Restructuring for Whom? Race, Class, Gender, and the Ideology of Invisibility

Margaret L. Andersen

This paper examines how changes resulting from economic restructuring affect views of racial inequality across different race, class, and gender groups. First reviewing some of the consequences of restructuring for different race, class, and gender groups, the paper also reviews research documenting the different views of racial inequality held by dominant and subordinate groups. The paper concludes by examining how race-blind ideologies affect discussions of race and multiculturalism and suggests that race-blind thinking has thwarted teaching about structural racism.

KEY WORDS: racial ideology; economic restructuring; race, class, and gender studies; multiculturalism; diversity.

INTRODUCTION

In the novel, Blanche on the Lam, the protagonist Blanche—a savvy middle-aged African-American domestic worker—solves the crime by being privy to the secrets of white people in the household where she works. In her taken-for-granted and invisible status as a domestic worker, she sees what others cannot see and has keen powers of observation of the habits and traits of white people. As the narrator writes, "Blanche wondered if people who hired domestic help had any idea how much their employees learned about them while fixing their meals, making their beds, and emptying their trash" (Neely, 1992:115, 116). Blanche's view of the white household and

1Originally presented as the presidential address, Eastern Sociological Society, Boston, March 5, 1999.
2Department of Sociology, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware 19716; e-mail: mla@udel.edu.
the knowledge she acquires through her social role are the key to solving two murders—those of the white southern sheriff and an African-American gardener.

The point here is that Blanche’s position as an African-American domestic worker is central to her knowing. Her social location, were it written in the academic literature, would be labeled as what Collins (1990, 1997, 2000) calls black women’s standpoint. In the tradition of W. E. B. DuBois’s thinking on the dual consciousness of African-American people, Collins argues that black women’s movement between two different communities generates a distinctive consciousness about race, class, and gender. Exposed often to the most intimate details of white people’s lives, black women’s knowledge of white society may be unknown and unappreciated by whites. As “outsiders within,” black women’s knowledge is rooted in an understanding of how race, class, and gender operate in a system of power, privilege, and inequality. Thus, black women’s standpoint is not just one relativistic view among many—as if every viewpoint were equally valid and true. Instead, the idea of black women’s standpoint rests on the premise that some groups in society have a more complete view, particularly of the system of stratification that buttresses their lives and the lives of others.

Although Blanche is a fictitious character, there is sociological truth revealed in the telling of her life. Sociologists can document the different interpretations that diverse groups in society have of the system of racial, ethnic, gender, and class stratification. Who sees privilege and inequality? Who can afford to think of society as color-blind, as gender-blind, or as an open class system? In the context of the restructuring of society, how do different groups interpret the advantages and disadvantages that they and others experience?

I chose the theme for the 1999 ESS annual meeting, “Restructuring Society: Changing Life Chances and Social Justice,” because my life’s work and that of the sociologists whom I admire has focused on social inequities—inequities brought by continuing systems of racial, gender, and class stratification. How are different people’s lives affected by the restructuring of society and how do different groups understand and interpret the changes that are afoot?

Since the late 1990s, we have heard that “the economy is strong,” our students face a good job market, and the future is bright. Yet, as sociologists, we should be asking the disquieting questions, essentially and most broadly represented by the question, “Good for whom?” or “How are different race, class, and gender groups faring in the context of economic restructuring?”

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3See also *Blanche among the Talented Tenth* (New York: Penguin, 1995); *Blanche Cleans Up* (New York: Viking, 1998), and *Blanche Passes Go* (New York: Viking, 2000).
The divisions are glaring. At a time when the structural intersections of race, gender, and class continue to matter so much in shaping group life chances, how can the dominant ideology posit that race, class, and gender no longer matter? To whom are the effects of restructuring visible and to whom are they invisible? "Diversity" has become a euphemism for a wide constellation of social facts: increased immigration, growth in interracial marriage, desegregation in some institutional sectors, increased presence of women in the labor market, and increased recognition of the significance of racial-ethnic groups in society, to name some. The general public has become more aware of diversity. Being conscious of diversity, however, seems not to translate into an understanding of how different groups are faring. What does this suggest for an agenda for sociological teaching and research?

