-blind ideology. In spite of living in the "color-blind era" most Americans remain very race conscious. Even while white privilege becomes increasingly "invisible" (Rothenberg 2000), the long-felt need of Americans to identify the race of other Americans (Spickard 1989, Kinney 1985 Williamson 1995) persists (Korgen 1998).

This paper provides examples of how 1) although the ideology of "color-blindness" is increasing in popularity, the American mindset is still focused on racial categorizations, 2) the ideology of color-blindness prevents us from acknowledging this orientation and engaging in open discussions about race with one another, and 3) the effect of color-blindness on the individual level is both reinforced by and reinforces the effects of color-blindness on the structural level. In doing so, it fills a gap in the existing literature by revealing the underlying connection between the continuing obsession about race, the prevailing color-blind ideology, and persistent racism in the United States.

Methodology

The grounded theory approach guided both our means of analyzing our data and our sampling technique. We used this approach because we know of no existing theory that examines the relationship between the traditional obsession with race in the United States (e.g. the one drop rule) and the current ideology of color-blindness. The grounded theory approach allows theory to come directly from data. We did not set out to test a hypothesis with our data. Instead, we read and re-read the transcripts of the interviews, looking for patterns to emerge. In doing so, we were able to categorize patterns within our data and recognize and explain the connections between those categories.[4]

Instead of having a predetermined number of interviewees in mind, the first author set out to interview biracial Americans (the first interview set) and pairs of cross-racial friends (the second interview set) until the information elicited from the interviewees

no longer brought forth new, relevant information. In the words of grounded theorists, the number of interviewees in each sample was determined primarily by the "point of saturation." It was at this point when responses from interviewees became sufficiently similar to make the researcher confident of a clear pattern among them. That point was reached, before the first author interviewed, respectively, the 40th biracial person and members of the 40th pair of close black-white friends.

Participants and Procedures

Primary data for this paper derives from two sets of intensive interviews. The sub-samples of biracial Americans and close black/white friends allowed us to interview Americans uniquely positioned in the social structure to give us valuable information on 1) the present American mindset towards racial categorizations, 2) the extent to which even close black-white friends (those Americans who have "crossed the racial divide") discuss racial issues and 3) the relationship between color-blindness on the individual and structural levels. Our interviews with biracial Americans allowed us to examine their unique perspective on the continued existence of racial stereotypes and need among white Americans to racially classify people. Interviewing cross-racial friends enabled us to see how the color-blind ideology influences discussions about race even between close black-white friends. In turn, these cross-racial friendships provided an indication of the mutually supportive relationship between color-blindness on the individual and structural levels.

The first data set comes from semi-structured, intensive interviews, undertaken during 1995-1997, with 40 persons who have a black and a white parent. All except one (which was done over the phone) of the interviewees took place, in person, and lasted between one and three hours. As Tables 1 and 2 indicate, the sample (15 males and 25 females) consisted of persons from a cross section of economic backgrounds with a variety of skin tones and facial features.

Table 1: Biracial Interviewees by Social Class

Upper	3
Upper-Middle	9
Middle	19
Lower-Middle	4
Lower	5

Table 2: Biracial Interviewees by Racial Appearance*

Perceived as Black	21
Perceived as White	10
Perceived as Mixed or Hispanic	9

*How they believe they racially appear to other people.

The first author communicated with the targeted population by advertisements in student newspapers in the greater Boston area, local (Boston-based) African American newspapers, and through using the snowball method. Fellow interviewees referred three other interviewees to her and she used her own personal contacts to find eleven of the interviewees. She offered two movie passes to all who volunteered to participate in an interview.

The second sub-sample consists of semi-structured, intensive interviews of 80 individual members of 40 pairs of close black-white friendships. The sample of close black-white friendship pairs were recruited through advertisements in university and local newspapers, the snowball method (one interviewee suggesting another), and word of mouth. Eleven pairs responded to ads placed in newspapers. The first author found six pairs through the snowball method, contacted two pairs after reading published articles on their interracial friendships, and located the remaining twenty-one pairs of

interviewees through word of mouth. Participants in the study came from California, Kansas, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Texas, and Wisconsin. Thirteen interviews took place by phone and the remaining 67 were done in person. Interviews were typically 1-2 hours in duration. The first author offered each interviewee $10.00 as a token of appreciation for participating in the study.

