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# Race without Racism: How Higher Education Researchers Minimize Racist Institutional Norms

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In their 2001 article, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Gianpaolo Baiocchi highlighted myriad ways by which researchers limit the significance of racism in sociological studies. Specifically, they examined and critiqued methods sociologists use to study racial stratification as well as their tendency to report data in ways that fail to substantively describe the racial realities of minoritized<sup>1</sup> populations. They noted how racism in the 1960s was defined as an

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<sup>1</sup>I use “minoritized” instead of “minority” throughout this article to signify the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in U.S. social institutions, including colleges and universities. Persons are not born into a minority status nor are they minoritized in every social context (e.g., their families, racially homogeneous friendship groups, or places of worship). Instead, they are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of Whiteness.

egregious set of beliefs and attitudes that compelled racist persons (namely White supremacists) to discriminate against or knowingly harm members of racial groups they deemed inferior. Eminent critical race theorist Richard Delgado (1984) argues that minoritized persons typically “see racism as including institutional components that extend far beyond lynch mobs, segregated schools, or epithets like ‘nigger’ or ‘spick’” (p. 571). Notwithstanding, Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi observed that racism in contemporary research continues to be viewed as extreme acts committed by an ignorant or ill-intentioned few. In short supply, they maintain, are sociological studies that take into account structural/institutional racism as an explanatory factor for racial differences in various outcomes. Hence, like Harrell (2000) and Jones (2000), I define racism in this article as individual actions (both intentional and unconscious) that engender marginalization and inflict varying degrees of harm on minoritized persons; structures that determine and cyclically remanufacture racial inequity; and institutional norms that sustain White privilege and permit the ongoing subordination of minoritized persons.

In Delgado’s (1984, 1992) examination of trends in law reviews and legal studies journals, he observed that White persons who wrote about racial inequities and civil rights often cited only each other’s research and rarely that of minoritized scholars who had published scholarly articles on similar topics. As a result, they often made incomplete or erroneous assumptions in their writings about the complex social realities and policy needs of minoritized communities. Consistent with earlier published critiques regarding the mishandling of racism in sociological research (e.g., Ladner, 1973), Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi (2001) sorted shortcomings of their discipline into four categories: (a) the limitations of surveys that seek to ascertain people’s honest racial attitudes; (b) the failure of post-civil rights era indices to accurately measure contemporary racial progress; (c) ethnocentric frameworks that mask the centrality and power of race-based social networks; and (d) the limitations of how sociologists report findings pertaining to racial stratification. Concerning the fourth category, they asserted, “Sociologists routinely fail to explain that the ‘race effect’ presented in their findings is the outcome of ‘racism’” (p. 125). I take up this point in this article but examine it specifically in the context of higher education research.

Some scholars have examined authorship trends and methodologies (Davis & Liddell, 1997; Kuh & Bursky, 1980), citation patterns (Budd, 1990; Budd & Magnuson, 2010), and gendered norms (Creamer, 1994) in higher education and student affairs journals. But to date, there have been no published analyses of how racism is handled in academic journal articles in our field. The most closely related is Banning, Ahuna, and Hughes’s (2000) 30-year synthesis of scholarship published in the *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* (formerly *NASPA Journal*), which focuses on race and ethnicity

but not squarely on racism. In fact, the terms “racism” and “racist” were used cursorily and only four times in the article.

The purpose of this article is to show how researchers explain, discuss, and theorize about racial differences in student achievement, faculty and staff turnover, and other outcomes that are routinely disaggregated in the study of higher education. Moreover, documenting how scholars make sense of racial climates and the experiences of minoritized persons on predominantly White campuses is another aim of this study. Some trends that Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi (2001) observed in the sociology literature were investigated in higher education, student affairs, and community college journals over a 10-year period. However, this study differs from theirs in that I give little attention to instrumentation (surveys and indices) and how findings are reported. Instead, I concentrate on answering the following research question: How do higher education scholars discuss and make sense of race-related findings that emerge in their studies?

### ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

Bonilla-Silva's (2009) book, *Racism without Racists: Colorblind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, illustrates a range of ways by which people make sense of the salience of race, racial stratification, and experiential differences between minoritized persons and Whites. He problematizes claims that some individuals make regarding their inability to “see color,” and dispels contemporary misconceptions about the United States having evolved into a post-racial society. This position is consistent with the tenet of critical race theory that critiques claims of neutrality, objectivity, and color-blindness in the law, in policymaking processes, and in U.S. social structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993).

Bonilla-Silva juxtaposes espoused claims of color-blindness with numerous examples of how race continues to be a consistent determinant of various sociopolitical, employment, and educational outcomes. He argues that Whites use color-blind racism primarily to explain racial differences in ways that exonerate them of any responsibility, a practice that Delgado (1984) also identified. For example, Black male students' comparatively higher rates of college attrition are typically explained by factors that have little to do with racist stereotypes they often encounter in and out of college classrooms or with the maintenance of White supremacy in their campus environments (Harper, 2009).

Based on Bonilla-Silva's (2009) analyses of survey data and interviews with 627 college students attending three predominantly White universities and 400 participants in the 1998 Detroit Area Study (DAS), he introduces four

central frames of color-blind racism. He describes them as the ideological frames that people use to interpret information concerning race relations and to explain racial differences in outcomes:

1. **Abstract Liberalism** involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., “equal opportunity,” the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice and individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters.
2. **Naturalization** allows Whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggesting that they are natural occurrences.
3. **Cultural Racism** relies on culturally based arguments such as “Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education” or “Blacks have too many babies” to explain the [status] of minorities in society.
4. **Minimization of Racism** suggests that discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances. (pp. 28–29)

These frames are sometimes used in combination for explanatory sense-making. However, the fourth frame on its own is most relevant to my study.

According to Bonilla-Silva, the minimization of racism frame compels Whites to view discrimination through the narrow lens of overt, outrageously racist acts. Anything that falls short is often misperceived as minoritized persons being “hypersensitive” or unfairly playing the “race card.” He substantiated this frame with data from the DAS survey. Black and White respondents—89.5% and 82.5% respectively—believed that discrimination against Blacks still occurs in the United States. However, in response to the survey item “Blacks are in the position they are today as a group because of present-day discrimination,” 60.5% of Blacks either agreed or strongly agreed, compared to only 32.9% of Whites. Bonilla-Silva then offers a series of illustrative quotations from interviews in which most White participants (and a few Blacks) failed to see the nexus between racism and racial differences in various social, educational, and economic outcomes; instead they considered a range of other plausible explanations for the subordinate status of minoritized persons. In my study, I use the minimization of racism frame to analyze how higher education scholars interpret race-related findings that emerge in their research.

## METHODS

### *Data Source*

This article is based on a systematic analysis of articles published in seven peer-reviewed academic journals that routinely publish research on students, faculty, and other postsecondary actors (e.g., administrators and trustees)

**TABLE 1**  
**JOURNAL ARTICLES REVIEWED, 1999–2009**

<i>Journal</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>The Review of Higher Education</i>	40
<i>The Journal of Higher Education</i>	21
<i>Research in Higher Education</i>	48
<i>Journal of College Student Development</i>	76
<i>Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice</i> (formerly the <i>NASPA Journal</i> )	29
Community College Journal of Research and Practice	32
<i>Community College Review</i>	9

at four-year institutions and community colleges. (See Table 1.) Some colleagues have privileged them as the “leading” journals in our field. More importantly, I chose these seven because they are the venues that publish most of the empirical research on postsecondary education. I first browsed titles and abstracts of every article published in each journal over a 10-year period (1999–2009) using electronic retrieval resources (e.g., Project MUSE, SpringerLink, and EBSCOhost Academic Search Premier). I flagged for analysis articles that focused in some respect on the following topics: campus racial climate, the experiences of minoritized persons at predominantly White institutions (PWIs), comparative studies of PWIs versus Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and studies that explored racial differences between Whites and minoritized persons.

In the seven journals, a total of 255 articles met these criteria and were selected for analysis. I created a database for these publications (described below). A disproportionate number of articles on these topics dealt with undergraduates. The bibliography of Turner, González, and Wood’s (2011) comprehensive review of higher education literature confirms that much has been written about faculty of color, but few articles about them have been published in the seven refereed journals that comprise my data source. Even less has been written about administrators and staff of color in postsecondary contexts. I excluded articles about HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions in which outcomes, experiences, and resources were not compared to PWIs.

