A Challenge to Critical Understandings of Race

ROBERT M ANTHONY

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, critical understandings of race have garnished greater acceptance within the social sciences. Although they have been useful for drawing attention to whites’ privileged placement within American culture, critical race assessments tend to rely on incomplete understandings of how social constructions are generated and why they are used by racial identity groups in the process of making social comparisons. This is largely due to an unwillingness to embrace scientific understandings of human cognition and related research in social psychology. Thus, while critical understandings of race claim to provide valuable insight into how social actors use their status and racial identities to reinforce the status quo, a closer examination reveals key weaknesses in their explanations for race-based assessments, social constructions of otherness, and social comparisons.¹

2. CRITICAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF RACE IN PERSPECTIVE

In this article, the term critical understandings of race (CUR) is used to denote the broad intellectual movement that applies critical approaches to issues of race and racial inequality. CUR are rooted in legal storytelling and borrow heavily from the critical theories developed in radical feminism; they also rely on the critical perspectives found in the writings of Antonio Gramsci, Jaques Derrida, and W.E.B. Du Bois (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical race theory and critical white studies are the most formalized versions of the perspective (e.g., Delgado & Stefancic, 1997, 2001; Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

While variations exist, there are several areas of agreement among critical race scholars. These include the notion of white normativity and white privilege, an insistence that covert forms of racism are intimately linked to white identity via white normativity, and a focus on whites’ social status as the primary reason for their support of racist social systems. In addition, there is an agreement that the purpose of applying the critical race perspective is to transform society for the better with most practitioners supporting radical multiculturalism.²

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A. White Identity, White Normativity, and White Privilege

CUR rest on the assertion that, as the majority group, whites hold a privileged place within American society; not only do whites have greater access to cultural and material opportunities, they have the power to use those resources to maintain a status quo centered on the “white” experience. An important component of maintaining this dominance is whites’ ability to dictate the symbolic parameters of racial otherness (e.g., racial identities). Given this premise, critical race analyses explore how the white majority uses implicit and explicit forms of “whiteness” to dictate ideological systems of inclusion and exclusion within American society (e.g., Bell & Hartmann, 2007). CUR also emphasize that whites attach values, attitudes, behaviors, and norms to social constructions of race that favor white interests (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). As such, in American society white is normalized while nonwhite identities and cultures are understood to be exotic, abnormal, and even deviant. Since whites dictate the cultural boundaries of racial otherness, CUR argue that the dominant white culture is the referent for how all racial groups experiences are lived and interpreted (i.e., white normativity).

Finally, CUR agree that the normalcy of whiteness is left unquestioned and unchallenged in American culture. Whites do not have to confront or think about what it means to be a white person living in American society; according to critical race proponents, white is the experience, it is the culture, it is “American.” Given this privilege, whites have a very different lived experience than nonwhites. Therefore, a shared political goal among critical race scholars is to challenge white normativity and white privilege by giving voice to the nonwhite minority experience (Taylor, 1998).

B. The Majority Assumption: Status as Behavior

In addition to the above, critical race scholars agree that social status plays an important and unique role in dictating how racial groups perceive, define, and assess racial others. For instance, holding a majority social status is thought to be the primary cause for whites’ racist assessments of nonwhites and their support for racist cultural elements (e.g., assimilationism, colorblind ideology). The logic for these assertions can be traced to the concept of white privilege. White privilege is the notion that whites’ majority status allows them to dictate cultural understanding of social otherness, such that, they do not have to confront or think about being “white.”

A complementary assertion to this comes from Du Bois’ (1903/1994) concept of double consciousness. CUR reason, that because nonwhites live life as subordinates, they are surrounded by whites’ definitions of their “otherness.” As a result, people of color do not have complete control over how self is conceptualized because a large part of their identity is defined for them (i.e., their racial other-
ness). Since the “otherness” aspect of self can never be changed, nonwhite minorities have developed unique understandings of the link between racial identity and racial inequality. Whites, on the other hand, are blind to this reality because they hold a privileged social status and can never experience life as subordinate others. Thus, CUR assert that nonwhites have a unique and enlightened understanding of race and racial inequality because of their subordinate status. As Delgado and Stefancic (2001) state it, “Minority status . . . brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism.”

A similar assumption is made about the effect holding a majority status has on whites’ assessments of racial others. CUR assert that because whites hold a privileged place within society, they develop assessments of racial others and support values that are intended to reinforce their cultural dominance (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Bell & Hartmann, 2007). In other words, holding a majority status causes whites to engage in excessive forms of self-interested behavior, which manifests as symbolic and material forms of racism. I label this assumption, the majority assumption.

The majority assumption is the assertion that social status is the primary determinant for how status groups perceive and understand social otherness as well as the behaviors and assessments that accompany and support those constructs. This assumption is used to support the notion that the white majority is more self-interested, more power-hungry, and more biased towards racial others than nonwhite minorities.

C. Missing Elements

Aside from the above, a final common feature of CUR is their reluctance to theorize social behavior at the social psychological level, even though they often draw attention to it (e.g., racist attitudes, stereotyping, racial identity, etc.). Like most normative approaches, CUR assume that social actors have the capacity to construct and decode symbols (Little, 1991); however, they make no attempt to account for the mechanism that makes symbols and meaning possible (i.e., the brain). Given this neglect, there has been a tendency for critical race scholars to explain behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes as extensions of social status. I contend that this blank-slate approach provides inadequate understandings of social behavior tied to symbolic systems, especially since there are various empirical studies linking human cognition to social constructions, as well as social psychological research linking human cognition to ingroup favoritism (e.g., Tajfel, 1957; Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963; Eiser, 1980; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Little, DeBruine, Jones, & Waitt, 2008).

In the section to follow, I use the insights of social identity theory to develop an empirically informed understanding of the role human cognition plays in mediating the intersections between social identity, social status, and ideology. This
framework is then used to reassess the insights and conclusions contained in Bell and Hartmann’s (2007) critical race analysis of diversity dialogue in American society, which demonstrates the inconsistencies and limitations of the critical race perspective.

3. SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

Social identity theory (SIT) is derived from research on the mechanics of human cognition, which is used to understand how social actors construct reality and share perceptions. In their book *Social Identifications*, Hogg and Abrams (1988) offer the following example of how human cognition promotes categorical simplification:

> When you look at a rainbow you see seven relatively discrete bands of colour, and yet what is actually there is a continuous distribution of light of different wavelengths. Your cognitive apparatus has automatically divided the continuum into seven perceptually distinct colour categories, each encompassing (or obscuring) a range of different wavelengths. The cognitive process of categorization simplifies perception . . . Effectively, it brings into sharp focus a nebulous world, by accentuating similarities between objects within the same category and differences between stimuli in different categories. That is, the process of categorization produces an accentuation effect . . .

(Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p.19)

SIT’s raison d’être is to extend this knowledge of human cognition to constructions of self, identity formation, and group dynamics in order to assess how social hierarchies are constructed and navigated by social actors.

At the micro-social level, SIT assumes that all individuals construct self using social categories derived from group membership. It also assumes that social actors possess two complementary psychological drives; the first is to achieve a positive evaluation of self (i.e., self-esteem or a positive self-concept), and the second is to take pride in groups to which one belongs. Aside from the micro-level assumptions, SIT also makes two macro-level assumptions grounded in a conflict perspective. The first is that social categories are not equal in terms of their power, prestige, and status. Power and status arrangements are dictated by historical, political, and economic forces. The second is that identities and their supporting constructs are not incontestable. Thus, social categories can lose or gain relevance and/or power over time.

A. Social Comparison, Stereotyping, and Positive Distinctiveness

Aside from influencing perceptions of physical reality, SIT asserts that the accentuation effect plays a key role in dictating evaluations of social reality.
In fact, it contends that accentuations become more pronounced when a specific social dimension is deemed important and relevant for establishing social boundaries. Thus, when consensus arises on the importance of a specific focal dimension a subjective frame of reference is established, and a social comparison is made.5

Social comparisons serve two social psychological functions. The first is to order reality in a coherent manner so that meanings can be shared among members of a group. The second is to construct a common self so that ingroup and outgroup membership can be established (i.e., social identity). Social comparisons also serve an individual and group level function; they help establish consensus on attitudes, values, and behaviors, as well as reaffirm worldviews (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p. 22).

In the process of social interaction, individuals and groups use their social identities to form social comparisons in predictable ways. All social actors seek categorical differences that can be used to evaluate ingroup or self in positive ways, but which can also be used to establish negative evaluations of outgroups and others. In each instance, biased perceptions of otherness serve to maintain boundaries of self and group identity. It also confirms that group definitions and perceptions of social reality are valid and justified.

The tendency for humans to form biased perceptions is what Tajfel (1957) referred to as the accentuation effect.6 When the limitations of human perception are taken into consideration, the accentuation effect is more accurately described as a cognitive process through which humans order the world using a system of correlated focal and peripheral dimensions (Hogg & Abrams, 1988).7 This tendency has been empirically shown to affect how humans order objects (Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963), establish categories of judgment among social stimuli (Secord, Bevan, & Katz, 1956; Secord, 1959), and make distinctions between attitudinal statements (see for example, Doise, 1978 or Eiser, 1980).8 What this means is that for physical stimuli and symbolic stimuli humans use accentuations to establish cognitive control over their total environment. Thus, humans’ cognitive limitations ultimately force simplified correlations of categories and produce stereotypic perceptions of all things. Stereotypic perceptions are constructed using subjectively relevant peripheral dimensions and do not capture the entirety of what is being perceived.

In sum, SIT asserts that most stereotypes associated with self and ingroup are used to from positive evaluations while stereotypes associated with outgroups and their members are used to form negative evaluations of accentuated similarities (i.e., outgroups are perceived to share the same or similar attributes or faults). In both instances, stereotypic perceptions are used to establish categorical distinctions and similarities. Therefore, stereotypes are used to form conceptions of social otherness, order social reality, as well as establish ingroup and outgroup boundaries. That is, they are the basis of social identity and the social construction of reality.
In addition to ordering reality more efficiently, stereotypes and social comparisons are also used to achieve positive distinctiveness. That is, in some cases, stereotyping allows social actors to maximize positive aspects of self by choosing a comparative dimension that can be used to form favorable evaluations of ingroup while simultaneously producing unfavorable evaluations of outgroups. Positive distinctiveness is a useful cognitive strategy for minority groups. It allows them to construct and reinforce positive evaluations of self in the context of majority dominance, especially in cases where the majority imposes shifting criteria of what constitutes otherness. However, SIT stresses that stereotyping and positive distinctiveness are not exclusive to any specific status or identity group. These tendencies are the result of a shared cognitive system that underlies identity formation and maintenance, which in the course of social interaction, produces simplified perceptions of otherness resulting in stereotypic perceptions of outgroups that are used for social comparisons.

B. Subjective Belief Structures and Minority/Majority Group Position

Two final concepts need to be discussed before moving on, subjective belief structures and social competition. Subjective belief structures are “beliefs concerning the nature of society and the relations between groups in it” (1988, p. 27). Hogg and Abrams discuss two subjective belief structures, social mobility and social stability. Social mobility is the belief that an individual can move freely from one social group to the next. Social stability is the idea that “the boundaries between groups are rigid, fixed and impermeable” (1988, p. 28). As is obvious, these concepts parallel the sociological concepts of “open” and “closed” social systems.

Finally, social competition is when subordinate groups engage in cognitive strategies (e.g., positive distinctiveness, social comparisons) that are used to challenge the legitimacy of the status quo supported by majority groups. With this in mind, SIT predicts that in open social systems minority groups will use cognitive strategies to directly and indirectly challenge the legitimacy of the majority’s dominance.