The biracial interviewees answered questions relating to 1) their own racial identity, 2) how others racially perceive them, 3) their experiences (if any) with racism, and 4) their perspective on race relations in the U.S.

The close black/white friends responded to queries concerning 1) how their close black/white friendship developed, 2) the role of race in their relationship, and 3) their perspective on race relations in the U.S.

While self-disclosure is an integral part of close relationships (Monsour et al 1994, Parks and Floyd 1996, Derlega et al. 1993), 29 out of 40 of the pairs of close clack/white friends interviewed avoid (consciously or unconsciously) seriously discussing the volatile topic of race (see Table 1).

Table 3: How the Close Black-white Friendship Pairs Deal with Issues of Race

HOW THE PAIRS DEAL WITH RACE	PERCENTAGE
Have Not Seriously Discussed Racial Issues	72.5% (n=29)
Have Seriously Discuss Racial Issues	27.5% (n=11)
	100% (n=40)

Elizabeth and Louise, both middle-class professionals and natives of southern California, provide a good illustration of how even close black-white friends tend to step around issues of race. As Louise, the black friend, describes it,

The only time we really got into something about race was during the O.J. Simpson trial and I thought he was not guilty and she thought he was guilty.... So, you know,

we kind of—we discussed it for a while. And I told her my side, she told me her side—"And, aw, forget it. Let's go on to something else"—and then we talked about something else. (Louise, black, 45)

Like most white Americans, Elizabeth believed that O.J. Simpson was guilty and like the majority of black Americans, Louise believed that he was innocent (Newport and Saad 1997). However, rather than continue the discussion and focus on their race-based reasons for disagreement concerning Simpson's guilt or innocence, they simply agreed to "talk about something else" and sidestep the serious racial issues that they would most likely have to confront if they were to continue the discussion.

Dave and Kofi, two middle-class professionals in their mid-thirties who have been best friends since meeting at a New England college, provide another typical example of close black-white friends who do not discuss race. When asked whether the topic of race comes up much between then, Kofi, a native of West Africa who came to the United States as a boy, said:

> No, it doesn't…. Hey, I know he's a Caucasian man. I know that. And I'm sure that he sees me as an African American person. But we don't. There are no issues. I mean, we don't talk about race per se. I can't even think of any one thing that we've talked about in terms of race. Because it's just—You know, we're friends. That's where it is. That's the way it is. (Kofi, black, 36)

Dave, who grew up in a predominantly white New England neighborhood, provided a similar response when he tried to explain why he and Kofi do not discuss racial issues.

Certainly it's not anything that I consciously avoided. I think we. I don't know, we're just two shallow guys. I don't know. [laughs] I don't know. Again, certainly, it's not anything that was consciously not brought up on my part. It's just ah, never been an issue with us. (Dave, white, 35)

The replies that both Kofi and Dave gave to the question about whether they discuss race in their friendship indicate their unease with the topic. Despite Dave's joke that they're "just two shallow guys," the two are very close, have shared very private information, and often have serious discussions with one another. Without any conscious effort, though, the two have avoided issues of race.

The lack of racial discussions in the friendships described above is not an inherent problem in the friendships themselves. The genuine love these friends have for one another is undeniable. The friendships are clearly positive forces in the lives of the friends and those close to them. Like the majority of close friends, cross-racial friends tend to be drawn together by their commonalities. These disparities, when highlighted, may make the members of these friendships uncomfortable and, perhaps, threaten some of these relationships (Korgen 2002). It may make sense, for the good of many of these friendships, not to make race a focal point of discussion.

Christina, brought up by Caribbean immigrants in an urban, primarily black and working-class neighborhood, agrees that it wouldn't be "natural" for her and her close white friend, Paula, to discuss racial issues often.

We can talk about it. And Paula and I can talk about the issue of race without a problem but it's not something that really comes up, we've got other things more, more pressing to talk about. (Christina, black, 24)

She says that race is not something that crosses her mind when looking at Paula. Moreover, rather than strengthening her friendship with Paula, she thinks that discussions of racial issues would be artificial and needlessly "divisive." Neither is very "politically minded," with any desire to, in Paula's words, "rehash" the topic of "racial equality or inequality" with one another.

