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White Noise:
Color-blind Racism and Framing
in U.S. News Media

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Abstract

After the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, there was a strong feeling that through this legislative action, people of color would no longer face barriers to succeeding in life in the United States based on their skin color. The racial problems of the past were deemed to have been overcome. This idea was cemented when Barack Obama was elected president in 2008. The U.S. was believed to now be a post-racial society. This, however, proved an illusion as enormous racial riots sparked in Ferguson, Missouri after the shooting of an unarmed black teenager by a police officer in 2014. Some remain in denial, and staunchly hold on to the idea of a post-racial America and use the language of color-blind racism to justify the current inequality seen among people of color. Particularly in the media, one of the biggest arenas where the race debate is taking place, sees the use of a particular language and framing style that maintains the current racial status quo.

Key words: color-blind racism, rhetoric, language, framing, denial, news media, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, police, inequality, racial profiling, institutional discrimination.

Introduction

Though race related issues continue to occupy a significant portion of our political discussions and thought, there remain many unresolved racial issues in this nation.

We average Americans simply do not talk enough about things racial.

– Attorney General, Eric Holder Jr.

Race is a controversial subject in the United States. At a time where “three out of four young black men [...] can expect to serve time in prison” (Alexander 6-7), the “unemployment rate among blacks is about double that among whites” (DeSilver, par. 1), and blacks are “two-and-a-half times more likely than whites [...] to experience nonfatal force” (United States) by police, many people have sought to address these disparities that run along racial lines. The 21st century has seen a plethora of attempts to initiate a national debate on race in the wake of multiple incidents of lethal police brutality towards unarmed African-Americans. Sparked by the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner among other high-profile instances of police violence, movements like the Black Lives Matter movement are trying to address institutional discrimination against people of color through protests and demonstrations. Their pleas, however, have largely fallen on deaf ears.

Responses to these suggestions of institutional discrimination have often been ones of denial. Member of the House of Representatives Pete King questioned the whole debate stating that, “people say very casually that this was done out of racial motives” (CNN). Political commentator Bernard Goldberg even called black people “socially paranoid,” (The O’Reilly Factor) as they looked to address these issues. Not only media commentators and politicians believe that the problems raised concerning race are not worth addressing. The general public also sees a strong disparity of opinions along racial lines when it comes to this topic. An August 2014 Pew Research Center poll showed that eighty percent of “African-Americans say the shooting in Ferguson raises important issues about race that merit discussion” (Pew Research Center, par. 3), while only thirty-seven percent of white people thought the same. There is a clear difference in narrative and experience between people of color and white people. Where many black people see there is an obvious racial element, white people much less so. Despite many statistics that corroborate that African-Americans still lag behind whites socio-economically and face

more challenges in life because of their racial background, denial has surrounded the proposed racial dialog. This divergence of opinions and discursive gridlock raises important questions about the current state of affairs of the racial debate. Why is there so much denial? How are people talking about race? And the even bigger question, is the United States really a post-racial society?

The earliest concept of the post-racial society was born in the late nineteen sixties. After the accomplishments of the Civil Rights movement and the passing of the Civil Rights Act, it was believed that the United States had entered a post-racial state and was witnessing a “declining significance of race” (Wilson iv) in American society. Now that legislative equality had been achieved, it was thought that the racial problems of the past had ended and people of color no longer faced significant barriers to succeeding in life. As time passed, these ideas gained more traction. In 1997 Stephen and Abigail Thernstrom, in their book *America In Black And White: One Nation Indivisible*, wrote that America had almost completely overcome the issue of race, that “real progress has been made” (17) and that equality between the races had been nearly reached. The concept of a post-racial society became ubiquitous after the 2008 presidential election when Barack Obama, a man of mixed race origins, was elected president. This moment was seen as a watershed in American racial history as the first man of color was elected to the highest public office in the land.

Obama was perceived as evidence that people of color no longer faced any social or economic barriers to achieving success, and as a result solidified the perception that all racial issues had been overcome and the United States had transformed into a post-racial society. Political commentator and television host Chris Matthews said about Obama, “[h]e is post-racial by all appearances. You know, I forgot he was black tonight for an hour” (Real Clear Politics). This post-racial idea is also present in academic spheres. Walter Benn Michaels believes that “race is an obsolete and useless concept, the only function of which is to distract the real and much more important issue of economic class” (Mitchell 21). David Hollinger thinks similarly and is attempting to steer further away from research on the topic of race and looks to focus on other areas. He argues that the sharp black-white color line of the past has become blurred, and that “black skin color itself is not as a big a deal in American politics it once was” (1). This new discourse attempts to no longer see race and racial issues, and believes that they are a thing of the past.

Post-racialism, however, does not account for many disparities that exist along racial lines. As the statistics above showed and others that appear later in the paper will too, people of color, predominantly African-Americans, still suffer from higher unemployment rates, higher incarceration rates, and greater chances of being submitted to state sponsored violence than whites. Professor Imani Perry describes the theory of post-racialism as a type of “willful neglect; I’m going to close my eyes to the reality both of diversity and the reality of inequality and injustice” (*White Like Me*). Academics like Wilson, Michaels and Hollinger see race as an increasingly insignificant factor worth discussing as we have reached a post-racial era. However, these are short-sighted theories that ignore the significance of race in American history and its very real presence in the current human experience. Though Michaels’ and Hollinger’s point on the importance of economic inequality is a legitimate one, as it impacts people’s position in society and should be researched further, the complex history and presence of race, people’s biases based on it and the issues that result cannot be so easily ignored. Race and the issues that spring from it are etched in United States history beginning at its inception with the genocide of Native Americans, the three-fifths compromise, slavery, the invasion of Mexico, abuse of Asians during the building of the transatlantic railroad, Jim Crow, Executive Order 9066, and the civil rights movement. This rhetoric of denial ignores many important histories, current realities of race, and pervades the contemporary racial debate.

According to sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, there is a new form of rhetoric that is used to undermine any claims of institutional discrimination, namely *color-blind racism*. This is a form of language that is based on the myth that “race [has] all but disappeared as a factor shaping the life chances of all Americans” (208), and is used to justify the current racial status quo. It is a dominant rhetorical framework based on a predominantly white experiential narrative that suggests that now all issues of race have been overcome after the success of the civil rights movement, any claims of institutional discrimination are invalid. Using various other frames, colorblind racism justifies the current position of people of color by blaming market dynamics, blacks’ perceived cultural faults, or so-called natural phenomena. Unlike the old overt systems of oppression, “[w]hat has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language we use to justify it” (Alexander 2). It is this language that requires further analysis to understand how it manifests in the current racial debate.

The biggest arenas where the race debate is conducted is in news media. Often the first to report on public incidents and dedicating much time to discussing them on various talk- and panel-shows, the role of the media in this debate is of great importance. How they portray the events that unfold and discuss them afterwards can greatly influence the way people see and discuss the issues, particularly as the white racial frame is “[f]ostered constantly by political and media socialization efforts” (Feagin 91). The question this paper will largely look to answer is: how does color-blind racism manifest itself in news media discussions and story framing in the contemporary discussion after the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner?

This paper will analyze various programs across the big three news channels: Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC. It will look at how people on talk- and panel-shows argue against the idea of systematic discrimination. Then the paper will analyze way in which the discussion is framed by the shows, and analyze the color-blind elements they use to justify their position. The first chapter will paint the backdrop of the current racial climate. It will go into one of the biggest sparks that in part initiated this national discussion, namely the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri and the ensuing unrest, described as “one of the most racially divisive incidents in recent memory” [All In With Chris Hayes]. Chapter one will also further explain the theory of color-blind racism, its frames, and how it is used. Chapter two will be the body of the paper, and contain the analysis of the rhetoric of multiple political commentators and hosts on various panel shows across Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC. The lens of color-blind racism will be applied to their language to see how their justifications are steeped in this idea of denial and color-blindness. Chapter three will look at the basic framing techniques used by some networks to describe the issues of race. Using Shanto Iyengar’s theory of episodic and thematic frames, the third chapter will look to locate elements of color-blind racism in the way news shows frame issues that are brought to light by one of the biggest, most publicized aggregators of social change, the Black Lives Matter movement.

This paper therefore looks to research the current state of the American debate on race by analyzing the rhetoric of those neglecting to address the issues of the ongoing discussion. By looking at how arguments are constructed and what they are based on, a clearer insight can be gained into how people discuss race and whether or not the United States really is a post-racial society. It is important to study this rhetoric because it “ultimately strengthens the social order” (Doane 22). Particularly its analysis in the media

surrounding the current debate is important due to its immense reach and possible impact on how people understand and discuss race.