### ***Data Analysis***

I first typed two keywords—“racism” and “racist”—into the search window for each downloaded article, counting the frequency with which these terms appeared in article titles as well as in the “Discussion” and “Implica-

tions” sections of the 255 publications. I then fully scanned each document to determine if the author(s) had used critical race theory for analytical or conceptual sensemaking. (My rationale for this is presented in the “Findings” section below.) Next, I copied text from the 255 peer-reviewed journal articles either from online HTML links or portable document files (.PDFs), which I then pasted into Microsoft Word documents. I extracted only text from the “Discussion” and “Implications” sections (1,276 pages) for analysis. I converted the files to RichText format and uploaded them into the NVivo software program for qualitative data analysis.

Consistent with steps prescribed by Miles and Huberman (1994) for textual and categorical analysis, I did two line-by-line readings of the “Discussion” and “Implications” sections of each article in NVivo—first for understanding, and then for the application of code words. During the second reading, I highlighted passages of text in the window of the software program and labeled them with a pair of categorical codewords: (a) explanations, and (b) terminology. The first categorical codeword captured sentences that demonstrate how authors discussed, theorized about, and attempted to explain race-related findings that emerged in their research. The second codeword tagged synonyms and phrases that authors used instead of “racism” and “racist” in their “Discussion” and “Implications” sections. At the conclusion of the coding process, I printed reports for the two categorical codewords. A thorough and repetitive reading of the two code reports led me to Bonilla-Silva’s (2009) minimization of racism frame, which helped me make sense of how higher education researchers typically approach writing and theorizing about race.

### ***Researcher’s Positionality***

Despite the regularity of my thinking, writing, and teaching about racial matters pertaining to colleges and universities in the United States, composing this article engendered tremendous personal turmoil. The source of my angst is threefold. First, I have been complicit in the very avoidance that I am critiquing. Some articles I analyzed for this study are my own. Like most others in our field, I, too, have written about the negative postsecondary experiences of minoritized students as well as racial gaps in access, achievement, and attainment without naming racism as a possible explanatory factor. Second, many of the articles I analyzed were authored by friends, mentors, and scholars with whom I have collaborated, as well as other colleagues for whom I have enormous respect. From conceptualization through the final stages of revision, I feared they would misunderstand this article as a harsh critique of their work. Poet, professor, and civil rights activist Maya Angelou once wrote: “I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better.” My aim here is not to criticize myself, friends, and other scholars, but instead to expand our ways of knowing, which will, I hope, compel us

to do better at naming racism and exploring more responsibly its harmful effects on people in postsecondary contexts.

Third, I experienced considerable conflict as I repeatedly pondered this question: What will I say to those who argue that racism claims are the antithesis of credible scientific evidence because such experiences are virtually impossible to prove? I use this question to clarify how I am situated as the researcher in this study. I am a critical race scholar who believes firmly in one of the foundational tenets of critical race theory—that racism is a permanent fixture in U.S. social institutions, including colleges and universities (Bell 1987, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Gillborn, 2008). The racism I have experienced firsthand, heard about from students and colleagues of color who have sought me out for support, and audiorecorded in numerous interviews with participants in my previous research studies sustains my awareness of its permanence and pervasiveness.

In a multi-institution qualitative study of campus racial climates, a colleague and I found that racism was rendered taboo. Because their campus environments promoted racial silence, students and administrators alike said they were rarely asked about their racial realities (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). My sense is that, if minoritized persons were invited to explicitly name what they have experienced, it will become clear to researchers and others that racism is indeed worthy of more serious empirical examination and documentation. A handful of studies on racist stereotyping or what some scholars call racial microaggressions (e.g., Harper et al., 2011; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue et al., 2007; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009) have taken this approach.

Still, some will inevitably argue that racism is perceptual, situational, and difficult to prove. My response is that the same could be said of other topics commonly written about in our field—sense of belonging, satisfaction, self-authorship, identity development, college readiness, and inclusive campus environments, to name a few. Ultimately, my argument is that ongoing attempts to study race without racism are unlikely to lead to racial equity and more complete understandings of minoritized populations in postsecondary contexts.