The absence of open conversations about race among even close black-white friends both reflects and supports the ideology of color-blindness. The fact that three out of four of the close black-white friendship pairs in this sample avoid the issue of race is indicative of the pervasiveness of this ideology. It also helps to perpetuate it. While we are not suggesting that these friends should shoulder the burden of achieving racial equity in our society, the fact that so many close black-white friends do not discuss the topic of race does not bode well for those interested in improving race relations in the United States. If Americans who have formed close friendships across the black-white divide avoid racial issues, it will be very difficult to convince other Americans, with less interracial contact, of the perils of color-blindness and the need to acknowledge the racial problems that exist in our society.

"But what are you, anyway?"

Ironically, while color-blindness grows in popularity, the American obsession with racially categorizing people continues. Despite the popularity of trying to avoid noticing race, Americans seem to be unable to stop themselves from identifying all they meet with a particular racial category. People who have racially ambiguous appearances know this firsthand. Every biracial interviewee who did not appear exclusively white or exclusively black had to deal, repeatedly, with the question "What are you?" This provides evidence that, while color-blindness has been the dominant racial ideology for approximately two decades, the new racial ideology is not the result of a decline in color consciousness among Americans. Instead, the new ideology merely provides a "cover" for efforts to dismantle civil rights legislation in a still racist society.

Mixed-race persons do not fit into the monoracial categories by which races are now classified in the United States. However, many people will still make every effort to try to discern the racial background of someone so they can fit them into a monoracial racial category. For instance, when Cheryl (a college student with a black father and a white mother) was a baby, strangers who saw her with her mother explained away her

dark skin by assuming her mother must have left her out in the sun, exclaiming. "Your baby has such a beautiful tan!" Cheryl understood how important people feel it is to be able to classify racially persons whom they encounter. It is so critical for some people that they will attempt, as she puts it, "to make sense of things in a way that doesn't make sense" if it will give them the peace of mind of fitting someone into a pre-existing category.

Some biracial interviewees felt that their ambiguous racial features made them a target. Jeff, a young graduate student in California, said that most people he encounters for the first time perceive him as Latino. However, his racially indeterminate features often made him feel "very afraid to walk down the street" in the predominantly black Washington, DC neighborhood in which he grew up.

I mean after a while, I just stopped going out. I remember once I was at my Dad's side and I went out to the playground to play and this guy said, he was like "Damn!" Like he couldn't believe me when he layed his eyes on me. "Damn shorty. Are you a honky or a nigger?" Y'know. And I didn't know what a honky was. But I knew a nigger was something bad so I said "I'm a honky." And he goes "I'm a honky too." [funny voice] Just like mocking me, you know. And, I mean. I just felt like people were just going to attack me if I walked down the street. (Jeff, 23)

When racial tensions are high, many biracial persons are expected to choose (and choose correctly) their racial allegiance. There is no color-blind option under these circumstances.

Many of the biracial interviewees, though, found ways to entertain themselves at the expense of those asking the "what are you?" questions. The following story shared by Julie, an 18 year old college freshman, provides a representative example of this mode of dealing with the "what are you?" query.

People are always asking [what I] and my sister [are] and I lie all the time about [laughing] what we [are] cause no one knows and, especially in Colorado. And they come up to you and they're like "What's your ethnic makeup?" And they, they will always use questions and the strangest words and everything and you're like. [sarcastic look] And one time my sister and I were at a party and I said "she's Egyptian and I'm Korean." And the person said "Oh, but you're adopted." I said "No, we have the same parents." You know, and these people believed it! (Julie, 18)

While Julie and other biracial Americans with racially ambiguous appearances may have some fun with those curious about their racial background, they are also using humor as a way to deflect some of the pain that can come with constant demands for an explanation of "what" they are. In any event, the fact that all of these interviewees must somehow cope with such questions throughout their lives, indicates that race is still a serious matter in the United States.

Phillip, an 18 year-old biracial young man with a racially ambiguous appearance, describes some of his own experiences that illustrate both the continued obsession

with race in the U.S. and the ramifications of various racial identities.