This paper begins by reviewing the consequences of societal restructuring for diverse groups in the United States. Next is a discussion of the dominant belief systems that frame current ideologies about race, class, and gender. Finally, the paper discusses the implications of restructuring and the dominant ideology accompanying restructuring for sociological teaching and research. How do we reconcile the fact that race and class and gender are so fundamental in structuring society and in the shaping of life chances with the dominant belief system that we live in a color-blind, class-blind, gender-blind society? Indeed, as Bell (1998) has noted, many whites think that race- and gender-conscious programs intended to remedy inequities are a greater wrong than race and gender inequities themselves.

RESTRUCTURING SOCIETY: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER

What does restructuring mean? Restructuring is an evolving process, referring broadly to the historical transformation from a manufacturing-based economy to a service-based economy. This transformation is marked by specific demographic, social, and economic changes, namely the deindustrialization of the labor force, an increasingly global basis to the economy, an increase in the racial-ethnic diversity of the population, and the development of extraordinary technologies that are rapidly changing our lives. At the same time, restructuring involves significant redistribution of capital and increasing stratification between classes and race and gender groups. Sociologists and economists are documenting the various consequences of restructuring for diverse groups in the United States. Briefly reviewed below are some of these consequences, particularly observed by trends in wealth holdings, wages, income distribution, and time and stress.
The Distribution of Wealth

As Oliver and Shapiro (1997) have demonstrated, sharp contrasts in the wealth of black and white Americans have created a sedimentation of black and white inequality such that, even with improvements in income level, the ability of black Americans and other disadvantaged groups to move ahead and do so securely is severely compromised. Oliver and Shapiro (and now, Conley, 1999) have shown how wealth accumulates over generations; racial exclusion in lending, housing segregation, and historical patterns of discrimination have created significant differences in the contemporary class standing of blacks and whites. Intergenerational transmission of wealth advantages those who over time have been able to accumulate resources and disadvantages those who have not. Thus, even those at similar levels of income have very different levels of wealth, thereby undermining the economic stability of those with the least wealth and contributing to persistent racial inequality.

Data reveal enormous differences in patterns of wealth across race and class groups. From 1989 to 1997 the national share of wealth held by the top 1% of the U.S. population grew from 37.4 to 39.1%; at the same time, in 1997, the typical middle-class family has 3% less wealth than it had in 1989. The richest 10% of households have reaped 85.8% of the growth in the stock market (Mishel et al., 1998). And, as Oliver and Shapiro (1997) have shown, wealth differences by race are huge and the gap is growing. Thus, when we hear about the booming economy, we should be asking, “Booming for whom?”

You can see these trends in everyday life. Airlines are creating more room in first class: a market is growing for luxury cars; expensive malls dot the white suburban and urban landscape. While popular television shows promote the ideology that anyone can get rich by simply answering a few simple questions (see Gamson. 2000), only some can afford the high-priced products that symbolize the prosperous lifestyle. Increasingly, the marketplace is dividing into those who are well-off and those who provide personal services to those with money. As Reich (1998) has pointed out, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates a 40% increase in the number of groundskeepers plus 39% more restaurant cooks, waiters, and hotel staff.

Family Income Trends

Throughout the 1990s, median family income (in real dollars) was lower than in 1989. Although by 1997, median family income had recovered to the level of 1989, this was true only for white and black families (not Hispanics
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and Asian-Americans). Indeed, in constant dollars Hispanic median income in 1998 was still less than in 1989—indeed it is lower than it was in 1972 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). Family income is primarily based on wages, which have been falling for lower-skilled workers—indicating the negative effects of restructuring for particular groups, namely those with fewer skills and less education (Wilson, 1996). Thus, since 1989, median income has fallen for Asian-American men and Hispanic men. Risen for black and white men and risen for women of all racial groups (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999). Whether these trends will persist remains to be seen. In 1999, for example, the wage gap between women and men working year-round and full-time that had been closing for the past 30 years actually widened (from 74% in 1998 to 72% in 1999, from an original gap of 59% in 1970; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000a,b).

Economists have noted a decline in the value of real wages over the period from the 1970s to the late 1990s with inflation-adjusted earnings 3.1% lower on average in 1997 than in 1989. Thus, in 1989 the median hourly wage for male workers was $13.22: in 1997 it was $12.63 (measured in constant dollars). Wages for the bottom 80th percentile of men are lower in 1997 than in 1989; the median male worker’s real wage fell 6.7% and the decline in real wages is worst for entry level workers (Mishel et al., 1998).