## FINDINGS

Below, I present two categories of findings that emerged from my analysis of the 255 peer-reviewed journal articles. I describe trends across the publications and occasionally substantiate them with verbatim quotations. In addition to the two categories, I also include observations concerning the use of critical race theory in articles published in the seven higher education, student affairs, and community college journals.



I decided against naming the authors whose work is referenced in this section for three reasons. First, my aim here is to report findings from my analyses instead of composing some version of a literature review. In other words, I use the literature as documentary evidence in my analyses; therefore, I present it as *data* in this section. Quantitative researchers do not include names of individual survey respondents in reporting their results, and it is commonplace for qualitative analysts to use pseudonyms in lieu of their participants' actual names. I employed a similar approach here. Second, naming the authors might lead readers to view those persons as negligent without first reflecting on whether they, too, engage in the same practices. Anonymity might compel someone reading this article to ask: "Could this be my study that is being written about here?"

And third, given the personal politics described in the previous section, I deemed it unwise (and unnecessary) to critique my colleagues by name. Again, my emphasis is on presenting data.

### ***Assorted Explanations: Anything but Racism***

The title of Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi's (2001) article, "Anything but Racism," sufficiently characterizes the approach that researchers in our field use to explain various racial phenomena in postsecondary contexts. In an attempt to make sense of their findings, authors theorized and offered assorted guesses in the discussion sections of their articles. Such statements were typically prefaced with "perhaps," and often included the words "may," "might," "possibly," "could be," and "presumably." Rarely were racism and racist institutional norms explicitly named among the range of plausible reasons for racial differences. For example, data in one study showed that Black faculty spend less time publishing in traditional research outlets and highly valued journals. Instead of proposing that these professors may have experienced certain journals as antagonistic toward topics and methodological approaches that do not reflect White cultural norms of their respective fields, the authors suggested: "Blacks may have greater financial burdens than Whites of comparable income levels, leading to greater pressure to spend time in paid summer teaching rather than unpaid research." Their hypothesis may have some merit. But like this example, many other authors presupposed that racial differences were attributable to a wide spectrum of possible factors; racism was hardly ever among them.

Another example is a study in which researchers found racial differences in undergraduate students' grade point averages. "The lower GPA for Blacks may result from disadvantaged educational backgrounds," they suggested. Could it also be that the cumulative effects of racist stereotypes encountered in their courses made it difficult for these students to achieve the same outcomes as White classmates who were immune to the toxic effects of racism? Even climate studies somehow managed to exclude racism as a possible explana-



tion for the experiences and disparities they reported. Authors of a study that examined the effects of institutional climate on student departure offered a range of possibilities for why minoritized students “stop out” en route to baccalaureate degree attainment. “Such reasons may include institutional policies and/or advisors who ask students to take a term off to reevaluate their goals or the decision to take additional courses at community colleges to increase their chances of succeeding.” They say nothing about how constant interaction with White faculty, peers, and others whom minoritized students view as racist might also compel them to take time off.

Similarly reported in several articles were results that showed how persons of color perceived and experienced campus racial climates differently than their White counterparts. Few, however, considered structural/institutional racism as a logical explanation for such differences. In one study that examined racial differences in student engagement, the authors wrote: “Majority students were more involved than minority students, presumably because of a higher level of comfort with their residence environment.” These researchers did not suggest that racist environmental conditions in the residence halls could have engendered discomfort among minoritized students and consequently dissuaded their out-of-class engagement.

Racial differences in student-faculty interaction were explored in a trio of studies. Each found that Black students in comparison to Whites tended to interact more with faculty on course-related matters but were considerably less likely to collaborate with professors on research and other enriching educational experiences. Not considered among the various explanations for these phenomena were the following: (a) some Black students might have experienced racism in their courses and in prior class-related interactions with White faculty, thus rendering non-class-related interactions undesirable; and (b) some faculty may possess low expectations and a range of racist assumptions about Black students that compel them, perhaps unintentionally, to extend the privileges of outcomes-productive engagement to other students. One of the three studies found that Asian American students were more likely than any other racial/ethnic group to be involved in faculty research. The authors did no theorizing about this finding. Might it be at all plausible that some professors presume Asian Americans are better in statistics and are therefore more useful laborers for research projects? Based on a national sample of respondents to the College Student Experiences Questionnaire, another study found that Native American and Black undergraduates simultaneously reported the highest levels of interaction and dissatisfaction with faculty. The researchers surmised that perhaps the expectations professors conveyed to these two populations “are qualitatively different from the expectations conveyed to other racial groups,” without acknowledging how such variation could be perceived or experienced as racist.