There was a period where others defined me for me. When I skateboarded I was white, When I surfed I was white, when I boogey-boarded I was white, when I played soccer I was white, and when I played baseball I was white. When I played football, I was a black kid. When I played basketball, I was a black kid. When I was angry and went out jacking people, I was a black kid. That's the way they looked at me. I was young and vulnerable, so that's the way I saw myself as well. (Phillip, 18)

People who encountered Phillip defined him based on their stereotypical notions of appropriate behavior for white and black youth. As Susan, a 46 year old black-white biracial woman states, young biracial persons

Understand that there are power and privilege issues connected to whom they choose to be. And the culture says if you're black you are connected somehow to welfare, and you're connected somehow with crime, and you're connected somehow with all these bad things, not with the economic survival of America, which is the truth (Susan, 46).

Phillip's recollection underscores that there are social and economic costs that come with being identified as black in the United States.

It is important to note that the people who ask biracial Americans "what are you?" are not necessarily likely to want to have serious discussions about racial issues. In fact, none of the interviewees mentioned that the people curious about their race were interested in learning about the implications of their mixed race heritage on their lives or life chances. Instead, the impression left on these biracial Americans was that the questioners simply felt the need to know their racial background so they could fit them into a pre-existing racial category. This phenomenon helps to reveal the continued obsession with race among Americans in the color-blind era.

Disparities between Blacks and Whites

If people were to openly acknowledge race, they may also feel compelled to notice the race-based inequality that still exists. One must first acknowledge that racial differences exist in order to begin to address race-based inequities. Discrimination against blacks can be found in the everyday practices of the legal, political, housing, economic, and educational systems in the U.S. In fact, a recent United Nations quality-of-life index (which includes education, income, and life expectancy) ranks U.S. whites first but black Americans thirty-first, similar to residents of Trinidad and Tobago (Feagin 2000). A 2001 Gallup poll revealed that only half of all blacks believe that they have the same job opportunities as whites and that nearly half maintain that they were discriminated against within the past month because of their race. According to the U.S. Labor Department, the black unemployment rate in 2005 was still slightly more than double that of whites.

In the white-dominated racial structure found in the United States, blacks have been treated with the greatest disdain of any racial group. In studies of prejudice in the United States, results indicate that whites are consistently less willing to interact with blacks than with other racial and ethnic groups. Since such research was conducted in the 1950s, when given a choice, whites have continually shown a clear preference to work with, reside next to, and intermarry with Asians or Hispanics rather than blacks (Allport 1954, Bogardus 1969, Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996, Herring and Amissah 1997).

Today, most cross-racial communication takes place within hierarchical, rather than friendship, relationships. Few close friendships exist between white and black Americans. When asked to write down the names of their closest friends and *then* racially identify them for a 2000 National Opinion Research Center survey, only 6 percent of whites included a black person on their list and only 15.2 percent of blacks wrote a white person's name on their list of close friends (Fetto 2000).

Mutual Reinforcement: Color-blindness on the Individual and Structural Levels

While many of those who maintain that there are differences between whites and blacks are white power advocates or black separatists, most are neither. Many whites and blacks, while advocating equality and integration of the races, say that we must acknowledge the disparities that do exist between whites and blacks in the United States if we are to ever fully address them. However, conservative proponents of color-blindness have been remarkably effective at disarming advocates of racial justice. Their efforts at the structural and cultural levels both influence and are, in turn, supported by the effects they have on individual Americans. Through using such tactics as quoting Martin Luther King Jr., they have managed to convince most Americans that the proper way to handle racial issues is to simply ignore them. Moreover, they attack those who do mention racial inequities and advocate civil rights legislation and AA programs to address them as stirring up the old "one drop" rule and antagonizing relations between the races (Will 2002).[7]

Those who attempt to counter the ideology of color-blindness must somehow convince Americans to deal with all aspects of race—interpersonal as well as political and economic. While many left-leaning Americans emphasize the importance of recognizing social and economic inequalities, opponents of color-blindness say we must be able to speak openly about all facets of race. One should, for instance, be able to recognize and feel comfortable acknowledging racial features when describing a friend of another race. As Barbara, an eighty-four-year-old white interviewee, observed,