These aggregate data can be misleading, however, since differences in the level of actual income for these groups and the degree of change for different groups are significant. Thus, white men’s median income has increased from $27,425 to $27,846, but this is a negligible increase. Black men’s income has increased by 16.5% (from $16,575 to $19,321—only 69% of white male income). Hispanic men’s income has declined from $17,615 to $17,257 (62% of white men’s income); Asian men’s income has declined most, from $27,092 to $25,124 (a 7% drop; 90% of white men’s income).

Economists have also shown that those in the lowest 20th percentile of the labor force have experienced a 22% drop in wages since the 1970s (Smith, 1998). And, while there has been some closing of the earnings gap between black men and white men, the closing of that gap is now eroding (Cancio et al., 1996). The overall racial gap in per capita income has also ceased to decline (Hogan and Perrucci, 1998; Jaynes and Williams, 1989). It remains to be seen whether current economic growth will change these data.

**Gender and Restructuring**

What is happening for women through restructuring? Median income for women has increased among all groups since 1989, although less so for Hispanic women. White women’s income rose by 13% (from $12,898 to
$14,617; 52% of white men's income); black women's by 27% (from $10,352 to $13,137. 90% of white women's income and 47% of white men's); Hispanic women's by 8% (from $10,052 to $10,862. 74% of white women's income, 39% of men's); Asian-American women's income rose by 3% (from $14,734 to $15,228. 104% of white women's income, 55% of white men's). For all women, median income still falls below the federal poverty line (for a family of four; U.S. Bureau of Census, 1999). This makes questions of economic justice central to the continued success of the women's movement.

Overall, women's wages are up 22 cents since 1978. Real wages for women grew 0.8% in the 1990s (5.7% of the previous decade), but there was a 6.1% decline in wages for women in low-wage jobs. Mishel et al. (1998), authors of The State of Working America, conclude that, after a decade of growth in wages for most women, between 1989 and 1995, the bottom two-thirds of women in the labor force saw their wages decline—again showing the differential impact of restructuring on working-class women and women of color. Furthermore, this decline is happening at a time when families are already working at their maximum capacity and when female-headed households are increasingly common.

**Time and Stress**

The impact of restructuring is not solely economic, although the material realities frame the everyday reality of people's lives. Most people are working harder to stay in place, an effort falling disproportionately on women. Consider this: Median income has risen for the two-earner middle-class family—the only household type that meets the national median income level—but this is mostly the result of wives working longer hours. Without the greater workload that is falling on women, real family median income would be lower than it was in 1989. Thus, the income growth that has been seen for middle income families is driven by an increase in their total annual working hours—calculated by economists to be an additional 6 weeks per year since 1989. Calculations indicate that from 1989 to 1996 husbands increased their annual working hours from 2207 to 2227 h (a total of 20 h more per year) while wives increased their hours of employment from 1342 to 1458 h—a total of 116 more hours per years, 8 more 8-h days per year! (Mishel et al., 1998).

**Income Distribution**

These data show some of the consequences of restructuring for different groups in the system of social stratification. This is perhaps most dramatically shown by looking at changes in income growth for different race-class groups
in the population. (Unfortunately, these data are not reported in such a way as to reveal gender as well).

In the U.S. population as a whole, significant trends in income growth over the past 20 years vary by group location in the system of stratification. Table I tabulates the growth and decline in income for five income quintiles (and the top 5% of income groups) from 1978 to 1998, based on U.S. census data.

These data show that the greatest gains in income have been by those in the top 5 and top 20% of income brackets. Furthermore, gains by whites and Hispanics in these two top groups exceed gains by blacks in the same segments of the population. At the lower end, blacks and Hispanics have lost income over this 20-year period and whites have remained relatively stagnant (in the bottom quintile). Furthermore, for all racial groups in the first three quintiles, losses during the decade of the 1980s have not been made up for through gains in the 1990s.

These data are further analyzed in a series of line graphs, depicting changes in income growth over this 20-year period. Figure 1 shows income growth and decline in the aggregate for all racial groups. Figure 2 shows the trends for whites only. Fig. 3 for blacks only. and Fig. 4. for Hispanics only.