Also evident in articles analyzed for this study is the tendency of scholars to describe a multitude of well-known factors that undermine the success of minoritized persons at PWIs without also citing racism as a common barrier to achievement. Here is one example from a study on Latino students at community colleges: “The first-semester Hispanic freshmen in this study want to go to school for the right reasons. However, their poverty, family obligations, and for many, the need to work constitute potential barriers to the actualization of their aspirations.” Much empirical evidence confirms that poverty, working more than 20 hours per week (especially off campus), and in some situations, extreme family commitments threaten one’s likelihood of persisting through degree attainment. However, it could also be the case that racist environmental conditions and practices undercut Latino students’ high educational aspirations. Seldom were institutional responses to the latter advocated in “Implications” sections of the 255 articles.

Instead of viewing racial differences as byproducts of institutionalized racism that requires systemic organizational change, authors routinely suggested approaches that had little to do with investigating and responding to the realities of race on campus. An example is a study in which the author recommended that institutional researchers identify “high-risk students who are more likely to experience difficulty in completing their degree programs than are most other students. Identification of high-risk students enables institutions to target services to those persons before high risk turns into high rates of departure.” Such recommendations seemed to suggest that only individuals, not racialized campus environments, were in need of institutional attention.

Ways in which minoritized students are persistently placed at risk were hardly ever written about in the 255 articles. Even in studies that examined stressors for minoritized persons on college and university campuses, the overwhelming majority of recommendations pertained to helping these persons cope instead of addressing racist institutional practices that engender stress:

Asian Americans were more likely to complete their education, even though they were more dissatisfied with their experiences on campus than other groups. An assessment of the psychological well-being and coping style of Asian Americans may be particularly important as administrators strive to develop interventions that address student satisfaction and mental health concerns.

As this example shows, the emphasis was on helping the student rather than addressing the environmental toxins that led to dissatisfaction and psychological distress for a particular minoritized population on campus. In another study, colleagues used mathematical models to analyze and predict future trends in faculty diversity. “Most departments, at most times, will struggle

to reach the expected [level of faculty diversity], and their struggles will be of long duration,” the researchers concluded. They then went on to offer six recommendations for institutional action, none of which focused on improving the reputation some departments have for being racist or addressing the implicitly racist assumptions that some professors make about minoritized applicants during faculty search processes. In a different study, researchers suggested, “Without adequate socialization, faculty of color are prevented from participating fully in the academic workplace. Highly structured mentoring programs and minority postdoctoral scholarships may serve as possible tools to socialize faculty of color.” Accordingly, instead of addressing institutionalized socialization norms that sustain White supremacy, the proposed adaptation onus was placed on minoritized faculty.

As indicated previously, I included several HBCU/PWI comparative studies in my analyses. Almost without exception, these studies amplified the educational advantages conferred on Black students who attend HBCUs. In comparison to PWIs, satisfaction and sense of belonging were higher on HBCU campuses, which researchers used to explain outcomes differences. Interestingly, the supportiveness of HBCUs was often written about extensively in “Discussion” sections, yet researchers infrequently furnished details about what made PWIs comparatively less affirming environments for Black undergraduates. In other words, the particulars of PWIs were hardly ever discussed; thus, the default explanation for outcomes differences was that HBCUs were characteristically more supportive. No author explicitly conjectured that one educational environment could be more or less racist than the other. Documented in one study was the following: “65% of HBCU students reported that they were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’ with the ethnic/racial diversity of their faculty, compared with only 24% of African American students at PWIs.” The authors made no attempt to explain (empirically or theoretically) how racism could lead to comparatively lower levels of satisfaction at PWIs.