You know . . . when you thought you really had reached a point [in your interracial friendships] when you could say "I don't notice if they're black or white," at some [point] you say to yourself "Hey! If you don't notice that, you're not recognizing them at all!" You know, ah, that's part of who they are, their color, just like their hair or your eyes or anything else. So, to me, that was something that I, that was kind of a moment

where I began to take another look, you know. It wasn't enough just to say, well, I don't even notice if they're black or white. Well, of course I do! Because that's part of how they look, you know. But I think that's just maturing [laughs]. (Barbara, white, 84)

Feeling comfortable noticing and talking about racial differences on the individual level, like Barbara does, relates to our ability to acknowledge and address structural inequalities between races. A fear of discussing racial issues is tied to white Americans' desire to both avoid appearing racist and maintaining the privileges of race (Bush 2004, Bonilla-Silva 2003). *Minimization of race* in interpersonal interactions can lead to what Bonilla-Silva refers to as the *minimization of racism*.

While every white interviewee acknowledged, to at least some extent, that racism exists in U.S. society today, only thirteen of the forty readily acknowledged their relative privilege in comparison to their black friends and to blacks in general. For instance, after saying that his friend Kofi does not have "any particular advantage or disadvantage over me because of his race," Dave stated that "generally speaking, on a societal level, black people may have it tougher" than whites. When asked why Kofi does not have it tougher, Dave perceived the illogic in his thinking.

Why wouldn't Kofi have it tougher? Maybe he has but he's just overcome. Because why wouldn't he, right? It's just so funny, I mean, I just see Kofi and he's just—He's Kofi, he's not the black Kofi. I don't know, that's odd. Yah. I'm kind of tripping myself up and not following my own logic but . . . African Americans do have it more difficult and Kofi probably has in ways I don't realize.... He's probably had to work harder than I or anyone else probably realizes to get there.... Maybe it's just something I really haven't given a lot of thought to before, to be honest with you. I'm really thinking about that for the first time now as we're speaking about it.... It's just not something I've had to think about. (Dave, white, 34)

Dave, while being a very close and loyal friend to Kofi for more than fifteen years, has somehow managed to avoid thinking about how racism affects his black friend. While he can recognize that racism exists in U.S. society, he had, up until the moment of the interview, never thought about how if affected Kofi. He echoes Rothenberg in *Invisible Privilege* when he says "it's just not something I've had to think about."

These aspects of color-blindness on an interpersonal level relate to how people view the social inequities between the races on a structural level. The inability of many whites to recognize their white privilege holds true even for many whites who have close friends who are black. If they avoid talking about racial issues with their black friend, whites in these friendships are often blind to the disparities between themselves and their friends that are due to racial discrimination. Eleven of the 13 whites who readily acknowledged their race-based privilege had serious discussions about racial issues with their black friend.

Benjamin DeMott (1995:36) forcefully argues that advocates of color-blindness lose "touch with the two fundamental truths of race in America; namely that because of

what happened in the past, blacks and whites cannot yet be the same; and that because what happened in the past was no mere matter of ill will or insult, it is not reparable by one-on-one goodwill." The data from the samples used here indicate that one-on-one goodwill, alone, even the establishment of close black-white friendships, will do little to change the racial status quo--or even make it a topic of serious discussion. It also reveals that the sidestepping of racial issues between whites and blacks in the United States, even among close black-white friends both reflects and supports the national trend towards embracing the color-blind ideology on a policy level. The ideology of color-blindness must be confronted simultaneously on the personal and structural levels.

Conclusion

Most Americans still feel the need to categorize people they meet by race, revealing the unabated salience of race in U.S. society today. The (conscious or unconscious) avoidance of racial issues by most close black-white friends denotes the still painful and volatile separation that exists between black and white Americans. The evidence this paper provides of both these realities highlights our need to openly discuss racial issues, rather than to ignore them. It also reveals the underlying connection between racial obsession and color-blindness. Instead of indicating a decline in the importance of race, the color-blind ideology simultaneously obfuscates and supports the American fixation on race.