What do these figures illustrate?

- The most dramatic income growth for all racial groups has occurred within the top 5% and the top fifth of the stratification system;
- For all but the top 20%, income growth for all groups has been relatively flat;

- Hispanic income growth lags behind that of all other groups and has been negative for all Hispanic classes except the top 20%;
- For all racial groups, the greatest decline in income growth has been for the lowest fifth of the population; this is most pronounced for Hispanics and, second, for African-Americans;


- Gains in income for the African-American and Hispanic top 20% do not match those for whites in the top 20%; the same is true for the top 5%.

Putting these social facts together with other sociological developments reveals some of the consequences of restructuring for diverse race, class, and

gender groups in the population. These changes have significant implications for ideologies about inequality. Persistent structural inequality is simply less visible to dominant groups, with increasing gaps in the perceptions of dominant and subordinate groups in the causes of continuing inequality.

**INVISIBLE IDEOLOGY: THE INDIFFERENCE TOWARD DIFFERENCE**

Alba (1999) has pointed out that racial stratification is one of the bedrocks of American society. Knowing that, and with the empirical evidence on restructuring firmly in mind, how do we explain the fact that the intersections of race, class, and gender are so fundamental to the shaping of inequality, power, and privilege—yet members of the dominant group so firmly assert that race no longer matters and that the gender revolution is over? There is increased recognition of “diversity in American society” and, yet there is also a persistent belief among privileged groups that race does not matter. This belief keeps people blind to the continuing differences in power and privilege that characterize U.S. society, making it difficult to generate public support for programs designed to reduce inequality.

Public beliefs about race and gender are framed by implicit liberal philosophy, presuming color- and gender-blindness as the ideal. But this masks the continuing inequities involving race, class, and gender. For example, in the criminal justice system, 20 years ago there was more consciously expressed and intentional racism in the criminal justice system; yet, with allegedly race-neutral policies now in place, race differences in outcomes in the criminal justice system are even greater than before (Blumstein, 1998).

What evidence do we have of dominant group beliefs about the nature and source of inequality? Most of these studies are based on survey data and have focused on questions of attribution of blame for racial inequality. Thus, Howard Schumann et al. (1997) in an analysis of General Social Survey data find that, although prior to the mid 1960s 43% of whites blamed whites for black disadvantage, since 1968 the number doing so has declined to 14%. Over half (56%) of whites now blame blacks themselves, compared to only 19% who did so in 1963. Furthermore, less than one-third (32%) said in 1998 that black disadvantage is mainly due to discrimination. The limitation of such surveys is that they have only examined blame either as a matter of individual responsibility (either whites or blacks) or as a matter of discrimination (in a context where de jure discrimination has ended). In a society where systems of racial privilege no longer necessarily rest on overt discrimination or individual prejudice, such surveys are incomplete because they do not tap people’s perceptions of entrenched, structural inequality.
Larry Bobo and James Kluegel’s work on public opposition to race targeting and public beliefs about inequality is another good starting point for thinking about dominant ideologies and the perspectives of subordinated groups. Bobo (1998) finds that there is a consensus among the U.S. public on the ideals of integration, but there is also strong racial polarization around specific dimensions of beliefs about inequality and programs for social change. More specifically, African-Americans endorse structural explanations for poverty more than whites and, second, whites perceive race-targeted policies as benefiting blacks to the exclusion of whites (Bobo and Kluegel, 1993; Kluegel, 1990). There is also a strong class influence on who sees structural advantage; thus, 58% of those with incomes over $50,000 think wealth is the result of individual effort, compared to 46% of those with incomes under $50,000 believing so (McMurray, 1990).

Bobo and Kluegel’s research shows increasing public support for principles of equality, but, an overwhelming majority of whites oppose race-targeted policies, even though they do support compensatory racial policies, such as job and educational training programs—so-called “opportunity enhancement programs.” Similarly, Wilson (1996) and others have pointed out, there is strong public support for government programs that increase employment opportunities and job skills for all groups. This is consistent, Bobo and Kleugel point out, with the norm that people should be able to help themselves, but whether or not groups see significant structural advantage and disadvantage nonetheless varies greatly by race and class location. In general, there is strong racial polarization around policies to combat racial inequality. African-Americans and Latinos are more likely to think of discrimination as the central axis of oppression, whereas whites are more likely perceive discrimination in terms of idiosyncratic, isolated incidents.

