

“Reconsidering the Black-White Binary: Where Do We Go From Here?”

As the discipline that studies, examines, and critiques societal social phenomena and structures, sociology has always been at the forefront of deconstructing social structures such as race, class, and gender in global society. However, in recent years, sociology, in general, has been unable to acknowledge the prevalence of the black-white racial binary within the discipline and in the larger U.S. society. According to University of Florida Law Professor and Critical Race Theorist Juan Perea, the black-white binary is “the conception that race in America consists...of only two constituent racial groups, the Black and White” (Martín Alcoff, 2003, p. 7).

The black-white racial dichotomy has dominated U.S. racial discourse since sociological race scholarship began in the late 19th century with W.E.B. DuBois’ quantitative study on the Philadelphia Negro. Critical Race theorist Elizabeth Martínez (1998) suggests the black-white binary has had such influence because the unique history of racial development in the United States can be attributed to the nation’s roots in slavery. The country’s Constitution and future U.S. legislation would be written to establish the social and political boundaries of the descendants of whites and blacks in the United States for centuries. However, the society of yesteryear no longer exists. The population of the United States is not predominantly black and white anymore, but more, red (Latino), yellow (Asian American), and racially mixed as unprecedented numbers of immigrants continue to arrive in the United States from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Therefore, the black-white binary is not sufficient alone for critiquing race and racism in 21st century U.S. society.

As a sociologist whose interest area is race and ethnicity, I have noticed a lack of, but growing amount of scholarship on the racializing experiences of other people of color

in the United States. Regardless of their self-identified racial identities or lack thereof before entering the United States, phenotypically non-white immigrants are often placed within the black-white binary and treated accordingly. Many studies (Waters, 1990, 1999; Landale and Oropesa, 2002), even when attempting to acknowledge the social uniqueness and autonomy of ethnic groups of color often measure their success by comparing their social outcomes to those of whites and blacks. This represents the staying power of the black-white binary. It is as if being socially white or black is the litmus test for one's societal status. In examining the experiences of newer immigrants groups, socio-racial contexts must be recognized. If we are to study the racial identity processes and racial experiences of these individuals, we must acknowledge how those experiences differ from those of whites and blacks.

This paper will discuss the power of the black-white binary as a paradigm and give a sociological and historical basis for its existence. It will then examine how the black-white binary is problematic within race studies and consider the possibility of moving beyond the paradigm. I argue that there are three ways in which the black-white binary hinders racial discourse in sociology and other disciplines as well as within the larger society: 1) it dichotomizes race in the United States, 2) it homogenizes members of the same "racial" group regardless of ethnic differences, and 3) it perpetuates racial oppression.

The black-white binary is a paradigm within various facets of U.S. society; this binary exists not only within scholarly research, but also within everyday social interactions and race discussions. It is perpetuated in the media; one example is the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, which were portrayed as a black-white social conflict when

predominantly Latinos were involved and injured. Thomas Kuhn describes how paradigms and their power can structure scientific research and knowledge in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Perea, 1998). Perea defines a paradigm as “a shared set of understandings or premises which permits the definition, elaboration, and solution of a set problems defined within the paradigm” (p. 359). Like most social structures, paradigms are only given meanings through the consensus and shared understandings of social actors. However, the social process alone cannot account for the power of the black-white binary as a paradigm; literature, textbooks, and institutions help perpetuate paradigms in society. Paradigms surrounding race influence racial understandings and problems (Perea, 1998). The black-white binary is the foremost pervasive racial paradigm and “dictates that all other racial identities and groups in the United States are best understood through the black/white binary paradigm” (Perea, p. 361). Scholars often reproduce the paradigm when discussing race and social policy. This is problematic because individuals or groups that do not fit into the paradigm are often neglected; their concerns are not addressed. According to Kuhn, “those that will not fit the box are often not seen at all” (Perea, 361). If Latinos, Asian Americans, and other groups are not included within the paradigm, it will be difficult for their voices and opinions to be heard with regard to race matters.