Whether we want to believe it or not, race still matters in the United States. Equality does not yet exist between blacks and whites. Our fixation with racial categorizations is a result of that difference, not a cause of it. We must stop the spread of the color-blind ideology on the individual and structural levels by openly discussing and confronting the differences--physical, social and economic—between white and black Americans. Only then can we make progress towards Martin Luther King's dream of "lift[ing] our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice" to create a society where people "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

References

Allport, Gordon W. (1954). *The Nature or Prejudice*. New York: Doubleday.

Anderson, Margaret (2001). "Restructuring for Whom? Race, Class, Gender, and the Ideology of Invisibility." *Sociological Forum*; **16**, 2:181-202.

Bobo, Lawrence and Camille L. Zubrinsky (1996). "Attitudes on Residential Integration: Perceived Status Differences, Mere In-group Preference, or Racial Prejudice?" *Social Forces* 74: 999-1025.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo (2003). *Racism Without Racists*. Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD.

Brown, Michael K., Martin Carnoy, Elliott Currie, Troy Duster, David B. Oppenheimer, Marjorie M. Shultz and David Wellman (2003). *White-Washing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society*. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Bush, Melanie E. L. (2004). Breaking the Code of Good Intentions: Everyday Forms of Whiteness. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.

Leslie Carr (1997). *"Color-Blind" Racism.* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

DeMott, Benjamin (1995). "Put on a Happy Fave: Masking the Differences Between Blacks and Whites," *Harper's Magazine*, pp. 31-38.

Derlega, V.J, S. Metts, S. Petronio, and S.T. Margulis (1993). *Self-Disclosure.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Feagin, Joe (2001). *Racist America*. New York: Routledge.

Fetto, John (2000). "Interracial Friendships Slip?" *American Demographics*, January. Accessed at http://www.marketing tools.com/publications/as/00_as/001_as/as000106e.htm

Frankenberg, Ruth (1993). *White Women, Race Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Gallup Organization. (2001). "Blacks and Whites Differ About Treatment of Blacks in American Today," July 6. Accessed at: http://www.gallup.com/

Glaser, Barney and Anselm Strauss (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Chicago, Aldine Publishing Company.

"Globe Poll: Views on Race in America," *Boston Globe Online*, May 11, 2000. Accessed at http://www.boston.com/globe/nation/packages/rethinking_integration/.

Hitchcock, Jeffrey (2002). *Lifting the White Veil*. Roselle, NJ: Crandall, Dostie & Douglass Books, Inc.

Herring, Cedric and Charles Amissah (1997). "Advance and Retreat: Racially Based Attitudes and Public Policy." Pp. 121-143 in *Racial Attitudes in the 1990s: Continuity and Change*, eds. Steven A. Tuch and Jack K. Martin. Westport, CT: Praeger.

King, Martin Luther, Jr (1968). *The Peaceful Warrior*. NY: Pocket Books

Kinney, James. Amalgamation! Wesport CT: Greenwood.

Korgen, Kathleen Odell (1998) From Black to Biracial: Transforming Racial Identity Among Americans. Westport, CT: Praeger.

-------------(2002). Crossing the Racial Divide: Close Friendships Between Black and White Americans. Westport, CT: Praeger.

La Ferla, Ruth (2003). "Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous." *New York Times*.
     Section 9, Page 1, Column 1, December 28.

McCall, George J. and J.L. Simmons (1978). *Identities and Interactions*. New York: Free Press.

Monsour, M., B. Harris, N. Kurzweil, and C. Beard (1994) "Challenges Confronting Cross-Sex Friendships: 'Much Ado About Nothing?'" *Sex Roles* 31, pp.55-77.

"Nation pauses to remember civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr." at CNN.com, January 15, 2001. Accessed at: http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/01/15/mlk.day.01/

Neville, Helen A., Roderick Lilly. Georgia Duran, Richard Lee, and Lavonne Browne (2000). "Construction and Initial Validation of the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (COBRAS)" Journal of Counseling Psychology. **47**, 1, January, pp.59-70.