4. AMERICAN INTEGRATION IDEOLOGIES

In the section to follow, I use the concepts above to assess Bell and Hartmann’s (2007) critical understandings of diversity dialogue in American society. A central component of their analysis is developing a critical deconstruction of whites’ adherence to assimilationist ideology. At the same time, they use critical deconstruction to build an argument that multiculturalist ideology needs to have a more prominent place in diversity dialogue. Since differences between the two ideologies plays a central role in Bell and Hartmann’s critical race assessment, it is necessary to explore the assumptions and logic behind them.
A. Multiculturalism, Assimilationism, and the Diversity Concept

From the 1960’s Civil Rights Movement, multiculturalist ideology emerged and began to challenge assimilationism (Higham, 1981; Spencer, 1994; Kazal, 1995). Multiculturalism is based on the premise that, “affirmation toward one’s ethnic group leads to a positive ethnic identity and higher levels of acceptance toward ethnic outgroups . . . As an ideology, [it] offers a positive view of cultural maintenance by ethnic minority groups and, as such, a concomitant need to accommodate diversity in an equitable way” (Verkuyten, 2005, p. 121). In short, multiculturalism assumes shared ignorance and/or animosity toward cultural differences are primary barriers to social integration and “true” equality within culturally heterogeneous societies. Therefore, multiculturalism’s proposed solution to cultural conflict is to educate, or re-educate, groups and individuals on how they should perceive social otherness, as well as value intergroup distinctions. 14

In contrast, assimilationism holds that sustained cultural difference are barriers to social cohesion in culturally heterogeneous societies. Instead of emphasizing respect for cultural differences, assimilationism suggests that individuals and groups need to shed their distinctive identity (e.g., race) and place greater emphasis on a shared identity (e.g., national identity). In other words, to achieve social cohesion individuals must drop their “previous markers of group identity and adopt those of the social whole” (Hartmann & Gerteis, 2005, p. 227).

Like multiculturalism, assimilationism assumes shifts in identity salience (albeit in opposite directions) are central for overcoming social inequality and increasing intergroup cohesion. Both claim to be superior models for integration within culturally heterogeneous societies, and both idealize social unity. Despite these similarities, multiculturalists and assimilationists offer two very different models of social integration. Multiculturalists argue assimilationism is oppressive to minority group interests because the majority group’s culture, identity, values, etc., are used as the referent for assimilation. In contrast, assimilationists argue that multiculturalism leads to heightened ingroup and outgroup distinctions resulting in greater division, which are seen as the primary cause of identity conflicts and sustained socioeconomic inequalities—things that act to undermine integration.

In spite of these fundamental differences both ideologies value and support the principle of diversity. According to Kazal (1995), the principle of diversity originated within multiculturalist ideology and in opposition to pre-Civil Rights assimilationism (p. 460). However, both ideologies now make moral appeals to a “diversity” concept.

For multiculturalists, the morality of diversity is the need for social actors to value and respect social differences with the intent of preserving minority group identities and heritages (Fowers & Richardson, 1996). This conceptualization is closely linked to what Hartmann and Gerteis (2005) term interactive pluralism. Interactive pluralism “realizes the existence of distinct groups and cultures . . . it posits the need to cultivate common understandings across these differences
though mutual recognition and ongoing interaction” (2005, p. 231). Multiculturalists emphasize social status as the most important barrier to achieving unity. In line with CUR, multiculturalists argue the majority groups use their privileged social status to maintain power via negative stereotypes of minorities and support for assimilationism. To overcome this oppression, minority groups are encouraged to raise the status of their subordinate identities via positive distinctiveness. This vision of multiculturalism is most often tied to the “mosaic” analogy of social integration since it favors status-ascension as the ideal.

In recent decades, a revised version of assimilationist ideology has emerged (for discussion on the changing nature of assimilationist ideology and its use see Kazal [1995] or Green [2006]). This revised version has incorporated the principle of diversity into its own ideological framework. Following Hartmann and Gerteis (2005), I term this weaker, more liberal and humanistic version, interactive assimilation. For interactive assimilationism, the principle of diversity is a value in which individuals are treated the same regardless of their cultural, racial, or ethnic differences. It posits the need for individuals within culturally heterogeneous societies to overlook differences in identity and focus on basic similarities in order to develop a shared identity (e.g., American) and a shared value system. Under interactive assimilationism, no group’s culture, identity, or value system is used as the referent for what “normal is.” Instead, shared human traits, values, and goals underlie a universal human identity. This humanistic appeal to universality is intended to promote unity by minimizing the accentuation of cultural identity differences, which if accentuated, increase the likelihood that negative stereotypes of those differences will lead to exclusion. This “melting pot” approach to cultural integration has been used to support colorblindness as the ideal in interactive assimilationism.

B. Social Status, Integration Ideology, and Group Strategy

In present day American culture, no matter how “diversity” is defined it remains a central part of political, economic, and social institutions. Through formalization, diversity has taken on emergent, often divergent, and contradictory meanings depending on which integration ideology is referenced or adhered to and by whom (for similar and complementary discussions see, Andersen, 2001; Hartmann & Gerteis, 2005; Deaux, Reid, Martin, & Bikmen, 2006). In order to understand why diversity is so widely accepted and celebrated, it is necessary to consider the specific conceptions of “diversity” contained in the integration ideologies discussed above. Conceptions of diversity are closely linked to how each ideology understands the role social difference plays in the integration process.

For multiculturalism, the integration of social differences is understood with respect to symbiosis (i.e., integration based on complimentary differences). Ideally, all groups recognize that differences exist (including their own) which allows for
mutual support of outgroup distinctions. In other words, the practice of accentuating ingroup difference is not judged, but encouraged. For assimilationism, the existence of social differences is acknowledged, but these differences are not judged with respect to ingroup eligibility (i.e., all are welcomed). Ideally, no group makes an attempt to place its difference above others, which means cultural difference must be deemphasized in order to develop a shared identity. Thus, assimilationism favors *commensalism* (i.e., integration based on a shared social identity).\(^{20}\)

While each version presents very different roles with respect to how self or groups should commit to and perceive social difference, both claim to minimize the impact stereotypic perceptions have on maintaining social inequality within culturally heterogeneous societies. In addition, both claim to have superior models for achieving greater equality. However, multiculturalism and assimilationism have opposing ideals as to how power should (and can) be redistributed in order to minimize inequality. Interestingly enough, both models are based on how each conceptualizes the role of identity salience in the integration process.