In order to critique the black-white binary, it is important to know where and how the binary is sociologically and historically situated. Because the black-white binary is a race paradigm, it is framed sociologically within traditional race studies. Race in the U.S. framework did not exist as it currently does when foundational sociological theorists were writing key sociological texts. Sociology developed in an imperialist, eurocentric

and racist era (Winant, 2000). Such ideas are reflected within various sociological works. Herbert Spencer was concerned with human evolution and the ranking of groups according to 'natural' characteristics while Durkheim ranked the world eurocentrically and distinguished between the 'primitive' and 'civilized peoples' (Winant, 2000). Although Marx opposed slavery and the devastation of the non-European world, he believed those societies could benefit from European influence (Winant, 2000). As sociology traveled to the United States, the salience of race studies grew within the discipline. W.E.B. DuBois' racial theorizing in the *Philadelphia Negro* as well as that of the Chicago School affected the way race would be sociologically theorized and examined. The sociological study of race was predicated on the black-white binary in the United States. Sociological theorists such as Spencer and others founded sociology from a Eurocentric perspective. When sociology crossed the Atlantic Ocean, DuBois' study, the first by any person of color, essentialized black as the primary non-white group of study, concretizing the binary within sociological studies of race.

Related to this sociological basis is also the historical significance of race in the United States. Martínez (1998) proposes that there are three reasons for the prevalence of the black-white binary in U.S. society. The first reason is the abundance of numbers and the second reason is geography. African Americans have long been the largest population of color in the United States and have been found in sizeable numbers across the country, not only in certain parts as are Latinos and Asian Americans. Therefore, African Americans are the people of color with which U.S. society is most familiar. As a result of having a higher presence in various areas of society (i.e. sports, politics, entertainment), African Americans have gained more visibility, cementing their position as the essential

minority group. The third reason for the binary has to do with the existence of slavery as a strong part of national history: “White enslavement of Black people together with white genocide against Native Americans provided the original models for racism as it developed here” (Martínez, 470). As a result of slavery, blacks aroused sexual anxieties and were considered more of a threat to racial purity more than other groups that were considered less black and more white. Robert Blauner, who examines the black-white binary and racism, also explains that U.S. race relations reflect the mutual involvement of blacks and whites (Martínez, 1998). There appears to be a love-hate relationship between the two groups that allows the binary to continue and also exclude groups that are not a part of either group.

Many scholars, especially those of color and within law disciplines, have begun to critique the historical prevalence of the black-white racial binary and racism in society. This theory came to be known as Critical Race Theory and began as an attempt to critically address the structure of race in U.S. society, particularly the negative characteristics and stereotypes that were assigned to people of color in scholarship and society as a whole. Crenshaw, et.al (1995) formally defines Critical Race Theory as “...a movement of left scholars, most of them scholars of color...whose works challenge the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally, in American society as a whole” (xiii). Such theorists have two common interests: 1) to understand how white supremacy was created and maintained and how it has subordinated people of color in America and 2) a desire to understand and change the relationship between law and racial power. These scholars reject the idea that scholarship should be neutral and objective and are dissatisfied with

traditional civil rights discourse, which only summarily addressed racial inequalities without radically changing the racist status quo. Despite Critical Race Theory's attempts to examine race from a more subjective perspective, some of the theorists, such as Cornell West and Andrew Hacker perpetuate the binary in their scholarship (Perea, 1998).*

The black-white binary is not only prevalent in contemporary sociological and other disciplinary scholarship; it is also very present in societal attempts to address racial inequality. Mary Frances Berry, the former chair of the United States Civil Rights Commission, suggested that the United States is comprised of “three nations, one Black, one White, and one in which people strive to be something other than Black to avoid the sting of White Supremacy” (Martín Alcoff, 2003, p. 8). When President Bill Clinton sponsored a Race Relations Commission in 1997, many notable race scholars attended to contribute to the discussion of the current state of race relations in the United States. John Hope Franklin, an esteemed historian commented: “racism in the black/white sphere developed first in North America when slavery was introduced in the Jamestown colony in 1619 and has served as a model for the treatment of race in the U.S.” (Martín Alcoff, p. 12). Frank Wu, a Howard University law professor, acknowledged the importance of this history, but also recognized that no racial theory can be effective without including everyone: “...we should start by including all of us...A unified theory of race, race relations, and racial tensions must have whites, African Americans, and all the rest...Our theory is an inadequate account otherwise” (Martín Alcoff, 13).