Lastly, consistently documented (and in some cases celebrated) in the literature is that White undergraduates benefit more than minoritized students from interactional diversity and participation in campus diversity events. The most common explanation across the articles was that White students likely came to college having interacted less with persons of color and therefore had more to gain as they engaged with others who were unlike themselves. Not considered were the possible psychological and emotional costs of such engagement on the few minoritized students who make interactional diversity possible on college campuses—that is, how students of color may be affected by cross-racial interactions with peers who have had comparatively less exposure to non-White people. Furthermore, while interactional diversity has been shown to confer rich educational outcomes on all students, Whites benefit more, which produces yet another racial gap that advantages them.

This irony was not sufficiently acknowledged in articles published over the 10-year period.

### ***Instead of Racism: Common Semantic Substitutes***

A second category of findings that emerged from the analyses of these seven journals elucidates semantic alternatives to the words “racism” and “racist.” These two terms appeared in only three article titles, two published in the *Journal of College Student Development* and the other in the *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* (formerly the *NASPA Journal*). Shown in Table 2 is the number of articles in which either word was used at least once in the “Discussion” and “Implications” sections. Accordingly, authors used “racism” and “racist” in 21.6% of the publications. In most instances, the words were used trivially—meaning that they simply appeared once or twice but were not substantively engaged or discussed in detail. Perhaps more interesting is that only 16 of the 255 articles used either word three or more times. Beyond quantifying the frequency of use, I also observed that few authors actually discussed their findings in ways that engaged racism as a plausible explanation for racial differences or negative experiences reported by minoritized participants. None used Bonilla-Silva (2003, 2006, 2009) or other racism-related frameworks (e.g., C. Jones, 2000; J. Jones, 1996; Harrell, 2000) for explanatory sense-making.

Instead of calling them racist, researchers commonly used the following semantic substitutes to describe campus environments that minoritized students, faculty, and administrators often encountered: “alienating,” “hostile,” “marginalizing,” “chilly,” “harmful,” “isolating,” “unfriendly,” “negative,” “antagonistic,” “unwelcoming,” “prejudicial,” “discriminatory,” “exclusionary,” and “unsupportive.” One or more of these terms was used in the “Discussion” and “Implications” sections of 63.1% of the articles. Rather than naming what participants had experienced as “racism,” more common terms were “minority stressor” and “racial tension.”

Likewise, in some articles, researchers reported findings related to stereotypes that minoritized students faced at PWIs but rarely referred to them as “racist” stereotypes. For example, four studies on Asian American students referred to the “model minority myth,” but included no discussion of its implicit racist assumptions. In these instances, it seemed that the myth itself was being used as a semantic substitute. Even articles describing low expectations that White professors held for students of color, or their resistance to hiring minoritized applicants for open faculty positions, failed to characterize such attitudes and corresponding actions as racist.

### ***[Un]Critical Race Theory in Higher Education Journals***

In her 1998 article, “Just What Is Critical Race Theory and What’s It Doing in a Nice Field like Education?” Gloria Ladson-Billings describes the

**TABLE 2**  
**JOURNAL ARTICLES USING “RACISM” AND/OR “RACIST”**

<i>Journal</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>The Review of Higher Education</i>	5
<i>The Journal of Higher Education</i>	9
<i>Research in Higher Education</i>	6
<i>Journal of College Student Development</i>	21
<i>Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice</i>	6
<i>Community College Journal of Research and Practice</i>	6
<i>Community College Review</i>	2

emergence of an epistemological lens that had been recently imported from other fields (namely, legal studies) to critically examine race and racism in education. Reportedly, critical race theory (CRT) had not yet been widely employed in the study of schools, education policy, and pedagogical practices in the mid-1990s. In fact, she and William F. Tate IV (both of whom are past presidents of the American Educational Research Association) had recently introduced a critical race theory of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997). For more than a decade, CRT has been increasingly used to analyze a range of issues related to racism, racial inequities, and the experiences of minoritized persons at all levels of education. (For comprehensive syntheses of these published studies, see Dixson and Rousseau, 2005, and Lynn and Parker, 2006.)