Chapter One – The Spark and Color-blind Racism

A riot is the language of the unheard.

– Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Spark

Tensions were running high in the United States in late November 2014. Moments before the grand jury was to decide whether or not to indict a police officer after the shooting of unarmed black teenager Michael Brown, ABC News reported that police were bracing themselves for protests “from Los Angeles to Boston in over 61 cities” (Dunbar par. 2). The case had been very controversial with much conflicting witness testimony, and would now be brought to its emotionally charged conclusion.

On August 9th 2014, hundreds of people gathered around a crime scene in Ferguson, Missouri. Eighteen-year-old African-American man Michael Brown, had been shot to death by Caucasian police officer Darren Wilson. It was uncertain what exactly had happened, but rumors quickly spread around the city from people claiming to be eye-witnesses about what transpired. One of the most ubiquitously told stories was that Michael Brown, before he was shot, had his hands up and shouted “don’t shoot!” What made the story worse was that Brown had reportedly been shot “more than just a couple of times” (Vinograd par. 4). The story quickly circulated and sparked incredible outrage in the largely African-American community of Ferguson.

The day after Brown’s death on August 10th, a peaceful memorial vigil that was held turned violent. Riots broke out “after a few thousand people paid respects at the memorial” (Wax-Thibodeaux par. 8). Some protestors were seen and caught on video destroying property and looting local stores resulting in thirty-two arrests. The volatility and sudden occurrence of the riots made national and global news, as what unfolded was covered by media stations across the world, as Governor of Missouri Jay Nixon would later say, “[t]he eyes of the world are watching” (“Police State USA”).

The media coverage continued for many days in tandem with the protests. The majority of the protests were peaceful, but some transformed into riots again during a second day as people protested and “gather[ed] outside around the Ferguson Police Department” (Kim par. 6) which lead to several arrests and the use of teargas to disperse crowds by tactical police officers in militarized uniform. Demonstrations continued for

multiple days as people held up signs that said “stop killing us,” and chanted “Don’t shoot, my hands are up” in reference to Michael Brown’s alleged final moments, but again many protests turned violent as police deployed teargas. Barack Obama addressed these issues in a statement he gave on August 14th where he looked to insert calm and reason into the situation, but also announced the commission of investigations by the FBI and the Department of Justice into the death of Michael Brown.

The protests, however, did not subside. Security of the city was handed over to the Missouri Highway Patrol with African-American Commander Ron Johnson in charge who attempted to show goodwill by marching with protestors. This was to no avail. On the morning of August 15th, the Ferguson Police Department released the name of the officer who shot Michael Brown, namely police officer Darren Wilson. This information was initially withheld to protect the officer and his identity in the midst of the civil unrest. When his identity was revealed, the police department also released a video of a convenience store robbery with Michael Brown the supposed perpetrator. This action sparked more anger within the African-American community, particularly Brown’s family as they saw this as an attempt to “assassinate the character of their son” (Kim, par. 16). The Department of Justice would later call this video release “an inappropriate effort to influence public opinion about this case” (Pearce par. 22). What made the timing and the publishing of the video more dubious was the fact that the police also confirmed that when the APB was released about the convenience store robbery, officer Wilson was not aware of it, raising questions as to why the officer stopped and shot Brown if not for seeing him as a suspect in the robbery.

More riots ensued after the police announcement resulting in a state of emergency being implemented and the institution of a curfew by Governor Nixon. The National Guard was called into action to assist in the maintenance of peace in Ferguson. At this time, the Department of Justice continued its investigation into the incident and conducted its own autopsy of Brown’s body. A grand jury also began proceedings to decide whether or not officer Wilson should be criminally charged or not. Only on August 21st did order slowly resume as the National Guard withdrew from Ferguson and areas of the city were reopened.

During this brief moment of peace in the streets, the Department of Justice continued its investigation into the Michael Brown case, but also initiated an investigation into the practices of the Ferguson police force. The longevity and emotional charge of the

demonstrations caused some journalists and political commentators to assess the relationship between law enforcement and African-American communities. At the emotional funeral of Michael Brown, guest speaker Reverend Al Sharpton looked to address this bigger picture that surrounded the incident:

“Michael Brown does not want to be remembered for a riot. He wants to be remembered as the one that made America deal with how we are going to police in the United States. This is about justice. This is about fairness. [...] We are not anti-police. We respect police. But those police that are wrong need to be dealt with just like those that are wrong in our community need to be dealt with.” (“Reverend Al Sharpton Speaks At Michael Brown’s Funeral”)

Among the African-American community is a strong narrative that they are more aggressively policed than others, and that when an incident like that of Michael Brown occurs, there is little faith in whether justice will be dealt. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center asked people about the response of the police to the Ferguson unrest. It showed that “two-thirds of blacks – 65 percent – [...] said police went too far in their response to Ferguson” (“Deep National Mistrust of Police by Minorities Exposed in Ferguson, Missouri”), whereas only one-third of whites agreed with the same statement. This poll showed a strong difference in perception, narrative, and experience that exists between black and white people.

As the decision of the grand jury neared, tension grew in the streets of Ferguson once more. Late September saw the beginning of new, but more sporadic peaceful protests in the area that called for justice in the Michael Brown case. In preparation of the final decision to be made in November and the potentially ensuing protests, another state of emergency was implemented. On November 24th 2014, the grand jury announced that Ferguson police officer would not be indicted on any accounts. Brown’s family released a statement:

We are profoundly disappointed that the killer of our child will not face the consequence of his actions. While we understand that many others share our pain, we ask that you channel your frustration in ways that will make a positive change.

We need to work together to fix the system that allowed this to happen. (Davey and Bosman par. 12)

Despite the Brown family pleas to remain calm and work constructively, the grand jury announcement set off new and long-lasting violent demonstrations in Ferguson. A wave of demonstrations gripped the city with the National Guard once more called in for assistance. The protests, however, were not limited to Ferguson. As NBC News reported “[t]housands of people took to the streets from New York to Los Angeles and Chicago to Seattle, with some demonstrations sparking violent clashes between protestors and police” (Leitsinger par. 2). In Ferguson, the protests continued for another day until they slowly died down on November 26th due to heavy snow fall in the area.

What happened in Ferguson would only prove to be the beginning of demonstrations in the United States surrounding the relationship between black people and law enforcement. Just a week after the grand jury in Ferguson decided not to indict officer Darren Wilson, a grand jury in New York decided not to indict another police officer in the Eric Garner chokehold case. Occurring in July of that year, Eric Garner, an African-American man, was suspected of illegally selling loose cigarettes on the streets of New York. He was approached by multiple police officers who attempted to arrest him. Garner initially resisted, but was overpowered by five police officers, one of which placed him in a chokehold that forced him to the ground. While on the ground, Garner uttered the phrase that would become the words of future demonstrations: “I can’t breathe.” He lost consciousness and when he arrived at the hospital, he was pronounced dead. The incident was caught on video and went viral. It sparked largely peaceful protests in New York where “people chanted, ‘I can’t breathe,’” (Goodman and Baker, par. 6). These demonstrations also got much media coverage particularly after both the Ferguson and New York grand juries decided not to indict the police officers in question, the decisions separated by only a week.

The scope of the demonstrations made many people and elected officials call for Justice Department intervention. On March 4th 2015, Attorney General Eric Holder and the Department of Justice announced its findings after its investigation into the practices of the Ferguson Police Department. The published document stated that the FPD “engaged in a pattern or practice of conduct that violates the First, Fourth, and 14th Amendments of the Constitution” (United States). It went on describe that people were stopped without

reasonable suspicion, arrests were made without probable cause, there was frequent use of unreasonable force, and it all “violates people’s rights, and is racially discriminatory” (Pérez-Peña, par.2). There was deep mistrust in a city where two-thirds of the population was African-American, but over ninety percent of traffic stops targeted black people. There was clear unfair treatment along racial lines. The report, however, did not support any civil rights actions against officer Darren Wilson.

Despite the controversy that surrounded the Michael Brown shooting, what it did was spark a national conversation about the relationship between American law enforcement and African-American communities. Where in cities like Ferguson, the black population is targeted by a predominantly white police force, the discussion could now be had within the larger racial frame, one of institutional discrimination. Journalists and politicians began to review more cases of unarmed black people being killed by police, like the shooting of Tamir Rice among many others within the frame of a systemic issue of racialized police brutality. There was also a counter-narrative, however, by many media pundits that disagreed with the premise and aimed to prevent this discussion and used color-blind rhetoric to do so.