* Cornell West's *Race Matters* (year) and Andrew Hacker's *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (1995) demonstrate the prevalence of the black-white binary in the race scholarship of well-known academics.

If sociology is to remain at the forefront of race scholarship, it must recognize that the black-white binary is problematic. I propose that the black-white binary is a historical and contemporary racial project that will have to change to address race in 21st U.S. society. Omi and Winant (1994) coined the term racial project to explain how race influences society: “a racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (p. 56). As a long-lasting racial project, the black-white binary still controls the meanings race has in society. I will now discuss the three ways in which the black-white binary hinders contemporary race scholarship.

The first way in which the black-white binary is problematic has to do with its ability to dichotomize race in the United States when there are more than two racial groups. Recent immigrant populations and their descendants may not see themselves as black or white, which prevents their inclusion in race discussions. According to Lee and Bean (2004), “today’s immigration thus may be moving the nation far beyond the traditional and relatively persistent black/white color line that has long divided the country, a demarcation reflecting the practice of slavery, its legacy of discrimination, and a history of black social and economic disadvantage” (p. 222). The arrival of these groups does not fit within the paradigm, challenging the existing racial system because society is not sure how to regard these individuals. Therefore, on the basis of country of origin, physical appearance, socioeconomic status and other social markers, blackness or whiteness is ascribed to these immigrant groups without considering the socio-historical categorization contexts of their native lands.

One example of the way race is lived differently is exemplified in Latin America and some parts of the Caribbean. Race has a much different meaning for Latinos than for other groups because of the historical and societally acknowledged prevalence of racial mixing within many Latin American societies (Landale and Oropesa, 2002). While skin color does influence social position in those societies, mixed race individuals are not assigned to one racial group. The dichotomous classification that occurs in the United States does not occur in Latin American and Caribbean countries:

“Compared to Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States is not just racist, but color-blind: people are either black or white. In the other Americas, a more complex consciousness of color sees black and white, but also recognizes many shades in between....In the United States, any degree of African ancestry makes a person black, while in Latin America and the Caribbean any degree of non-African ancestry means that a person is not black” (Landale and Oropesa, 233).

When individuals from these societies immigrate to the United States, the black-white binary challenges perceptions of self-identity with regard to race and/or color classification. Where skin color was once conceived of within a continuum in one's former society, skin color now determines the new immigrant's race and where he/she will fall within the black-white binary. Such a process can be overwhelming and often leads to misclassification on the Census since the concept of race (in the U.S. framework) is alien to some of these individuals. The dichotomization of race along the black-white binary subjugates the personal, cultural, and historical experiences that other people of color bring to the United States.

The black-white binary is also problematic because it homogenizes members of the same racial group regardless of ethnic differences. For groups included in the binary

such as blacks and whites, ethnic differences are often ignored and given little attention with regard to experiences of racism. Among blacks, the African American experience is the essentialized black experience in the United States. However, other black ethnic groups from the Caribbean, Africa, and Latin America are subsumed into the African American category, which makes it difficult for these ethnic groups to address more specific problems that may hinder their social status. For example, blacks of other ethnic origins that do not speak English may experience language discrimination in addition to racial discrimination. However, these concerns may not be relevant for the African American community, which receives most of the recognition with regard to civil rights and discrimination redress.

Likewise, the incorporation of European ethnic groups into whiteness is also problematic because society does not readily acknowledge the discrimination some European ethnic groups encountered upon their arrival in the United States. Irish, Italian, and East European immigrants were not considered white and experienced racial/ethnic prejudice. However, upon recognizing the existence of the binary with blacks as the least desired societal members, many of these groups adopted racist behaviors to attain whiteness and distinguish themselves from African Americans.