Specifically in the higher education context, CRT has proven useful in examining the marginalization, stereotyping, and racial stress routinely experienced by students and faculty of color (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002; Harper, 2009; Harper et al., 2011; Mitchell, Wood, & Witherspoon, 2010; Patton & Catching, 2009; Patton, McEwen, Rendón, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Teranishi, Behringer, Grey, & Parker, 2011; Villalpando, 2003; Yosso et al., 2009). In addition to these and several dozen other peer-reviewed journal articles, books have also been recently published on CRT in education (e.g., Cole, 2009; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Parker, Deyhle, & Villenas, 1999; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009; Yosso, 2006). The third edition of the *ASHE Reader on Racial and Ethnic Diversity* (Harper & Hurtado, 2011) includes an entire section on critical race scholarship pertaining to higher education. Moreover, scholars have convened annually for a CRT in education conference, presented papers and symposia on CRT at other national conferences (including the Association for

the Study of Higher Education annual meeting), and taught graduate-level CRT in education courses at such research universities as the University of Arizona, UCLA, Iowa State University, and the University of Pennsylvania.

Despite CRT's proven utility for making sense of race-related findings in education research and the popularity of its use in other peer-reviewed education journals, only five articles published in the seven journals selected for analysis in this study used CRT as a framework: Harper, Patton, and Wooden (2009); Jayakumar, Howard, Allen, and Han (2009); Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, and Bowles (2009); Park (2008); and Patton (2006). These authors used the terms "racism" and "racist" throughout their articles and did not opt for semantic substitutes to describe or theorize about their findings. Here is one example:

Although many respondents experienced indifference and subtle hostility, one thread that ran through all the data, despite the time period, was that undeniably racist acts were constant. The responses that were coded as racist included racial epithets and insulting humor. (Johnson-Bailey et al., 2009, p. 193)

More than most other articles reviewed for this study, the five articles that employed CRT were considerably more likely to treat racism as both individual and institutional. For instance, Jayakumar et al. argued, "The discussion must be expanded to include and place greater emphasis on how White faculty benefit from institutional racism irrespective of whether they are consciously aware of or actively support racist attitudes/practices/policies" (p. 555).

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In a landmark affirmative action case, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun asserted, "In order to get beyond racism, we must first take account of race. There is no other way" (quoted in Harper & Hurtado, 2011, p. viii). In this article, I argue the inverse of Justice Blackmun's perspective: In order to get beyond persistent racial disparities and to realize the vision for a version of American higher education that is truly equitable and inclusive, we must first take account of racism and its harmful effects on people in postsecondary contexts. In my view, there is no other way. Findings in this study make clear that most higher education researchers have attempted to take account of racial differences in college access and student outcomes, as well as in the racially dissimilar experiences of Whites and minoritized persons, without considering how racist institutional practices undermine equity and diversity.

I do not believe that every racial disparity or negative experience a minoritized person has is attributable to racism. However, as noted in the previous section, most higher education scholars rely on everything but racism in

their attempts to explain, theorize about, and discuss findings that emerge in their race-related studies. This trend is consistent with approaches sociologists commonly employ in their research (Bonilla-Silva & Baiocchi, 2001). In some ways, this approach is sensible, as complex topics like racial differences in student attrition and faculty turnover cannot be easily explained by a narrow set of factors. But my question is this: Why not racism? Why is it inconceivable that what a minoritized person occasionally experiences is not a “chilly climate” but instead a racist environment?

Bonilla-Silva (2009) contends that people typically avoid the topic of racism because they do not like to think of themselves as racist or as being somehow complicit in the cyclical remanufacturing of racism. This reaction could be true for some scholars who publish their research in the seven higher education journals analyzed for this study. It is possible that some writers subconsciously avoid naming racism in publications because it is not engaged as plausible in their everyday lives and professional work. Sensemaking of race-related findings in our research might be informed by and consistent with the ways racial matters are handled in the institutional contexts in which we teach and interact with diverse others. Pollock (2004) found that educators in a high school and California school district avoided talking about racism, despite the existence of numerous quantified racial disparities among students. She refers to this avoidance as “colormute.” The semantic substitutes that higher education scholars opt for are reminiscent of the “race labels” routinely used by the educators Pollock studied. Might conversations about racism be so muted in our daily conversations and sensemaking that such evasion has a spillover effect in how postsecondary researchers interpret race-related findings in our work? This question is worthy of exploration in a future study.