Color-blind Racism

Issues of race are predominantly “a problem of power” (Bonilla-Silva 54). The dominant group seeks to maintain its position of power and hold onto its collective interests. To remain in power, an ideology develops, a way of speaking that reinforces the privilege of the dominant group. Bonilla-Silva calls the contemporary racial ideology *color-blind racism*. It is a form of rhetoric that maintains an ideal of non-racism after the perceived success of the Civil Rights movement in the sixties, and “explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics” (2). The status of people of color is no longer blamed on discrimination in institutional systems, but on market dynamics, so-called natural phenomena, or blacks’ own cultural faults. Colorblindness, “the claim that race no longer “matter[s]” in American society – serves as the dominant framework for making claims about the role of race in the United States” (Doane 15). Any discussion of institutionalized racism is thus avoided as the root of all argumentation is based on this frame of denial, and the position of the dominant group does not come into question and is even reinforced.

Sociologist Joe R. Feagin, on the theory of dominant racial rhetoric, believes that the language of color-blind rhetoric is not just based on the denial of racism, but that it is still greatly based on racial stereotypes. He states that “the white racial frame includes a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, interlinked interpretations and narratives, and visual images” (xi). Some of these are stereotypes of African-Americans being violent, lazy, and sexually aggressive beings, and he believes that the use of these racial tropes continues to this day. Within the language of the dominant group is the inclination to deny the existence of racism, but still discriminate against people of color using old racial stereotypes, and thus reinforce the position of the hegemonic social group through this inherent contradiction.

Color-blind racism contains a few common elements: “common frames, style, and racial stories” (Bonilla-Silva 10). Color-blind rhetoric knows four main frames: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. *Abstract liberalism* uses the main ideals of liberalism (individualism and equal opportunity) to justify racism by stating that no race should receive preferential treatment e.g. in the form of affirmative action. Any racial history of disenfranchisement and the continued results thereof and impact of such history are ignored. Any form of de facto racial inequality is denied as is the notion of any necessity of addressing it. *Naturalization* explains away racially based phenomena by claiming that they are natural occurrences. These can be matters of housing segregation or people’s tastes in friends claimed to be “the way things are” (Bonilla-Silva 28). There is no critical assessment of the status quo, and any racially based issues are deemed a normal occurrence. *Cultural racism* uses generalized and often stereotypical cultural differences between races as a frame of argumentation. These are suggestions that social problems that exist among people of color like a high crime rate, high unemployment, and high number of single-parent households are faults in their culture. They are thus responsible for fixing their own problems and must aspire to the ‘better’ white culture. This form of argumentation fails to critically look at socio-economic issues that might impact the situations of people of color. It assumes that the problems that lie within the community are their own. It blames the victims of a particular situation by drawing on old stereotypes of black people being violent, lazy, and oversexed. *Minimization of racism* is a frame that proclaims that discrimination is not an issue that affects people’s life chances anymore. These are arguments that suggest that things are better now than they were before and thus deny any real racial inequality. This frame

assumes that minimal progress is a sign of de facto equality and explains away any critical discussions by stating that “things are not as bad as they were” so contemporary racial issues do not deserve any further analysis. The minority experience, the black narrative, is de-centralized and set aside and ignored to make way for that of the majority.

These elements create the framework of color-blind rhetoric and are based on the experiences, narratives, and interests of the hegemonic group and neglect those of minority groups. They are created and used by actors to justify and maintain the racial status quo. Though these four frames are not the only frames used, they form the foundation of color-blind rhetoric. Nor are they rigid constructions. In fact, they are very flexible in nature and can be adapted to many situations. Ashley Doane believes that “the role of colorblindness is to manage the contradictions between realities of race and the ideal of a post-racial society” (25) and thus needs to be very loose to cater to these needs. Color-blind racism rearticulates itself according to changing social situations and the needs of the actor even if they are contradictory. The rhetoric therefore, has to be very closely and carefully analyzed as it can change subtly in ways that are sometimes hard to see.

Often the first bringers of news and information to the general public, analyzing news media is very important. As news media has a daily reach of millions of Americans and the ability to impact how people understand domestic issues, scrutiny of their practices and language becomes vital. The way in which media reports or discusses such big occurrences in their shows can shape how many people understand what has happened. The next chapter will analyze the language used by political commentators on talk- and panel-shows aired by CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News (the big three), and how they discuss the Michael Brown case, the Ferguson unrest, and Eric Garner’s death. Using the frame of colorblindness will give an understanding as to how the racial debate is conducted on some television programs.

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Chapter Two – Racial Arguments

To be blind to color is to be blind to the consequences of color.

– Tim Wise

Minimization of Racism

The civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri was highly publicized. Longstanding tensions between black people and law enforcement were laid bare, as well as active police actions that profiled the black community. This sparked a nationwide debate about race. People had strong and polarized opinions concerning what transpired in Ferguson and other cities and what it meant concerning the topic of race. Liberal news aggregator, The Huffington Post, believed that these protests not only began a discussion on police brutality but “stress[ed] ongoing issues of economic inequality, housing discrimination and unequal access to adequate education” (Goyette et al) along racial lines. Many saw this as the opportunity to discuss multiple areas of inequality that faced people of color. However, there was also a strong counter narrative that used color-blind racism to justify its arguments.

One of the frames of color-blind racism is that of minimization of racism, a frame that sees discrimination as something of the past. On November 18th 2014 on an episode of *Varney & Co.*, Stuart Varney hosts special guest and radio show host, Lou Dobbs. They discuss Ferguson a few days before the announcement of the grand jury on the possible indictment of officer Wilson. Dobbs tries to create a perspective on the situation:

We are, I think as a nation, facing so many opportunities that we have never seen before. We at the same time are also facing more adversity. When you look at the unemployment rates, when you look at what is happening to minorities in this country, it is greater unemployment, but we are facing the same thing across our society, and the reality is we share the challenges. We share the adversity.

At first glance, this may seem as a supportive gesture towards minorities and the situations they deal with when it comes to unemployment, however, this response contains the color-blind frame of abstract liberalism and minimization of racism. First, Dobbs

contends that, indeed, there are problems of unemployment in the United States. What he does not acknowledge is that African-Americans have twice the unemployment rate of whites. The position of blacks is further undermined, and the barriers they face minimized when he says that they face these issues across the entire nation. Indeed, there is unemployment in other communities, but that of blacks “is consistently twice that of whites” (DeSilver par. 1). This minimizes the problem of racism by blaming it on market dynamics that affect everyone, while it has disproportionately affected the black community. The issue of this disproportionate impact on African-Americans and that this has been the case for decades needs to be discussed, because that is one of the indicators of possible institutional racism.

Another person who proposed this counter narrative with the use of minimization of racism was Bernard Goldberg, a journalist, political pundit, and Fox News contributor. On an episode of The O’Reilly Factor on October 23th 2014 he gave his two cents on the demonstrations in Ferguson.

I think, and I want to say this with sadness and not an ounce of malice, I think, that slavery, segregation, and the humiliation that blacks suffered under Jim Crow has turned some people socially paranoid. They see things that others don’t see. [The O’Reilly Factor, 23 October 2014]

The way in which Goldberg argues that the theme is not worth discussing by using minimization of racism. Here he removes himself and the role of white people from any role in a most recent history of overt, state-sanctioned black oppression that only happened fifty to sixty years earlier. The white presence and role in the systematic oppression is completely absent in his response, leaving the African-American narrative all on its own. Without an oppressor which historically was the Caucasian system of segregation, there is only the black experience, and without an aggressor, they are perceived as a paranoid community and their complaints made up. He believes that African-Americans are paranoid and are turning this into a racial issue when it is not. Stating that people of color see things others do not, does not necessarily suggest their paranoia, but that there are two different experiential narratives at work: a white experience and a black experience.

A future response of his on the same show in November gives a deeper insight into his thinking.