Newport, Frank and Lydia Saad (1997). "Civil Trial Didn't Alter Public's View of Simpson Case," *Gallup News Service*, February 7. Accessed at http://www.gallup.com,/poll/releases/pr970207.asp

Parks, M.R. and K. Floyd (1996). "Meanings for Closeness and Intimacy in Friendship*." Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 13, pp. 85-107.

Rockwell, Paul (1995). "The Right Has a Dream: Martin Luther King as an Opponent of Affirmative Action," *Extra!* May/June. Accessed at http://www.fair.org/extra/9505/king-affirmative-action.html.

Rome, Dennis (2004). **Black Demons:** The Media's Depiction of the African American Male Criminal Stereotype, Wesport, CT: Greenwood

Paula Rothenberg, (2000). *Invisible Privilege: A Memoir About Race, Class, and Gender* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

Schofield, Janet Ward (1986). "Causes and Consequences of the Color-blind Perspective." In John F. Dovidio and Samuel L. Gaertner (Eds.) *Prejudice, Discrimination and Racism* (pp. 231-253). New York: Academic Press.

Snead, James (1994). White Screen Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side. New York: Routledge

Spickard, P. (1989). Mixed blood: Intermarriage and ethnic identity in twentieth-century America. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Strauss, Anselm (1959). *Mirrors and Masks: The Search for Identity.* Glencoe, IL: Free Press

Thernstrom, Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom (1997). *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005). "Employment Situation Summary." February 2005. Accessed at http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0htm on March 16, 2005.

Wachtel, Paul (1999). Race in the Mind of America: Breaking the Vicious Circle Between Blacks and Whites. New York: Routledge.

Welkos, Robert W. and Richard Natale (2001). "Multiethnic Movies Ring True with Youths." *Los Angeles Times*, June 2, P.A1 Accessed at http://www.latimes.com/news/state/20010702/t000054597.html

Will, George F. (2002). "Dropping the 'One Drop' Rule," *Newsweek*, March 25, p. 64.

Williams, Lena (2000). *It's the Little Things.* New York: Harcourt

Williams, Patricia J. (1998). *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race.* San Francisco: Noonday Press.

Williamson, Joel (1995) New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press

Notes

1) Carr and Bonilla-Silva focus mainly on the black-white framework of race relations, due to its historical dominance over the society's racial ideology. Due to our empirical focus on black-white biracial persons and black-white friendship pairs, we will also share this focus, while acknowledging that, particularly in certain more ethnically diverse areas of the United States, this framework is inadequate without considering how the presence of Latinos and/or Asians shifts the discourse supporting color-blind ideology.

2) Coretta Scott King has repeatedly asked for an end to attacks on affirmative action, particularly those using the words of her late husband. She has stated that if her husband were alive today, he would support affirmative action programs. See, for example, "Nation pauses to remember civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr." at CNN.com, January 15, 2001. Accessed at: http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/01/15/mlk.day.01/

3) Eduardo Bonilla-Silva discusses this increasingly popular point of view in *Racism Without Racists* (2003).

4) For a complete description of the "saturation point" see Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss' *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Chicago, Aldine Publishing Company, 1967

5) The first author has encountered many such well-meaning audience members during conference presentations. She also finds the college students she teaches raising such color-blind-based queries on a regular basis.

6) While the 2000 Census allowed multiracial persons to check off "all that apply" under race, there was no multiracial category. Moreover, for statistical purposes, all those who did check more than one box were coded according to the box that referred to the largest numerical minority population (e.g. if someone checked off black and Asian and Pacific Islander, he/she was counted as black.

7) Will (2002) argues that race-based programs such as affirmative action hearken back to the days of the "one drop rule," when Americans were focused on racial differences (He comes from the color-blind point of view that maintains that noticing race creates problems between races).

1

2 Coretta Scott King has repeatedly asked for an end to attacks on affirmative action, particularly those using the words of her late husband. She has stated that if her husband were alive today, he would support affirmative action programs. See, for example, "Nation pauses to remember civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr." at CNN.com, January 15, 2001. Accessed at: http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/01/15/mlk.day.01/

3 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva discusses this increasingly popular point of view in Racism Without Racists (2003).

4 The first author faces at least one such well-meaning audience member during almost all her conference presentations. She also finds the college students she teaches raising such color-blind-based queries on a regular basis.