For assimilationism, greater equality between the majority and minorities is achieved when accentuated differences are minimized between identity groups (low cultural identity salience). Logically, this entails a greater loss of power for the majority group since the majority’s identity holds a higher initial status. That is, in lowering the relevance of cultural identity, the majority must forfeit the privilege attached to their identity. In contrast, for multiculturalism equality is achieved when accentuated differences between identity groups are maximized, such that, each minority group’s identity is increasingly valued for being different and/or unique (i.e., not white). Logically, this entails a greater gain in power for minorities since minority groups’ identities gain status by becoming as important as the majority’s identity (i.e., status ascension). In short, each version acknowledges that the majority group must forfeit power linked to its privileged social identity in order to achieve greater equality, but the ideologies differ on the way power should be lost.

C. White and Nonwhite Ideological Preferences in the American Context

Consistent with CUR, SIT asserts that ideological preference is partially derivative of a group’s social status. However, unlike CUR, SIT asserts that both majority and minority groups will act in their own self-interests. This means that majority groups will favor and promote ideologies that support their interests and minority groups will do the same. When applied to the context of American society, SIT predicts that nonwhite minorities will favor multiculturalism and its conceptualization of diversity as a mosaic, while the white majority will favor assimilationism and its conceptualization of diversity as a melting-pot (see Table 1.
This is because multiculturalism justifies pursuits of positive distinctiveness while assimilationism justifies the pursuit of a shared identity.

Fortunately, Verkuyten (2005) has already tested similar hypotheses with respect to majority/minority ideological preferences lending support to the above predictions. More recent research has confirmed similar findings in American society; particularly with respect to the impact racial identity and status have on ideological preferences (e.g., Deaux et al., 2006 find support for Verkuyten, 2005). However, it should be noted that past research has also confirmed that integration ideology has independent effects on ingroup identification levels (Judd, Park, Ryan, Brauer, & Kraus, 1995; van Oudenhoven & Eisses, 1998), as well as outgroup evaluations (Negy, Shreve, Jensen, & Uddin, 2003; Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004). Thus, while membership in a particular racial group will make it more or less likely that an individual member will adhere to a given ideology, adherence to the ingroup’s preference is not absolute. Moreover, at the individual level, adherence to an ideology has been found to trump adherence to one’s identity group preferences when forming evaluations of otherness for both majority and minority members (Verkuyten, 2005). In other words, when a member of the white majority favors multiculturalism, adherence to multiculturalism will impact how the individual sees his/her racial ingroup as well as how he/she evaluates cultural difference.

What these studies indicate is that in order to understand conceptions and applications of “diversity,” one has to consider social status and racial constructs just as CUR assert, but one also has to consider how the ideology being adhered to affects social comparisons (i.e., status, race, and ideological effects are not synonymous, although they are often overlapping). Most importantly, one must consider how shared cognitive processes drive ingroup assessments of outgroups’ perceived social otherness with respect to status, racial identity, and ideological preference, a topic taken up at length in the pages to come.
Now that an alternative framework has been offered, and a discussion of the dominant integration ideologies in American society has been presented, I turn to Bell and Hartmann’s (2007) recent article on diversity dialogue in American society (from here on B&H). Their article provides a relevant example for demonstrating the limitations of CUR.

The main purpose of B&H’s article is to explore “how ordinary Americans understand and experience diversity” (2007, p. 896). To accomplish this, they develop a critical race assessment of conversations on diversity that were collected as part of the American Mosaic Project. B&H come to the following conclusions with respect to conceptions of diversity: First, respondents’ definitions emphasized the universal inclusion of social difference and were optimistic; however, the meaning of “different” was dominated by whites’ cultural understandings of race and actually meant “not white.” When respondents were asked about the problems of having a diverse society, most pointed to integration as the biggest barrier and then used specific race-based experiences as examples. B&H conclude that the tendency for respondents to point to racial difference when discussing diversity is evidence that diversity dialogue is really about race.

In addition, B&H argue that a variety of contradictions and tensions were apparent in the interviews. Specifically, there was tension between individualist values and group-based commitments with respect to conceptions of diversity. In one sense respondents discussed diversity as the valuing of individuals regardless of their social differences; in another sense respondents referred to diversity as the valuing of differences between groups. An additional source of tension was revealed when respondents repeatedly appealed to the universal inclusion of social differences, but used specific race-based examples when applying their diversity concept. Citing Bonilla-Silva’s (2003) work, B&H argue that the language of diversity appears to be a form of colorblind racism; it is a way for whites to talk about nonwhite minorities without sounding racist.

This leads to a final point of tension identified in their analysis. B&H suggest that “respondents had a very difficult time talking about structural inequality in the context of diversity conversations” (p. 902). When pressed, respondents tended to separate race from inequality and they resisted making any concrete connection. If and when respondents did recognize a relationship, a majority had a difficult time articulating what the relationship was (p. 906). Given these points of tension, B&H argue that diversity talk is a way for the white majority to discuss race without having to confront the relationship between race and inequality. In short, the link between “different” and inequality is left unanalyzed and unquestioned in diversity dialogue because white culture dominates the language of diversity.

B&H end their article with a direct application of the critical race perspective. They focus on how white normativity and assimilationist assumptions (an
extension of whiteness) shape the language of diversity. They claim the interviews provide “empirical evidence” that Americans’ conceptions of diversity rest on “assimilationist assumptions and employs linguistic tools that privilege white cultural norms and values.” These values situate nonwhites outside of the “. . . white mainstream” (p. 907). In other words, the language of diversity is the language of the privileged white majority whose negative perceptions of racial otherness is supported by assimilationist ideology with the intent to maintain white supremacy.

Given this conclusion, B&H suggest that the current diversity dialogue needs to be dismantled and replaced with “an entirely different set of assumptions and aspirations.” There needs to be a discussion that does not start or end with the white perspective; rather, the discussion needs to start by recognizing the link between social difference and inequality so that it can be confronted (p. 911). In the end, they argue for a dialogue that is informed by multiculturalism. With this in mind, in the next two sections I develop a more in-depth analysis of B&H’s application of the critical race perspective to demonstrate general weaknesses in CUR.