More than a few journalists, especially on television, are trying to turn this into a civil rights story, but you know what, Ferguson Missouri is not Selma Alabama, 2014 is not 1965, and Michael Brown is not Emmet Till or Medgar Evers or any other black person who was shot by a white bigot. [...] Michael Brown was the bad guy in this case. And please, America, let's not turn this kid into some kind of Civil rights martyr because that he is not. Ferguson, Missouri is not Selma, Alabama [...] I still have sympathy for the tragedy involved, but the bad person in this case was Michael Brown, and that's something you will not hear from most reporters because it's politically not correct, and they never feel comfortable. They always say they want an honest discussion about race; they don't. They want a politically correct discussion about race. [The O'Reilly Factor, 25 November 2014]

In this response, the frame of minimization of racism comes much more to the fore. He gives a clear comparison between the contemporary story and compares it to the height of racial violence in the United States. As things are not as bad as then, things are not bad now. This, however, is not an argument, as "minimization of racism seems to be part of a broader white framing of the issues that excuse racism" (Moore 13). The experiential narrative of people of color is set aside and ignored, and the less controversial white narrative of an America that has progressed greatly on the issue of race, is centralized.

Defining Racism

At the same time Goldberg uses a narrow definition of the concept of racism. He sees racism as an obviously overt expression by a racial bigot who murders an African-American on racial grounds. Author Michael K. Brown explains that his way of thinking "is a particular understanding of racism as a 'motivated, crude, explicitly supremacist, and typically expressed as individual bias'" (37). Goldberg's definition ignores the possible changes in the character and expression of racism. As the Civil Rights Act outlawed segregation, there is the belief that all racism is gone and that any future form of discrimination cannot be institutional, but must be individual. This, however, does not take into account the possibility of a much more covert form of racism, and its lingering effects. There is no analysis of a possible institutional form of racism that may have profiled the

victim and caused the situation. There also is no discussion of the socio-economic circumstances that may have caused the unrest in Ferguson.

Here we see a profound discrepancy in the definition of what racism is. There is the colorblind belief that racism no longer exists as it is not often expressed in an overt form, and disregards the possible changes it can undergo and the ways it can be shown. Due to this limited definition, Goldberg does not see the racial elements involved and ignores the African-American experience and centralizes the dominant white narrative. What this does is that he instead of addressing the issues at hand; he blames the victims, the African-American communities by labeling them as paranoid. The narrative that black people attempt to address is set aside for the larger, white narrative which embodies an ideal of non-racism.

A limited definition of the concept of racism can also be found in the discussion of the Eric Garner case. Republican member of the House of Representatives, Peter King, disagreed with the idea that his death was a racial matter. On CNN News on December 3rd 2014 he said that:

If he [Eric Garner] had not had asthma and a heart condition, or was so obese, most definitely he would not have died from this. The police had no reason to know he was in this condition. [...] People say very casually that this was done out of racial motives, a violation of civil rights. There is not a hint there that anyone used any racial epithet. [CNN]

Here too, we see that there is a very narrow definition of the term of racism. According to King, there is no element of racism unless there is an overt expression of it, for example with the use of racial epithets. There thus cannot be any argument that suggests discrimination in the mind of King. Joe R. Feagin pays special attention to the perception of a collapse of institutional racism and the introduction of individual racism. He observes that mainstream analysts “accent the *institutional* and *systemic* racism that undergirds individual acts of discrimination” (144). Since there no longer is any institutional racism due to the success of the civil rights movement, the only form of racism that remains is individual. This undercuts any claims about the persistence of institutional discrimination, and the possible collective biases of the police may have lead to this moment.

Cultural Racism

One of the most frequently used arguments to deny the discussion is that of cultural racism. Cultural racism “encompasses an ideology that blames blacks themselves for their poorer relative economic standing, seeing it as the function of perceived cultural inferiority” (Bonilla-Silva 7). The way in which these suggestions are made can be overt or covert depending on the actor. An individual who regularly uses overt cultural racism is Fox News television personality Bill O’Reilly. On August 25th 2014 on episode of his show, *The O’Reilly Factor*, O’Reilly discusses the Ferguson case with Megyn Kelly. O’Reilly asks Kelly if she believes in the idea of white privilege when it comes to the case of Ferguson. Kelly rebuts and gives a long list of Bureau of Justice statistics that back her claim. She states that African-Americans in Ferguson have an unemployment rate that is three times higher than whites; that an African-American child is four times more likely to live in a poor neighborhood; fifty-two percent of black children come from single parent homes compared to whites’ twenty percent; the incarceration rate of blacks is six times higher than that of whites; the presence of segregated housing, underperforming schools, and the fact that blacks are three times more likely to be threatened by police all feature in her statistics. Kelly believes that all these numbers suggest a great racial problem in Ferguson and gives the African-American community little reason to trust that there would be a positive outcome in the Michael Brown case. O’Reilly, however, looks to challenge her statistics and ideas.

Let me challenge the stats here. Number one, you have a black attorney General who is basically running the investigation, so I don’t know why African-Americans would not have confidence in that. [...] Number two, the Asian-American community is not a troubled situation. As everybody knows, their academics are better than whites. They have language to overcome while black Americans don’t. It all comes down to families, culture, personal responsibility, all of these things which we don’t hear anything or much about, and this is what drives the poverty. [...] Nothing will get better in this country until the culture changes, and the culture is ‘you can do it.’ [The O’Reilly Factor]

In this response, O'Reilly does not go into any of the statistics mentioned. There is no direct engagement in the premise that he initially presented with his question to Kelly. To distract from the fact that he does not address the points that were made, he draws on multiple cultural biases. He begins by generalizing the various ethnic communities that exist in the United States starting with Attorney General Eric Holder and the African-American community. O'Reilly believes that because a black man is heading a satellite investigation into the case that he will be biased towards other people of his own race. Though this may be possible, this is an assumption of tribalism that he makes without proof. Then O'Reilly makes the comparison between the African-American community and the Asian-American community. Here too he makes generalizations of the two communities and holds the latter as a beacon to aspire to for black people, suggesting that they too had challenges to overcome, but still thrived in the United States. In this instance there is no discussion of any historical context. Asian-Americans did endure challenges, especially during the building of the transatlantic railroad where Asians were brutally exploited. The Asian-American community, however, has a different history of exploitation in the U.S. compared to African-Americans. The black community has a history of hundreds of years of slavery, Jim Crow, and where segregation and institutional discrimination was only abolished in the nineteen sixties. There is a differing historical context that has different results and varying impacts on the people that were targeted. Finally, he draws on the idea of culture. The bottom line he draws is that all the statistics Kelly listed are due to African-American failing families, poor culture, and a lack of personal responsibility. Here, O'Reilly uses "explanations for persistent joblessness among African Americans now invoke nonracial notions like "economic dislocation," "moral character," "victim focused identity," or "impersonal economic shifts." In each instance, race need not be explicitly mentioned to communicate a message with racial overtones" (Wellman 62). Using coded language, the conclusion he draws is that the responsibility lies with black people and their poor cultural practices and their natural inability to maintain a stable family without mentioning any explicit racial stereotypes. Any historical impact is ignored and the implication is that the African-American community is naturally lazy as they do not have the drive or are willing to get themselves out of their predicament, and are too sexually driven to maintain a "better" family construct.

Another commentator who uses cultural racism to discredit the discussion of racism is Geraldo Rivera. After the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown, multiple sporting

celebrities donned t-shirts with “I can’t breathe”, “Hands up don’t shoot,” or “No Justice, No Peace.” They were meant to show their sympathy for the families of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, create awareness for what happened in Ferguson and New York, and call for justice to be done. An area where this happened a lot was the National Basketball Association (NBA). Basketball player LeBron James and many other basketball players wore such t-shirts, receiving much criticism from political commentators. On an episode of Fox News show *Hannity* on December 10th 2014, Geraldo Rivera discusses this.

I wonder to myself, what if LeBron James instead had a shirt, “be a better father to your son” raise your children. Those difficult issues are not being dealt with by the black community. [Hannity]

Cultural racism creates generalized notions about society and the people in it. In this instance, people of color and their practices are presumed to be fixed and applicable to all African-Americans. Rivera’s language is used to “assail them [black people] for their presumed lack of hygiene, family disorganization, and lack of morality [...] The essence of the American version of this frame is “blaming the victim,” arguing that minorities’ standing is a product of their lack of effort, loose family organization, and inappropriate values” (Bonilla-Silva 40). By using stereotypes of poor family organization of African-Americans, Rivera attempts to turn away from the discussion that is being brought up by athletes and instead blames the individuals themselves for their situation. There is no attempt to look at historical or structural impacts that could affect people’s chances, but everything is individually driven.