Not only does this homogenization neglect cultural and ethnic differences that make these groups unique, it also causes tension within the group, particularly among blacks, when certain ethno-racial concerns are not addressed.

The third reason the black-white binary is problematic is because it prevents coalition-building among people of color, which allows racial oppression to continue. Of all three reasons, this one is the most important:

“The hegemony of the black/white paradigm has stymied the development of an adequate account of the diverse racial realities in the US, and weakened the general theories of racism which attempt to be truly inclusive. This has had a negative effect on our ability to...create lasting coalitions...” (Martín Alcoff, 2003, p. 14).

Because the black-white binary focuses primarily on racial tensions between blacks and whites, other groups of color are neglected and may feel resentful toward blacks. The growing number of Latinos and Asian Americans has led to increased competition for employment, education, and political power. As a result, there is rising conflict between blacks and these new ethnic groups (Piatt, 1998). In multi-ethnic cities (i.e. New York, Los Angeles, Houston) around the country, there have been reports of anti-Asian, anti-black, and anti-Latino sentiment among these people of color. Because many blacks, particularly African Americans, have bought into their essentialized minority position within the black-white binary, many feel a sense of entitlement and even nativism, which makes them feel superior to other people of color.

Conflict among people of color over jobs and resources allows the system of white supremacy to continue and racial inequality to perpetuate. The inability of these groups to recognize their common struggle against racism prevents their ability to organize collectively and take a collaborative stand against racial oppression. As people of color quarrel among themselves instead of forming coalitions with one another, the status quo will continue to exist and racially oppress people of color.

The black-white binary plays a very important role in this process because of its hegemonic existence. Late sociologist Antonio Gramsci proposes that hegemony operates through coercion and consent, where ruling groups elaborate and maintain a system of

ideas and practices (Omi and Winant, 1994). This is exactly what the black-white binary does. Blacks, whites, and other people of color have either consented or been forced into reifying its existence. According to Espinoza (1998), “the politics of dichotomous categorical identity require individuals to be placed into or be forced to choose one particular defining identity” (17). As long as people of color are unable to recognize and challenge the hegemonic power of the black-white binary, their ability to build enduring coalitions to oppose the racist status quo will be diminished.

Now that I have outlined the sociological and historical significance of the black-white binary and discussed how it is problematic, I will discuss the likelihood of moving beyond the black-white binary in closing. If sociology and the larger social order are to continue addressing and critiquing race and racism in contemporary society, we must recognize and learn the structure of the black-white binary. By acknowledging its existence, we can become aware of how the binary works in order to dismantle or modify it. Martinez (1998) proposes that we must know the central role the black-white binary has played in constructing U.S. racism. Therefore, it seems that any attempts to dismantle or modify the binary must pay special attention to how the binary has historically and contemporarily influenced racial discourse. While it is necessary for other groups to receive inclusion and societal and structural recognition, we must consider if these groups should be included within the paradigm (i.e. black-Latino-Asian-Other-White) or if we should create a new paradigm (i.e. people-of-color-white). Whatever direction sociologists, critical race theorists, or lay person social actors decide to go in, the objective of creating a new or modifying the existing paradigm should actively be anti-racist and work to dismantle racism in U.S. society.

It is also important to consider what new color lines, if any, will be drawn with the modification of the binary. Historically, the black-white binary has been predicated on the color line between blacks and whites. However, if other groups are incorporated, how will this color line look? What new line(s) is/are being drawn in U.S. society with more Latinos, Asians Americans, and multiracial individuals? This is another reason why race scholars must be careful in considering how to move beyond the black-white binary. We do not want to create another binary or modify an existing one that excludes societal members. So, in closing, I ask and answer the following questions: 1) can we as scholars and a society move beyond the black-white binary and 2) will doing so improve people of color relationships and coalition building? Only time will tell.

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