Jennifer Hochschild’s work on the American dream is also pertinent here (Hochschild, 1995). Hochschild shows that, although blacks and whites believe equally in the American dream as a prescription for society and as descriptive of their own lives, African-Americans have become increasingly discouraged about whether the dream applies to them. Thus, while middle-class blacks have improved their socioeconomic standing, their belief in the American dream has declined sharply. They see that racial discrimination is worsening in some areas of life. While they continue to believe that success lies in their own hands, they are also increasingly pessimistic about the ability of African-Americans to succeed and they believe the dream works only for those who are not black.

and women in how each group interprets its life chances. Their data reveal perceptions of social structural explanations and how they differ by race and gender groups. Based on an analysis of two cities, Buffalo and Jersey City, Fine and Weis show that deindustrialization and restructuring have been especially hard on families headed by younger workers. They conducted extensive interviews with African-American, Puerto Rican, and white men and women, focusing on young, working-class and poor adults aged 23–35—those who are entering adulthood and trying to establish their family and work lives. Fine and Weis find clear race-based differences and gender-based differences in how these young adults see their economic and familial struggles, how they explain the decline of their urban neighborhoods, and who or what they blame for their problems. White men in Fine and Weis’ study blame blacks for the economy that is failing them, but they are silent on the role of elites in shaping their life chances. Instead, white men blame blacks for not working, for welfare abuse, and they blame affirmative action for the lack of opportunity they experience. Even though these white men have themselves received welfare benefits, they define themselves as deserving and black people as “freeloaders.”

Fine and Weis explain this apparent contradiction by analyzing not only race, but also the social construction of masculinity. Thus, although it is typically unexplored in other studies, there is a gender component to these belief systems. Fine and Weis argue that, as jobs for working-class men have been deindustrialized, jobs in the service sector no longer lend themselves to the construction of physical masculinity that characterized earlier work for men. White men then see themselves as unable to “be men” by protecting and supporting their families, so they set themselves up as men in opposition to what they define as a black “other.” The men’s construction of the “other”—the undeserving African-American other—is then defined as the cause of their economic demise.

African-American men, on the other hand, offer broader-based social critiques. Instead of blaming individuals or groups, they have an articulated critique of racism and society “woven around notions of job availability” (Fine and Weis, 1998:28). They see their problems and those of their community as the result of a lack of jobs for men and they blame the system of economics, racism, disinvestment in urban communities, and, for that matter, police harassment of them and their neighbors.

According to Fine and Weis’ study, Puerto Rican men do not have the same institutional critique that African-American men have developed since their belief system is one that is centered on asserting a specific racial and cultural space for themselves, one centered in their search for an affirmation of their citizenship. For them, the construction of identity as Puerto Rican American men is central to their understanding of their life chances, but
they do not articulate the same structural analysis about jobs and police harassment that black men do. On the other hand, neither do accusations of blame against African-Americans enter their discourse as is the case for white men.

Similarly, we see a different perspective on life chances among the women in Fine and Weis' work. Neither white women, African-American women, nor Latinas articulate the system of disadvantage in the same way that men in any group do. All of these women see men's value in the family wage economy as deteriorating, with themselves pushed into "tighter domestic corners" (Fine and Weis, 1998:171) as a result. Violence—on the streets and in their homes—marks their everyday lives. Indeed, African-American women see themselves as under siege in deteriorating neighborhoods. Their critique is less of the system than of specific groups and people who directly impinge on their lives, either by withholding or providing resources for survival. Thus, they see African-American men as unable to sustain the family's economic well-being, but they blame caseworkers and other representatives of the system for withholding resources they see themselves as needing. (As an aside, they center their beliefs in a strongly religious and spiritual commitment, a fact well examined in this book). Latinas, mostly Puerto Ricans in their study, see themselves as struggling to assert family values and gender roles in their daily lives—roles that Fine and Weis see as both a source of strength and oppression for Puerto Rican women.

The white women in their study, along with Latinas and African-American women, desire protection and care for their children but do so within a context of extraordinary surveillance by the state, focusing on the women's experiences of mothering. Fine and Weis do not explore the women's perceptions of disadvantage per se so much as to detail the everyday realities of mothering in a society that has relinquished any social or moral responsibility for poor children (Fine and Weis, 1998:203). But their analysis suggests that all groups interpret their life chances in the context of their specific race, class, and gender locations.