An individual who sometimes uses less overt cultural racism is former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani. A frequent political commentator, Giuliani, has appeared on multiple networks speaking on many shows and his point of view has been exposed to millions of people. When discussing the issue of police violence against black people, many pundits who disagree with the premise quote an FBI statistic about black on black violence. In a discussion on NBC’s *Meet the Press*, host Chuck Todd discusses American cities with a police force that is ethnically very different from the communities they serve. They are seen as potential hotbeds for future disruption like in Ferguson. When Giuliani is asked about this, he responds:

The fact is I find it very disappointing that you are not discussing the fact that 93% of blacks in America are killed by other blacks. We are talking about the exception here. [...] I would like to see the attention paid to that, that you are paying to this, and the solutions to that. [Meet the Press]

The statistic that Giuliani gives is referred to many times when discussing the issues of institutional racism in the United States. On an episode of *Fox & Friends* on December 4th 2014, Giuliani is invited to discuss a speech given by New York mayor Bill De Blasio. Earlier that day De Blasio had given a speech to give his personal reaction to the Eric Garner case and the grand jury's decision not to indict the police officers who killed him. In his speech he also gives some historical context and says, "[w]e are not just dealing with a problem in 2014, we are not dealing with years of racism leading up to it, or decades of racism, we are dealing with centuries of racism that have brought us to this day, that is how profound the crisis is" (Good par. 5). Giuliani responds to the speech:

There are a handful of police shootings of blacks. A handful. I don't know the exact percentage, different cities; one percent, two percent, three percent. 96 percent of the time it's a black child being killed by a black. [...] If he wants to train young black men in how to avoid being killed in the city, you can talk about the police. [...] But you should spend 90 percent of your time talking about the way are actually probably going to get killed which is by another black. [Fox & Friends]

The statistic used varies according to who says it, but is always in the ninety percent region. The actual number that Giuliani is referring to is from a quote in an FBI report with numbers most recent into 2008 that stated that "93% of black victims were killed by blacks" (Cooper and Smith 13). This statistic is used to minimize the idea of racism in the police by showing that more black people die at the hands of other black people than by the police. African-Americans are murdering themselves more than they are killed by the police; therefore there cannot be institutional racism in law enforcement as black people commit more homicide.

This, however, is a false argument. Giving statistics about black on black violence can serve the purpose of detracting from the main issue as it is a statistic that does not deal with the main issue. What commentators often neglect to mention is that directly

underneath that FBI statistic, there is another one that states that “84% of white victims were killed by whites” (Cooper and Smith 13), also a very high percentage. Despite this fact there is no mention of this high number and what it could mean to the white community. What the statistic actually shows is an argument of proximity. Black people live close to each other and are thus more likely to commit homicide towards other black people, similar for white people. The argument that is made by commentators is thus irrelevant. What this statistic actually shows is that American neighborhoods are largely segregated. Black people live with black people, and white people with white people. It is an irrelevant statistic and may in fact even prove that there *is* racial discrimination when it comes to people’s choices of neighborhoods.

The purpose of mentioning this statistic is to attempt to call on the stereotypical idea of black people being inherently violent and using it to blame them for their situation. The implication is that black people are violent by nature, more than white people. The minority is reduced to a violent beast that does not deserve to be listened to, and can be blamed for its own natural faults. There is no further assessment of socio-economic issues that may be present in black communities that could cause such numbers.

Contradictions

The use of statistics by commentators who do not want to engage in the debate can sometimes be contradictory. Ashley Doane believes that these contradictions are inherent in color-blind racism. As stated earlier, she believes the rhetoric is meant to “manage the contradictions between realities of race and the ideal of a post-racial society” (25). When discussing institutional racism in the police force, this type of contradiction occurs frequently. On an episode of *Outfront With Erin Burnett*, anchor Burnett had Rudy Giuliani as a guest. While discussing the idea of institutional racism, Burnett cites Federal statistics that “found a 21 times more likely chance that a young black would be killed by a police officer than a young white man. That’s a pretty stunning statistic” [Outfront]. Giuliani, however is not convinced by these figures.

Statistics don’t tell you anything. We’d have to know what those twenty-one people were doing. By what percentage do black young men commit violent crime compared to white. Isn’t it like, five, six, seven to one. [...] Well, five, six, seven to

one means there can be an awful lot of concentration and a lot more interactions between the police and the black community than between the police and the white community. You can't just look at a statistic like that. In the case of NYC for example, 70 to 75 percent of the murders are committed by blacks. That's a statistic, that's not racism, that's a fact. [Outfront]

Here we see a contradictory use of statistics. At the beginning of his response to Burnett's point he initially deems her statistics irrelevant and too complex to be taken into consideration for the discussion. More research needs to be done into the statistics to find out causes and possible outcomes as a result. Later in his response he gives his own statistics on black crime rates and decides that they *are* relevant. Giuliani asserts that Burnett's statistics are irrelevant to the discussion, but later uses his own. This is a selective use of figures, as he uses only the ones that support his narrative. The predominantly white police should receive the benefit of the doubt, their claims must be researched before they are judged; black people on the other hand must be immediately written off as criminals, and no further research must be done into the reasons for these high numbers.

Contradictions are also present in the discussions of the Eric Garner case. The medical examination of his body proved that Garner "died from compression of the neck" (Paddock et al, par. 2) and his death was labeled a homicide. Despite this fact, commentators looked to defend the system and found multiple even contradictory reasons for Garner's death as long as they did not blame the officer.

When first discussing the arrest, Eric Garner is described as a very large man and that when he resisted arrest it was necessary for five police officers to coerce him. As former NYPD police officer Harry Houck said on *Outfront with Erin Burnett*: "what a lot of people don't understand is, that man was a big man. [...] When you want to take a guy like that down, the only way you can take him down is by the neck" [Outfront With Erin Burnett]. Here he is painted to be a strong man that required necessary force to apprehend him. This point of view was supported by former NYPD commissioner who pointed out that "Garner outweighed the officer by probably 150 pounds" [Your World With Neil Cavuto]. However, this depiction of him changes later on in the discussion. When the pundits look to assign blame, Eric Garner is later described to be a very fragile individual, who, if he had not been so fragile, would not have died. As Republican Peter King says: "if

he had not had asthma and a heart condition and was so obese, most definitely he would not have died from this” [CNN]. There is a distinct opposition in the two different descriptions as the colorblind rhetoric looks to deal with this contradiction dependent on the goal of the language. When describing Garner as a large, and dangerous man, they look to absolve the police of wrongdoing or assign blame to the victim by posing the actions of the police as using necessary force that was needed due to Garner’s gait. However, when attempting to achieve the same goal of police absolution and assigning blame, the rhetoric changes to describe him as weak and fragile stating that his death was unavoidable due to his weakness. No matter what the situation is, the blame does not lie with the officer that placed him under a chokehold that killed him, but with the individual who died.

White Victims

Another rhetorical device used in color-blind racism is one of perceived white victimization. It is a way of distracting from the issues that affect people of color. When actors use this tactic, it distracts from the issues being discussed by claiming that white people are being threatened by minorities. As sociologist Rodney Coates states, “[t]his results in not only a rejection of the continued significance of racism, but also claims victim status by those whites in majority positions (reverse discrimination), and devalues and delegitimizes racial remedies” (325). The claim of victimization can be done in multiple ways. Claims can be made that institutions created by whites are in danger, that white society is being oppressed through reverse-racism, or even calling black people racist.

On an August 3rd 2015 episode of *The O’Reilly Factor* with Andrea Tantaros and Jehmu Greene, Bill O’Reilly discusses the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. BLM is a movement that was born after the George Zimmerman case and the shooting of unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin. The movement organizes many demonstrations that protest institutional discrimination against black people, most recently police brutality after the Michael Brown and Eric Garner cases. O’Reilly contends that BLM is a group of controversial activists who are hypocritical as they do protest against police violence, but not against high crime rates among blacks in Chicago.

You don't see the Black Lives crew on the South side of Chicago, but the death rate among young black males in Chicago is through the roof. [...] If they want more action then they should join with me and demand that the mayor and police chief of Chicago police the south side in an effective way, which means flooding the zone with officers and stopping the madness. Yet those people will not do that because they are only interested in condemning white society, that's all. [The O'Reilly Factor]

O'Reilly believes that the movement has an agenda that targets white people. The Fox show host sees white society as the victims of a targeted movement that looks to discredit and condemn them based on their race. He does not say that the movement is racist outright, but by explicitly mentioning the white race, the implication is made clear. This conclusion is drawn because race-related issues are being regarded as nonracial and based on other things. Therefore, due to this inability to speak about race, when it is mentioned, "whites deem almost all proposals to remedy racial inequality necessarily as illogical, undemocratic, and 'racist'" (Bonilla-Silva 209).