A. Assimilationism as Racism

B&H cite three white people (“Melissa,” p. 907, “Lawrence” and “Craig,” p. 908) and one black woman (“Kamau,” p. 908) as “empirical evidence” that assimilationist ideology is linked to white normativity and mainstream white identity in ways that perpetuate racism and white supremacy.23 They start with “Melissa, a white Southerner,” who makes an argument that diversity is “good overall.” She then expresses an initial support for multiculturalism by saying, “ ‘We as Americans . . . need to respect one another’s differences and backgrounds . . . and be tolerant of one another’ ” (p. 907). However, she then proceeds to draw from assimilationist ideology by pointing out that “diversity is . . . not gonna work . . .” if there are cultural, political, or linguistic groups who refuse to adhere to “. . . a defining thread.” B&H argue that as a white person adhering to assimilationist ideology “she is, in fact, calling into question people’s right to maintain political or linguistic deviations from American mainstream culture, a social system and set of practices dominated and defined by whites” (p. 907). B&H develop a very similar interpretation of Lawrence’s dialogue, and a related interpretation of Craig’s, “a white Minnesotan.”

Craig expresses frustration with a black teenager he personally knows who purposefully and publically acts out stereotypes that whites associate with black youths (i.e., “to look tough.”). Craig explains that the teen’s purposeful adherence to racial stereotypes, which in his opinion are intended to agitate whites, is directly contributing to a “vicious circle” of racial conflict. His exact words are, whites “are going to look at blacks as being a threat as long as blacks want them to, and
blacks are going to go on blaming whites for separatism and being racist and this just goes around in a vicious circle.” B&H interpret Craig’s criticism as support for “white racism” because “Tellingly, Craig does not discuss the need for whites to change.” The implication, then, is that Craig is developing negative assessments of black culture because of an implicit adherence to his privileged white racial identity and support for assimilationism. That is, Craig’s social comparison is grounded in his white privilege and it is intended to maintain said privilege. Thus, from their perspective Craig is “placing what he sees as black cultural deficiencies at the center of the problematic black-white relationship” (p. 908).

While B&H’s assessments are directly in-line with CUR, like CUR, their interpretations overlook the fact that social comparisons and preferences are not always based on racial identity. Sometimes social comparisons and preferences are based on an adherence to other relevant social dimensions (e.g., other identities or an ideology), especially in culturally heterogeneous societies. For example, polling of American citizens has indicated that African Americans are as likely to endorse linguistic unity in the form of “English Only” rules in the workplace as whites, while Hispanics were more unlikely.24 What can be implied from this is that when African Americans (a racial minority) are part of a linguistic majority, they are as likely to adopt preferences and attitudes that serve the interests of the majority group to which they belong. In this case, racial identity does not determine how African Americans assess linguistic otherness. SIT, and similar social psychological theories (e.g., Stryker, 1980), recognize the importance of social contexts in dictating identity salience, especially within culturally heterogeneous societies. Thus, contrary to the claims of CUR, social comparisons made by whites (or any racial group) are not always based on allegiances to a racial identity, even when that racial identity holds a privileged status.

When the above is taken into consideration, it becomes clearer that both Craig and Melissa’s social comparisons are grounded primarily in an adherence to assimilationist ideology, and not their racial identity. Melissa is not “calling into question people’s right to maintain political or linguistic deviations” because of her adherence to whiteness (italics mine). She is calling into question the utility of an immigrant group accentuating its cultural difference “because it becomes this game of well, were better than you.” Thus, the “empirical evidence” suggests Melissa’s salient identity ingroup is “We . . . Americans,” which is contrasted with the implied immigrant outgroups she is directing her social comparisons toward. However, B&H argue from a critical race perspective, and so they accentuate Melissa’s whiteness, which is then used to develop their own social comparison of how she (and other whites) stereotypically uses assimilationism in the interest of white culture. Thus, they offer an incomplete and highly questionable interpretation of Melissa’s dialogue which appears to be an attempt to confirm that their commitment to radical multiculturalism and the critical race perspective is right and justified (2007, p. 896).
A similar critique applies to B&H’s interpretation of Craig’s dialogue. Contrary to their claims, Craig is not “placing what he sees as black cultural deficiencies at the center of the problematic black-white relationship.” What he is placing at the center is the teen’s purposeful elevation of his racial identity, or what Craig clearly sees as the abuse of racial identity salience due to his adherence to assimilationism. Although Craig is placing blame on black culture for the elevation of the black identity (“as long as blacks want them to”), it appears that his negative evaluation is linked to a deeper assessment of black culture’s adherence to multiculturalist ideals, which values racial identity salience (i.e., status ascension). This value is in direct competition to how racial identity salience should be treated under assimilationism. Thus, his social comparison is primarily grounded in assimilationist ideology, and so identity salience (in general, not whiteness or a specific racial identity) becomes the most relevant focal dimension for developing a social comparison. In fact, since cultural integration is a central point of focus in diversity discourse, it is likely that all respondents’ assessments are guided by an adherence to integration ideology, even more so than an allegiance to specific racial identities.25

B. The White and Nonwhite Normative Centers

In the final section of their discussion, B&H develop an argument that white normativity has pervaded diversity discourse to the point that otherness is defined in terms of difference from white. They state:

While the existence of an underlying desire to maintain white cultural norms and practices is important to recognize, it is even more important to understand the implicit adherence to a white center in most of the diversity discourse. The language of diversity rests on an assumption that few challenge: “Different from what?” This lack of definitional specificity reflects the assumed white center . . .