One related finding is reported in Harper and Hurtado (2007). Specifically, a theme from our multi-institution study of campus racial climates is that race and racism were deemed taboo and unspeakable topics. That is, students, faculty, and administrators reportedly adhered to an unwritten code of silence regarding racism, mostly to avoid making others feel uncomfortable. It is possible that those who submit their work for publication in higher education journals and elsewhere use semantic substitutes for racism to avoid causing discomfort to reviewers, editors, and readers. Unarguably, “hostile,” “alienating,” and other such words used to characterize campus environments are not as emotionally loaded or politically risky as the term “racist.”

It also seems reasonable to suggest that aspiring higher education scholars are socialized to use assorted semantic substitutes for “racism.” That is, what they are assigned to read in graduate degree programs (including articles from the seven journals reviewed in this study) and how their professors engage race in class discussions collectively convey the normative parameters



of racial sensemaking in our field. Because they do not read about it in the literature or talk about it explicitly in class, many graduate students could be led to believe, perhaps unintentionally, that racism no longer exists. But as Bonilla-Silva (2009) maintains, racial stratification would not sustain itself in the absence of individual, structural, and institutionalized racism.

Eventually, early-career scholars transition to mid-career roles and then onward to the senior ranks of academia. If their graduate education does not permit deeper examinations and more honest conversations about racism and racist institutional norms, many will spend their careers doing what Perez Huber, Benavides, Malagon, Velez, and Solórzano (2011) refer to as studying the “symptom” (racial disparities) without understanding the “disease” (racism and White supremacy). According to Delgado (1984), many White legal scholars believe that the race of the person arguing for civil rights does not matter as long as someone is advocating equity and racial justice. In the same way, higher education researchers could deem it unnecessary to use “racism” and “racist” instead of the more popular semantic substitutes that aim to focus awareness on the experiences of minoritized persons. Consistent with Delgado’s perspective, I believe it matters greatly whose voices get included and are privileged in race-related scholarship, as well as what we term the practices, policies, and structures that undermine racial equity.

As stated earlier, it is not my argument that racism is an explanatory factor for all racial inequities and everything pertaining to minoritized persons. I also am not suggesting that critical race theory is the only useful lens for studying race in postsecondary contexts. In fact, in the past nine years, I have used popular theories of student engagement (Astin, 1984), social capital (Bourdieu, 1987), racial identity development (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Cross, 1995), campus ecology (Strange & Banning, 2001), stereotype threat (Steele, 1997), within-group racial heterogeneity (Celious & Oyserman, 2001), and surprise and sensemaking in organizational contexts (Louis, 1980) in my publications on Black male undergraduates. Therefore, it would be unreasonable and contradictory to argue that these theories are somehow no longer useful for studying minoritized populations in higher education.

As reported in my “Findings” section, CRT, an interdisciplinary analytic lens that has been widely used in other disciplines (and even in other sectors of education), has been used in only five articles published in the higher education journals analyzed for this study. It is noteworthy that higher education scholars (e.g., Hughes & Giles, 2010; Patton & Catching, 2009; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Taylor, 2000) have published articles using CRT in other peer-reviewed academic journals. Their work demonstrates the utility of CRT in examining complex race-related phenomena and problems in U.S. colleges and universities. Researchers who wish to critically examine the race effects of higher education policy and practice and better understand

why longstanding racial inequities appear so inextricable, need to invite voices from minoritized populations concerning our experiential realities and explore contradictions regarding espoused and enacted institutional values concerning racial diversity. In achieving these aims, scholars would likely find CRT a useful lens for analysis.

### CONCLUSION

Although this article articulates several critical perspectives, what I have written here reflects professional care as well as a sincere personal commitment to the advancement of our field. One central argument of CRT is that racism is normal and endemic to U.S. social institutions, including colleges and universities. Critical race scholars have long argued that those who embark upon the elusive quest for racial justice must be willing to acknowledge racism as real (Bell, 1987). I honestly believe that the overwhelming majority of higher education scholars whose research I analyzed for this study are authentically interested in narrowing racial gaps, diversifying college and university campuses, and doing research that informs the creation of environments that no longer marginalize persons of color. I am afraid, however, that these aims will not be achieved if we continue to study race without critically examining racism.

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