After the officer who choked Eric Garner was not indicted, there were many protests and calls for justice from political pundits. On *Fox & Friends*, frequent guest Rudy Giuliani was asked to give his thoughts on all the comments.

All these attacks on them [grand jury] I find really horrible. One of the things the mayor, and Sharpton and the others are doing is they are tearing down respect for a criminal justice system that goes back to England in the eleventh century. [Fox & Friends]

Giuliani paints the grand jury and the criminal justice system as victims. He sees the calls for justice by the protestors as "attacks" on the system and by association also the white society. There is no assessment whether or not the system is just. It is assumed to be a just system because it has a long history, ignoring that systems change and are improved. In this instance, the justice system that has its root in old Anglo-Saxon ways is part of white dominant narrative. It is seen as "common sense" that supports the interests of the dominant race, and these demonstrations are "oppositional ideologies [that] attempt to challenge that common sense by providing alternative frames, ideas, and stories based on

the experiences of subordinated races (Bonilla-Silva 10). There is an avid defense of the racial hierarchy, and no attempt to see the other side of the story. Once more, the minority narrative is set aside to make way for the dominant white narrative.

On that same episode, Giuliani continues with his argument as to why this discussion is irrelevant by once more mentioning statistics that look to discredit the debate:

[Y]ou should spend 90 percent of your time talking about the way they [black people] are actually probably going to get killed which is by another black. To ignore that fact, I think is racist.” [Fox & Friends]

At the end of his comment, Giuliani explicitly mentions that the perceived ignorance of certain facts makes critics of the justice system racist. He looks to make white people the victims of a situation that is supposedly being placed on them due to their race. Giuliani looks to portray the police, and by association the entire white community as innocents in this discussion. As Joe R. Feagin notes that, “this perception lets these whites draw on an old essential element of that frame and ‘assert themselves, individually and collectively, as racial innocents and ‘good’ people” (18). What this does is hide much of brutal white racist history by portraying themselves in an inferior position, while throughout history having enjoyed the spoils of racial exploitation. There is no critical analysis of past discrimination and exploitation and its possible effects on the present.

Another but much more subtle example of white victimhood and ignorance of history is present in an episode of the Fox program, *Varney & Co.* Host Stuart Varney discusses Ferguson just before the grand jury announcement with radio show host Lou Dobbs. Varney and Dobbs discuss the coming grand jury decision on whether or not Darren Wilson will be indicted. Governor Nixon has called in the National Guard once more to prepare for unrest no matter what the outcome, and the show host and guest see this as orchestrated civil unrest caused by Obama and activists. When asked if there is a greater racial divide in the United States, Dobbs answers:

There is a greater antipathy of certain elites – we, in this case, are talking about the attorney general, the president and some of the activists – there is a greater antipathy and animosity toward both our system of government and our society

than there has been in the roughly fifty years in which I have been witnessing what is happening in this country.

This is an example of the use of coded language that uses elements of cultural racism, and white victims. Dobbs creates the idea of a threat in the form of Eric Holder, Barack Obama, and in the instance of Ferguson, activists, who incidentally are all people of color. He generalizes the black community as being a threat in the impending unrest, and then generalizes white society and sees black actions as attacking “our society,” meaning the police system and by extension white society. He portrays African-Americans as a violent threat that is going to attack the innocent white community.

Furthermore, Dobbs goes into the fact that he has not seen such great antipathy and violence in fifty years which ignores much history of unrest due to police brutality in that time. In the fifty years he describes where in his mind there was almost no animosity, he ignores multiple cases of unrest like the Los Angeles riots after the acquittal of police officers that beat up Rodney King in 1992, or the Miami riots in 1980 after death of Arthur McDuffie by police officers among many others. Lou Dobbs uses a combination of frames of cultural racism and white victimhood, by depicting black people as a violent threat along old racial stereotypes, and the white society as an innocent that is being attacked. This denies any historical analysis or responsibility of the dominant group as the minority narrative is painted as violent and unfounded, while the hegemonic narrative is glorified in its perceived innocence.

What this chapter has shown is that those who do not see the racial issues use varying techniques of color-blind racism to discredit the discussion or deny it from being had. The problem of racial discrimination and inequality is minimized, stereotypes are used to blame minorities for their own predicaments, the victims are blamed for their own situations even if certain notions are contradictory, and all this time the position of the hegemonic white racial group is never called into question. The African-American narrative of oppression, disenfranchisement, and discrimination is set aside, seen as paranoid, and makes way for the narrative of the dominant group, thus maintaining the status quo.

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Chapter Three – Denying the Debate:
Black Lives Matter and Framing

An explicit racial vocabulary is rarely used to justify decisions in which race plays a part.

– David Wellman

Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) was established in 2013 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. The organization was initially born from a phrase used by Alicia Garza in a letter to black people that was “intended as an affirmation for a community distraught over George Zimmerman’s acquittal” (Cobb, par. 6) in which she used the phrase “black lives matter.” This phrase became a hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter, which circulated social media and would later evolve into a movement that would organize many demonstrations throughout the United States.

The Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) largely organizes protests that surround the deaths of African-Americans at the hands of police officers, for example the sit-in at the New York Grand Central station in 2014 after the death of Eric Garner. In their own words, the movement is “broadening the conversation around state violence to include all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state” (“About the Black Lives Matter Movement”). Their protests have included attempts at raising awareness for and discussing issues of police brutality, racial profiling, and inequality, but their focus is the position of black people in relation to public institutions. The basis of this movement is one that looks to discuss a systematic problem of institutional discrimination against black people on multiple fronts.

BLM has gained much media coverage and recognition for its demonstrations, but also criticism. The movement has been accused of being an exclusive and non-inclusive activist organization as their name Black Lives Matter refers only to black lives and not others. Counter movements have been created like the All Lives Matter slogan, an attempt to counter the perceived exclusivity of BLM. It is believed by proponents of the All Lives Matter slogan that by continuously mentioning race, that movements like BLM are only causing division and inciting racial hatred rather than attempting to heal racial wounds.

In an interview with The New York Times, philosophy professors George Yancy and Judith Butler counter this perception when they comment on the use of the slogan All Lives Matter. Butler stated that:

When some people rejoin with “All Lives Matter” they misunderstand the problem, but not because their message is untrue. It is true that all lives matter, but it is equally true that not all lives are understood to matter which is precisely why it is most important to name the lives that have not mattered. (Yancy and Butler 6)

The All Lives Matter slogan uses colorblind rhetoric as its basic frame. It does not see that in the past black people and their lives have been seen as less than those of whites (during slavery they were seen as three-fifths of a person), and that in many instances they are still in a disadvantaged position. Racial realities of the past and their effects on the present are disregarded. What we see here is that All Lives Matter slogan ignores racial realities and denies “the enduring effects of historic discrimination as well as to deny the significance of contemporary discrimination” (Bonilla-Silva 79).

The type of criticism that users of the All Lives Matter slogan does, is that it does not engage in any meaningful dialogue concerning the issues that are being raised. What happens here, by focusing on the name of the movement, is that “the rhetoric of color-blindness ironically obfuscates meaningful discussion about identity politics, access, and the progressive institutional reforms that would ensure this access” (Holmes 26). Focusing on the name and perceived exclusivity of the movement distracts from the actual problems that the movement is attempting to discuss. Barack Obama also looks to explain BLM’s choice of name during a White House forum on criminal justice in American in late 2015.

I think the reason that the organizers use the phrase ‘black lives matter’ was not because they were suggesting no one else’s lives matter, rather what they were suggesting was, there is a specific problem that is happening in the African-American community that is not happening in other communities. And that is a legitimate issue that we have got to address. We as a society, particularly given our history, have to take this seriously. One of the ways of avoiding the politics of this and losing the moment is everybody just stepping back for a second and understanding that the African-American community is not just making this up. It is

not just something being politicized, it is real, and there is a history behind it and we have to take it seriously. And it's incumbent then on the activist to also take seriously the tough job that police have. (McCarthy)

By focusing on the perceived shortcomings of the organization by people who use the All Lives Matter slogan, the problems that the BLM movement looks to address are avoided even if they are legitimate questions. This type of criticism and misrepresentation of the movement has increased with their growing publicized demonstrations. It has seeped into the framing techniques of talk- and panel-shows on the big three news media outlets: Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC.