(Bell & Hartmann, 2007, p. 908)

To support this, B&H cite several white respondents (Alice, Jill, and Howard). Each explicitly or implicitly states that people of color are “add-ons” to an undefined “we”—meaning whites. Thus, they conclude that “American understandings of diversity treat whiteness as the neutral center and everyone else as outside contributors . . . [who are] harmoniously added” (909). For B&H, the dominance of the white center is problematic for two reasons: First, it contradicts the universally expressed ideal of inclusion found in conceptions of diversity. Second, since nonwhites are excluded from this “center,” the nonwhite perspective on diversity is missing from the dialogue. Specifically, they call attention to the fact that the link between diversity and inequality, while recognized by most minority respondents, is ultimately left unchallenged and unexamined. As they state:

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Indeed, what makes this diversity discourse so potent and problematic is precisely the way in which it appears to engage and even celebrate differences, yet does not grasp the social inequalities that accompany them... The language of diversity both constructs difference as natural and disavows its negative impact on the lives of those who are so constructed. 

(Bell & Hartmann, 2007, p. 908)

In addition to this, B&H claim that the nonwhite minority “voice” is not being represented because the white majority dominates the definitional space of diversity dialogue. Ultimately, we are led to believe that whiteness is so pervasive and omnipresent that, with a few exceptions, minorities conceptualize and apply diversity in ways that reinforce white supremacy.26

The most serious consequence of adhering to the majority assumption is that critical race scholars grossly overstate white culture’s ability to dictate how minorities fill definitional space (i.e., the parameters of their lived experience), especially when it comes to nonwhites’ ability to conceptualize their social otherness. As discussed above, critical race scholars believe that the white majority imposes social constructions of difference on racial minorities via assimilationism and supporting ideologies. B&H make a similar argument when they assert that nonwhite minorities “buy into” and unconsciously support diversity discourse that favors white interests (e.g., B&H’s interpretation of “Claire” on p. 901). While racial minorities are certainly subject to the white majority’s stereotypic constructions of otherness, there is reason to believe that when a group’s identity is relatively fixed, and the stratification system is relatively open, a subordinate group will engage in social competition (Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

For nonwhite minorities, this means actively defining self via positive distinctiveness. Achieving positive distinctiveness requires that nonwhite minorities contest the white majority’s ordering of social reality, including its definitions of social otherness that has been applied to them. Of course, the effectiveness of positive distinctiveness will vary depending on how open or closed the social system is. Given that modern American society is an open society, this strategy has been used by various nonwhite minority groups since the Civil Rights Movement, and its continued use is clearly visible in the diversity dialogue. This is especially true for African-Americans whose “otherness” has been at the center of whites’ racial concepts for centuries (Higham, 1981).

A relevant example of achieving positive distinctiveness comes from the dialogue of “James, a 67-year-old African American.” In citing James, B&H provide an example where a racial minority uses his subordinate racial identity to directly contest white normativity. The purpose of doing this appears to be an attempt to achieve or reassert positive distinctiveness. Ironically, this overlooked behavior is quite similar to the behavior condemned by B&H when discussing Craig and Melissa’s social comparisons. In any event, when asked about the relationship between diversity and inequality, James states that, “Diversity has to be taken on global terms, in the so-called diverse world—the multiculturalist world—the least
favored of all are the Africans.” He is then asked to “expand on what he believes the general public thinks diversity is” (p. 906). His response is as follows:

Well you know, it’s a word that’s in vogue, it’s overused. Most of them don’t know what they’re talking about. But other than the fact that, you know, it conjures up ideas of the workplace or the community that, where, you know, women have a place and men have a place and ethnic minorities have a place and somehow that the melting pot is working and everybody’s happy every after. And that’s what the—that’s happy talk, yeah (italics mine).

(Bell & Hartmann, 2007, p. 906)

In this discussion, James is clearly offering a critique of assimilationism, the favored ideological vein of the white majority. We know that James perceives Africans (his racial ingroup) to be “the least favored of all,” and that, in an earlier statement, he calls into question the “many myths of the pilgrims” (i.e., white folklore). Based on this evidence, we can safely assume that his implied “them” is white culture or whites specifically. In either case, James is belittling the concept of the melting pot in order to draw a clear distinction from it. He is calling into question the practicality of assimilationism as a solution to the problems of racial integration by labeling it “happy talk.” Thus, James is placing his evaluation of “diversity,” grounded in multiculturalism, above assimilationists who use diversity as “happy talk.” He is establishing a positive distinction based on differences between multiculturalism and assimilationism in order to favor self and his racial ingroup who holds a minority status.

What can be taken from James’ dialogue is that, in modern day American society, the formation of social comparisons among racial minorities is not grounded in a passive adherence to the white majority’s ideological preferences, or their cultural understandings of difference. Racial minorities can, and do, engage in ingroup protective behaviors via positive distinctiveness, which requires developing their own social constructions of otherness. Indeed, African-Americans have developed a rich, lively, and openly defiant counter culture, a culture that increasingly confronts white normativity (e.g., hip hop). Thus, there is every reason to believe that nonwhite minorities in a modern American society have developed an adhere to their own socially constructed cultural centers—that is, decades of socioeconomic modernization have brought about vibrant and visible nonwhite minority cultural centers that CUR fail to acknowledge.

While it is not my intent to map every possible nonwhite cultural “center” linked to a minority racial identity in American society (e.g., African American, Hispanic, Asian American, etc.), or discuss the social changes that are empirically linked to the decentralization of cultural power in modern societies (e.g., urbanization), it is possible to generalize a shared feature of nonwhite normative centers; that being, a skepticism of the white majority. Indeed, the shared experience of exclusion among racial minorities is important just as critical race scholars argue. But it is not important because it somehow gives racial minorities a unique insight.
into social inequality. It is important because it serves as the focal dimension that racial minorities use to develop social comparisons with when contesting the white center.

A relevant example can be found in the dialogue of Kamau, “a 61-year-old black Atlantan.” Her dialogue demonstrates how a person of color, adhering to a nonwhite normative center, can be used to contest the white center via social comparison derived from an adherence to multiculturalism. Her words are as follows:

I think we call ourselves—this country is a country of a melting pot of people, but the majority of the people have a certain philosophy and they wish to impose their philosophy on those minorities that come into this country. They want to impose that and not necessarily allow openness of those people’s culture and their ancestry.