Framing

In news media, the concept of frameworks and framing can be used as a powerful tool especially when it comes to matters of race. Frames are a way of telling a news story and are used to explain difficult political issues in a more general way to make them accessible to the public. They “allow journalists to help emphasize what they believe to be newsworthy or important” (Mercurio and Filak 59). By choosing what journalists include and exclude in their stories, these news frames can impact how a story is received by an audience.

A news story can be told in certain ways. Shanto Iyengar's research creates two distinct frames that are used: the episodic frame and the thematic frame. Episodic news frames focus “on specific events or particular cases, while the thematic news frame places political issues and events in some general context” (2). The biggest difference being that the thematic frame highlights a larger social problem while the episodic frame does not. Iyengar concludes that attention should be spent on the way in which news is reported as it can greatly impact the public view of an issue. In the case of social problems, these frames can help determine who is ascribed responsibility or blame of certain issues. As Oscar Gandy and Zhan Li note “episodic frames tended to be associated with a willingness to attribute responsibility or blame to the individuals, rather than to public institutions” (Gandy and Li 75). This is of great importance, particularly when it comes to racial topics and clashes between African-American citizens and public institutions. Viewers may be

more easily drawn to blame victims of e.g. police brutality than the law enforcement agency with an episodic frame than with a thematic frame.

When it comes to analyzing rhetoric, the way in which arguments are framed and the basis of these arguments must be scrutinized. Particularly when it comes to discussions in mainstream media where the usage of frames and framing comes to the fore. Media is important to analyze as it “plays such an important role in the production, reproduction, and transformation of ideologies” (Ashe and Bonilla-Silva 67). The reach of mainstream media, the millions of people it can influence, and the way in which it can affect the way people think and argue make its analysis of great importance.

Episodic Frames

One of the clearest examples of the usage of the episodic news frame and a misframing of the Black Lives Matter movement, is an episode of *The Kelly File* on August 24th 2015. At the beginning of the show, Fox anchor Megyn Kelly introduces the frame for discussing the Black Lives Matter movement and the Ferguson civil unrest. She opens the segment by introducing a Facebook video of Peggy Hubbard, an African-American Missouri local who criticizes BLM that at the time had been watched over seven million times. Kelly describes the woman as “not the only one lashing out against the Black Lives Matter movement,” and the video as an “epic critique” (*The Kelly File*) of the movement. Before showing parts of the video that are vehemently critical of BLM, Kelly gives the context of the Ferguson protests. She explains that the protestors were angry about a young man (Michael Brown) who was shot to death by a police officer, and specifically makes the addition that he “allegedly pointed a gun at an officer” (*The Kelly File*). The addition of that allegation that was not confirmed by any authority already colors Michael Brown as an aggressor. By ascribing a violent perspective to his character, blame is being shifted to him, the victim of police force. Kelly then goes on to contrast the demonstration in support of a man who allegedly was violent, to the lack of a demonstration for a young African-American girl who was killed by a stray bullet after violent actions that occurred in her street. The distinct contrast that she makes between the deaths of a supposedly violent man and a young, unarmed girl demonstrate the way in which certain frames and certain language can defame an individual’s or group’s personality and thus color an audience’s interpretation of events.

After sketching these two cases, Kelly enters the subject of the segment, namely the supposed hypocrisy of BLM as they protest the death of a criminal, but not of an innocent girl. She argues that the matter of black on black violence is far worse than the case that BLM is making of institutional police violence. Professor Cornel West is the guest on the Kelly File. When Kelly poses this statement to West, he sharply points out the attempt at reframing the actual point of discussion. He says that in this discussions, people “have to make the distinction between state sponsored violence against black people, and violence against black people owing to actions of black people [...] they are not the same thing” (The Kelly File). Aware of the attempt at changing the discussion by the show, West points out that the argument that is made by Kelly and many other television hosts and commentators is invalid. It does not deal with the subject matter at hand, but instead looks to turn away from the issue and blame the African-Americans for another problem that plagues their community. There is a deliberate attempt to reframe the issue that protestors and activists are attempting to address. This type of argumentation initially discredits the victim, Michael Brown, and attempts to slander him. When going into the body of her argument that is based on the denial of racial issues frame, there is a use of a combination the minimization and the cultural racism argument. There are supposedly bigger problems that the African-American community must face than blaming the police institution. It does not engage in the actual discussion, and instead reframes the problems as smaller black problems that they themselves need to address, absolving institutions and the majority white community from any responsibility. They do not include themselves in the social conversation, elevating themselves above it and maintaining their position of power.

Another frame that has been used when discussing the Black Lives Matter movement has been the frame of them being anti-cop. An example of the use of this frame was on June 9th 2015 on the Fox news show, *Hannity*. Host Sean Hannity opens the segment by very clearly framing the discussion:

Anti-cop protestors have been popping up all across the country after select incidents with law enforcement. One activist has also protested before, get this, in Ferguson, in Baltimore, and is now in McKinney, Texas. [...] Is it fair to say that there may be professional protestors at all these incidents? (Hannity)

This is an episodic frame as it does not engage in the larger issue; why the protestors are demonstrating. Instead it focuses on the possible nefarious dealings of the protestors. From the first word to the last in Hannity's opening monologue, there are multiple layers of color-blind rhetoric. He begins with the word "anti-cop," immediately painting protestors as aggressors who are targeting police officers in a possibly violent way. Following this description, he calls the multiple shootings of unarmed African-Americans "select incidents" rather than a systemic issue. There already is an opinion that all that has occurred are not frequent things, but are small, insignificant moments that do not represent a larger issue or deserve discussion. Finally, he poses the question that, because some of the people that demonstrate in one city are also protesting at various other locations, that they are professional protestors. The implication is that because they are presumably professionals that they protest for money and do not care about the issues being demonstrated.

All of these frames look to actively discredit the movement that attempts to address larger social issues by painting them as "troublemakers." Guest, activist Deray McKesson, attempts to discuss the larger issue:

I've been to many cities where the police have been violent towards people of color. And there have been many people who have traveled around the country in solidarity to stand with people to make sure these stories don't go unnoticed.

[Hannity]

Despite this response, Sean Hannity still looks to smear the activist by asking if he has been part of the rioting or looting that has taken place in some of the cities. Although the demonstrations have been largely peaceful, Hannity looks to discredit McKesson and the movement. An incident of violence and looting is ascribed to the entire movement, not individuals as he actively attempts to defame the guest and the movement.

Rhetoric to Blame

Another frame that is used to distract from the issues BLM looks to discuss is addressing the rhetoric of the movement. The frame that the rhetoric produced by the

Black Lives Matter movement is harmful and encourages violence towards police, has been a recurring theme in news media.

On September 2nd 2015, Don Lemon's show *CNN Tonight* did a segment on the police and the relation to BLM. The main question that framed the segment was, if BLM's harsh rhetoric made it difficult for the police to do their jobs. At the beginning of the episode, Lemon poses the frame of the segment namely directing his question to BLM organizer Rashad Turner: "[y]our group marched this weekend and there has been some pretty harsh rhetoric that they have been playing calling police 'pigs in a blanket, fry like bacon'" (CNN Tonight). Lemon then goes on to show some footage of BLM demonstrators chanting the phrase he just mentioned during a protest. After the brief clip Lemon continues: "[t]his was your group. Do you think that any of this anger and frustration, is it spreading, is it going too far? You don't condone this language, do you?"

This frame is an episodic one that takes a single example of a demonstration with a particular chant and ascribes it to an entire group of people, but does not place it in the larger context of police brutality. In this instance as well, there is no real engagement in the actual point, but a commentary on the rhetoric that is being used. The use of the episodic frame, an instance of where a single demonstration used inappropriate language is ascribed to the entirety of the BLM movement. The movement is generalized to a single, unflattering moment and this is then believed to be the whole of the movement. This rhetoric is then said to be incredibly violent in nature and encourages people to act violently towards police.

This particular style of framing, by taking a single action and not placing it in the context of the wider theme, why BLM is protesting, is damaging to the movement and their message. What it does is discredit "minority members who speak against injustice [and] are often the target of unfair and unfounded character assassinations (Marvasti and McKinney 73). This style of framing and its use to discredit the movement is particularly visible in an episode of *Outfront With Erin Burnett*.

A critic of Black Lives Matter is Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke. A frequent Fox News contributor and appearing on many other news networks, Clarke is a very outspoken individual about the Black Lives Matter movement and profoundly critical of their demonstrations and rhetoric. On August 31st 2015 during an episode of *Outfront With Erin Burnett*, he is invited to engage in conversation with academic and political commentator Marc Lamont Hill. The frame of the segment is the suggestion that anti-cop

rhetoric used at BLM demonstrations is causing people to target and attack police officers. The example is given of Harris County police officer Darren Goforth from Texas who was attacked and shot dead by an African-American man. Sheriff Clarke agrees with the proposed narrative that violence towards police officers is due to rhetoric of BLM. Hill responds that the rhetoric of BLM is being misconstrued and that their demonstrations focus on accountability of police officers, stating that “the sustained number of black bodies which die at the hand of state violence needs to end” (Outfront With Erin Burnett).

Here too we see the use of an episodic frame that looks to vilify the Black Lives Matter movement. One police officer is shot dead by an African-American man whose motives were unknown. The suspect is framed to have been impacted by the language of BLM although this cannot be proven. This rhetoric is said to be indicative of the entire movement, claiming that they propone violence and should thus not be listened to. When Hill attempts to reframe the discussion to include what BLM is actually about, Sheriff Clarke retorts with the similar argument made by Megyn Kelly concerning statistics of black on black violence: “what about the black victims that die at the hands of other black people. That doesn’t seem to matter. And they are dying by the thousands, not by the few rare instances of the police use of force” (Outfront With Erin Burnett).

The ubiquitous argument that is made, the comparison between police killings and black on black violence is a tactic that uses multiple colorblind frames. The issue is minimized by comparing it to statistics that concern a different discussion and is a form of cultural racism as it blames the African-American community for its natural violent behavior and the situation it is in. Institutional discrimination is initially glossed over by introducing a statistic that does not deal with the issue being brought up by BLM – the relationship between African-Americans and the state – but makes it one of African-Americans versus African-Americans. The high number of crime of black on other black people is due to their proximity and the fact that they live close together. There is no engagement in the actual discussions, but an attempt to seek blame. That is where the frame of cultural racism is introduced. The suggestions is made that black people are naturally violent, that it is happening in their community and that it is their responsibility. There is no greater socio-economic discussion or question of the state and its contributions to that state of affairs. This is simply seen as an attempt at a disruption of the status quo as an institution like the police force is being attacked.

In news media, Shanto Iyengar detects two main frames that are used to explain a news story: the episodic frame, and the thematic frame. The episodic focuses on a particular incident and does not place it in a broader context, while the thematic frame does. Framing stories using an episodic frame, without placing it in a larger context can color the way the general public understand the situation.

In this chapter we analyzed how certain news shows framed certain issues concerning the Black Lives Matter movement. BLM looks to address problems of institutional discrimination towards people of color and organize many demonstrations to raise awareness for their goals. When they are reported on by shows on CNN it is often in a frame that does not engage in the discussion they are attempting to have. They are misframed to discredit the movement by calling them hypocritical for only demonstrating against institutions, or that their rhetoric can cause violence, or that their protests does cause police officers to get shot. A single chant during a single protest of the many they organize is taken out of context, generalized to be their main rhetoric, and then ascribed to the entire movement, and then blamed for sewing division and causing violence. What this does is “actively sustain the structure of racial inequality. They [white elite] do not patiently and retroactively address minority complaints, but they constantly manipulate the structural conditions and the discursive resources (i.e., the language of the game) to ‘reframe’ the issue” (Marvasti and McKinney 71). There is no engagement in any of their talking points, they are blamed for actions without proof, and actively ignores the voice of the oppressed. The status quo is thus maintained and never called into question.

Notes

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Conclusion

There is no coming to consciousness without pain.

– Carl Jung

Race is a very controversial subject in the United States. As Thomas Sgrue describes it, “few domestic issues have been more controversial [and] have generated more passion among scholars and journalists” (6). After the highly publicized deaths of multiple unarmed African-American men at the hands of police in 2014 and ensuing volatile protests, there was an attempt to initiate a new and comprehensive conversation about the role of race in America. Actually discussing the possibility of institutional discrimination has proven difficult in the age of color-blindness.

The success of the Civil Rights movement in the nineteen sixties introduced a new ideology that all racial problems of the past had been overcome with anti-discrimination legislation. It was believed that institutional racism could no longer exist, and that the United States had now become a post-racial state. How then does an ideology of non-racism discuss de facto racial issues? Particularly when “in the era of color-blindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt” (Alexander 11)?

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva observed that a new form of rhetoric had come into existence namely, *color-blind racism*. It is a form of language that is based on the frame of denial of racial issues that looks to maintain the current racial status quo. Contemporary problems of race are no longer blamed on discrimination, but on market dynamics or the cultural faults of minority groups. It is this form of rhetoric that is also present in the current debate of institutional racism surrounding the deaths of multiple unarmed African-Americans at the hands of law enforcement.

The first chapter painted the backdrop of the Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, Missouri that sparked protests across the country. The uproar in Ferguson gave rise to investigations concerning the relationship between the African-American community and the police force. These Federal investigations showed that the largely white Ferguson police department systematically profiled and abused the predominantly black people of that district. Due to the immense attention paid to the area, more research went into the socio-economic position of black people, and showed that there are still stark disparities

between the status of black people and white people. Lagging behind in areas of education, employment, poverty, and being overrepresented in statistics like crime and single-family homes, there is the question of great systemic problems that run along racial lines. Despite this gap based on race, there is a great unwillingness to discuss and deal with these issues.

The second chapter looked into how political pundits use color-blind racism to discuss these cases and how they justify the deaths of unarmed African-Americans in cases of fatal police force or deny the debate outright. This is done using multiple frames that do not engage in the discussion based on the idea that race issues no longer exist. Beginning with the definition of racism, commentators saw racism as an overt expression of it done by an individual bigot. There is the belief that due to the outlawing of discrimination in the nineteen sixties that institutional racism no longer exists and thus can only be shown in an individual manner. There is no concept of the possible changing of the form of racism and how it can be expressed. Racism must be overt in the eyes of these pundits, however, they themselves use coded language with racist overtones when they discuss this issue. The state of the African-American community is blamed on the faults within their own culture and are not seen as the result of institutional racism. If there is a claim of violence towards black people, it is rebutted with a high black on black crime statistic that suggests black people are naturally violent. If there is a discussion of the unequal position of African-Americans it is blamed on their lack of a family unit. Using old racial stereotypes of black people being violent or immoral pervades the language of color-blind racism. A clear contradiction in a form of rhetoric that claims to be color-blind and not see race, yet uses overt racial stereotypes in their arguments. When blaming the black community for their own predicaments, there also is the occasional use of the white victim frame, where commentators portray the white community as victims of racism. They are drawn to be under threat, and being targeted as scapegoats, attempting to paint themselves as racial innocents, ignoring a long history of racial oppression.

The third chapter analyzed the framing techniques of some shows when discussing a movement that attempts to discuss issues of institutional discrimination, the Black Lives Matter movement. What we see is an active attempt to discredit the movement that looks to address these issues. Using the episodic frame, incidents of a black person critiquing BLM are used to show the hypocrisy of the movement that does protest police violence, but not black on black crime. The actions of a few are also generalized to represent the entire movement. Civil unrest caused by a few is ascribed to the entire group, and the language

that is chanted during one protest is proposed as being indicative of the whole movement. Especially when a police officer is killed by an African-American, BLM is blamed as being the ones influencing his thought processes by proponing violence in their rhetoric. At all times, there is no engagement in the issues the movement is proposing, instead using the episodic frame there is an active attempt to distract from those issues and blame the actions of a few individuals on the group and thus defame the movement and their discussion points.

The act of talking about racism has been perceived as being racist. The rhetoric of color-blind racism combined with particular framing techniques is particularly damaging to the current race debate. It does not allow individuals, particularly minorities, to question the status quo. If they do, they are labeled 'troublemakers,' seen as socially paranoid and their narratives are brushed aside in place of the majority narrative. This actively sustains the racial inequality under the guise of non-racism. Particularly due to the reach of news media and their status as "first responders" to socio-political stories, they can influence the perception of race relations in the United States. With this active attempt to silence those who question the system, it is safe to say that America is far from being the post-racial society it claims to be.

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