(Bell & Hartmann, 2007, p. 908)

In this example, Kamau is acknowledging that the majority (i.e., whites) adhere to assimilationist ideology when evaluating social otherness. From her perspective, this ideology is not in the interests of minorities because it does “not necessarily allow openness of... people’s culture and their ancestry.” More importantly, she forms a negative stereotypic evaluation of the unnamed “majority of the people,” which we can safely say is white culture or whites. That is, in adhering to the nonwhite center whites become stereotypical oppressors (e.g., the Man), and so they “impose” their philosophy and “do not necessarily allow openness” of those who are different. Although subtle, like James, Kamau is contesting white normativity. She is doing so from a multiculturalist point of view that is grounded in a general skepticism of the intentions of the white majority. Not surprisingly, this is the same skepticism that runs throughout B&H’s self-proclaimed critical race analysis grounded in a radical multiculturalism (2007, p. 896).

C. Evidence of Ideological Competition and Convergence in American Culture

A final area that needs to be addressed is B&H’s analysis of the tensions and contradictions identified in the diversity dialogue. They claim that expressions of uncertainty, ambiguity, and contradictions contained in respondents’ discourse provides evidence that all respondents (regardless of race) are unable to resolve the inconsistencies between dominant conceptions of diversity informed by white culture (i.e., diversity without oppression, “happy talk”) and the real way white culture treats racial others (i.e., as outsiders which produces racial inequalities). This conclusion is clearly articulated when they state: “The tensions and ambiguities that we identify appear less as cracks and fissures in the discourse than as the actual power by which diversity discourse is paradoxically structured and
reproduced” (p. 910). The problem with this assessment is that there is too much counter evidence suggesting that real ideological compromise is underway between the white majority and nonwhite minorities, and has been for quite some time (for a discussion see Higham [1981] or Spencer [1994]). In fact, the “cracks and fissures” that B&H use as evidence of white power actually provide additional evidence that nonwhite minorities’ subordinate identities have become a stable and important source of political power in a post-Civil Rights era.

Earlier it was demonstrated that nonwhites contest white normativity via an adherence to a nonwhite cultural center that favors multiculturalism. A key source of power that nonwhite minorities have derived from their adherence to multiculturalist ideology is their ability to claim moral righteousness when talking about issues of race, including how racial minority identities should be understood. This moral monopoly has been gained from the institutionalization of the language of political correctness (Spencer 1994). Political correctness has provided nonwhite minorities with a legitimate “voice” that is used to openly, and sometimes aggressively, contest white normativity. Indeed, political correctness has become such a part of American racial discussions that it dictates the moral treatment of racial otherness, thus giving nonwhite minorities (and other nonracial minorities) a source of cultural power that whites and other majority groups cannot openly challenge. Despite being a visible feature of the diversity dialogue, B&H conveniently overlook the presence and impact of political correctness in the diversity discourse.

Evidence that political correctness is an effective tool for minorities to contest the white majority can be observed in the ideological competition between multiculturalism and assimilationism. The adoption of political correctness and the appeal to diversity by the white majority signifies a major ideological concession with respect to the long-standing nativist assumptions that dominated early versions of assimilationist ideologies supported by the white majorities of the past (Spencer, 1994). In the diversity dialogue, the impact of this concession can be observed when white respondents discuss diversity and difference. In several instances, white respondents make an effort to over-include social differences when conceptualizing diversity. That is, they over-conform to the moral standards of political correctness in order to signal that, even though they are white, they are not racist. Notable examples of this are cited by B&H: “Lucy” (p. 899), the unnamed “white man” (p. 899), “Dan” (p. 899, p. 902), “Jill” (p. 900, 908), and “Melissa” (p. 900).

Thus, while whites may have a greater say in how racial otherness is culturally defined, there is undeniable evidence contained in the diversity dialogue that the nonwhite cultural center has a greater say in how racial otherness is morally valued and accepted by the white majority. Indeed, one could argue that political correctness is the dominant discourse for moral understandings of diversity in mainstream American society. In short, in contemporary American society nonwhites have cultural power, they have a say in how their otherness is under-
stood, and they can (and do) use the threat of labeling whites as racists to further their own interests (i.e., what has been termed “playing the race card” by whites). In other words, nonwhites engage in the same forms of ingroup favoritism as the white majority via adherence to symbolic systems that favor ingroup. This fact remains hidden to those using the critical race approach because acknowledging these shared tendencies in human social behavior challenges their political narrative.

6. CONCLUSION

Critical understandings of race value activist research and share a progressive political ideology rooted in radical multiculturalism (Bell & Hartmann, 2007). They seek “not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). At the same time, critical race approaches attempt to link racial constructs and identities, social statuses and behaviors, and ideologies to systems of racial inequality. However, as demonstrated in the work of Bell and Hartmann (2007), a consequence of mixing activism with sociological research is that one must settle for incomplete and inconsistent assessments of social constructions of reality in order to maintain political allegiances. Specifically, when interpreting diversity dialogue, Bell and Hartmann’s reliance on the critical race perspective resulted in a failure to recognize that nonwhite minorities generate social constructions of otherness in order to favor self and ingroup. These social constructs provide support for integration ideologies that favor nonwhite minority interests and openly contest the dominant white culture’s social constructions of otherness. In other words, there is no difference in the social behaviors that underlie the motivations of the white majority or nonwhite minorities. Therefore, contrary to the strategy of political engagement endorsed by critical race scholars, what appears to be needed in order to move sociological understandings of race forward is for practitioners to refine their knowledge of the cognitive mechanisms responsible for generating the illusions of “race” while acknowledging the importance of shared social behaviors linked to a common humanity. Adopting this approach is much more likely to produce a deeper understanding of race relations and lead to more effective social policies than is “doubling down” on the very behaviors that are responsible for producing racial intolerance and maintaining systems of racial inequality.

Robert M Anthony
Department of Sociology
The Ohio State University
anthony.74@sociology.osu.edu

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NOTES

1 The term “race-based assessments” is used to denote evaluations of social otherness that are influenced by, and directed at, social constructions of race.

2 As Delgado and Stefancic (2001) note in Chapter 1, Section A: “Unlike some academic disciplines, critical race theory contains an activist dimension. In not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better.”

3 The use of the terms white and nonwhite is adopted for the sake of simplification and because critical understandings of race tend to use this dichotomy as a basis for analyses. That is, whites versus everyone else.

4 Although SIT defines self very similar to Mead, it does have some distinctions (see Hogg and Abrams, 1988, p. 14–26).

5 A subjective frame of reference is defined as: “the set of comparison others that is subjectively available to the individual in making a particular judgment, and it is this that governs the judgment made (Turner, 1985; Turner et al. 1987)” (Hogg & Abrams, 1988, p. 22). Social comparison is the process of actively comparing self and ingroup to others and outgroups using subjectively relevant focal or periphery dimensions.

6 When accentuation occurs, the thing being categorized is termed the focal dimension, while factors relevant to the stimuli being ordered (i.e., categorized) are termed peripheral dimensions.

7 This understanding of how human perception works has gained empirical support in the recent work of Little et al. (2008).

8 For a discussion and empirical support, see Hogg and Abrams (1988, p. 71–73).

9 It should be noted that the tendency toward ingroup favoritism is not universal (see Hinkle and Brown, 1992 for a discussion). Social status can play a role, but other factors can increase or decrease the likelihood that ingroup favoritism will be the strategy used to develop positive evaluations of self via alignment with ingroup.

10 A perfect example is white American cultural definitions of what constituted “negro.”

11 Empirical evidence suggests that social bias is highest among minority groups with low status and low legitimacy, and also among majority groups with high status and low legitimacy (Turner & Brown, 1978).

12 Hogg and Abrams adopt the term social change, which they admit is confusing (1988, p. 56–57). In its place, I use “stability” for the sake of alleviating this confusion. The new label refers to the same concept.

13 Hogg and Abrams use the example of African American adopting the slogan “black is beautiful” to contest white conceptions of female beauty (1988, p. 28).

14 See Hartmann and Gerteis (2005) for a detailed discussion on conceptual distinctions between different ideological programs of multiculturalism: cosmopolitanism, fragmented pluralism, and interactive pluralism.

15 For simplicity, and to keep the language consistent with the research cited later on, when using the term “multiculturalism” I am referring to interactive pluralism.

16 Status-ascension is a term I use to refer to minority groups’ belief that acquiring greater social status is the key to achieving equality. This was conceived of while reading Richeson.
& Nussbaum (2004). Unlike the colorblind ideology used by the white majority, status-ascension is an ideology that posits increases in ingroup distinction necessarily leads to greater power and status, and thus, equality. Therefore, under the “mosaic” analogy the more distinct a group’s “color” becomes from “white,” the more it is recognized and valued for its distinction.

17 Hartmann and Gerteis (2005) discuss assimilationism in terms of a strong or thick version in which majority group dominance remains the referent culture for the assimilation of minority groups into society. However, newer versions of this ideology are not nearly as inflexible. Support for nativist assumptions that are grounded in white identity have becomes more of a social stigma than source of power for whites—at least in the mainstream.

18 This label compliments Hartmann and Gerteis’ (2005) conceptual diagram of integrative ideologies and “bends” it to form a complete circle. Thus, a double arrow would link interactive assimilationism to both interactive pluralism and assimilationism (see Figure 4, p. 234). Hartmann and Gerteis recognize this link but do not expand upon it (see footnote 17 and the third paragraph p. 233).

19 This is similar to if not the same as colorblind ideology discussed in the sociology of race and ethnicity, which critical theorist see as abhorrent (e.g., see Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

20 Both symbiosis and commensalism are terms used in human ecology; see Hawley (1986) for a discussion.

21 What is most striking about Table 1, is that it illustrates how each outgroup’s complementary ideology is the central concern for the ingroup with respect to integration. While the ramifications of this are not directly addressed here, future research should closely consider how this ideological opposition causes tension and conflict between majority and minority groups acting in their ingroup’s interests.

22 “...a multiyear, multimethod study of race, religion, and multiculturalism in contemporary American society” (p. 897). Interviews were acquired in two phases: The first used telephone interviewing to collect “understandings of race, religion, and diversity.” The sample consisted of a nationally representative sample of 130 randomly chosen respondents. The second phases relied on 36 face-to-face, open-ended interviews conducted by graduate students. The sample was non-random.

23 On page 907, B&H (2007) state that “Our research provides empirical evidence that the diversity discourse relies on assimilationist assumptions and employs linguistic tools that privilege white cultural norms....” It is this reference that is being acknowledged.

24 A Rasmussen Poll from November 27, 2007 revealed that 82% of whites and 72% of African Americans supported “English Only” in the work place (Associated Content, 2007).

25 Verkuyten’s (2005) related finding provides convincing evidence that ideological adherence can trump adherence to racial identity.

26 Their discussion of Clarice’s adherence to “neutral American values” (p. 909) provides a notable example.

27 For a discussion on the history of racial minorities’ use of multiculturalism to contest the nativist assumptions of earlier versions of assimilationism in American society, see Spencer (1994).

28 Spencer (1994) traces the emergence of multiculturalism to African American’s efforts to gain an “American” identity.

29 Space does not permit a discussion, but a similar observation applies to nonwhite respondents’ use of assimilationist assumptions. It is more logical to assume that nonwhite adherence to assimilationism is not a sign of blind acceptance of white interests; rather, it is a sign of the need for nonwhites to compromise their value of accentuating their racial identity in an increasingly heterogeneous society. Thus, like assimilationist ideas, multiculturalist ideals do not perfectly match the realities of diversity or how humans understand...
and use difference for their own self-interests. In practice, nonwhite minorities are faced with the limitations of accentuating their difference to acquire a higher status just like the white majority is faced with the limitations of imposing its cultural dominance on others to maintain its status.

Although space prevents me from offering an extensive catalogue of white respondents’ adherence to political correctness, the most prominent is Alice’s anxiety over being part of the white majority, who may inadvertently exclude nonwhite minorities from “the best summer readings for 2004” (2007, p. 903).

REFERENCES


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