Through these lives and through other studies, we see how one's structural location influences how visible or invisible structural inequality is. Among white privileged groups, isolation from racial and ethnic groups, exacerbated by patterns of segregation in housing, magnifies the tendency for them not to see the sources of differential life chances that clearly distinguish different group outcomes. Those who never or seldom encounter structural obstacles based on race or gender—obstacles that go beyond individual blame or overt discrimination—are unlikely to see the influence of such structural conditions.

In this ideological context, clearly questions are raised about how to create a common framework for social justice. Carol Swain's research suggests
that there are some conditions where whites and blacks can agree on programs designed to remedy inequity (Swain, 1998). She shows that, under some circumstances, people have a common sense of fairness. Using carefully constructed vignettes designed to tap people's understanding of "merit," Swain shows that there are conditions where groups can agree on what constitutes merit and can agree on affirmative steps needed to counter the disadvantage of some. Both blacks and whites will support admission of a less well-prepared student (even if a member of their group loses) when the person is perceived as coming from an underprivileged background (regardless of race) and as working hard to succeed. Yet, whites tend not to see the persistent structural disadvantages that other racial groups encounter. Herein lies the task for sociologists. As Swain herself concludes, there is a need for studies that identify and expose the hidden racism and discrimination that persists in housing, employment, policing, and education and we should use these studies to heighten public awareness of continuing structural inequity.

**Restructuring, Ideology, and the Sociological Perspective**

It would seem that the agenda for sociologists is clear: doing the research and teaching that will help people see the disquieting facts that might appeal to their sense of fairness and providing analyses that link the experience of diverse groups to the structural systems that perpetuate race, gender, and class stratification. The role of sociology as a debunking (or "unmasking") perspective provides the empirical grounds to reveal inequality. But for many in sociology this is not just to reveal "truth": there is also a long tradition of using sociological research to promote social justice—both through social action and social policy. At this crucial time in the nation's political economy, this is not the time to retreat from a mission of social justice, although within sociology there is significant resistance to this vision for the discipline.

Despite sociologists' traditional focus on race and stratification, despite at least 30 years of gender studies and 20 years of new scholarship on the intersections of race, class, and gender, there is still confusion among many—and outright resistance among a significant number—to taking the study of race, class, and gender seriously. As I have written about elsewhere (Andersen, 1999), resistance to analyzing social structural disadvantage occurs even among sociologists. In a review of an introductory text I have published with Howard Taylor—a book that takes diversity as a central theme in teaching the basic concepts and theoretical perspectives of the
field (Andersen and Taylor, 2000)—reviews by sociologists, who say they endorse a "diversity approach" in teaching introductory sociology, produced the following comments:

I don’t want to focus on race, class and gender because I’m uncomfortable teaching it. I don’t want to make my students ill at ease.

I do not want ... various groups in our society setting themselves apart from one another and jealously insisting on their "rights," "respect," etc. with consequences to follow if those are violated.

[Regarding the] focus on diversity: for some it is an excuse for nonperformance and for a racist/sextist agenda of their own.

I do not want the U.S. to become balkanized with different groups creating barriers to one another that lead to justifications for hostility, racial and ethnic cleansing.

[A focus on race, class, and gender puts] too much emphasis on people who didn’t make it.

These comments reflect a tendency to silence thinking about race, even within sociology—the discipline that has provided the most significant analyses of race and its connection to structural systems of power. Why? In some ways, race is a "hot" topic. Seized by cultural studies, race has moved to the forefront of literary scholarship, and it is central to campus discussions of diversity and multiculturalism. Although the new cultural studies paradigm builds from sociological work on the socially constructed character of race (Omi and Winant, 1994), the cultural studies paradigm poses significant problems in the conceptualization of race—namely by associating it primarily with "culture" and often disconnecting race from a focus on the structural dimensions of power that are embedded in the social construction of race. Thus, I see people wanting to acknowledge diversity, but avoiding any discussion of race and diversity that points to continuing inequity in group life chances—what I call "diversity without oppression" (Andersen, 1999)—or what I am seeing now as the desire to create only "happy sociology."

You can see these problems in the argument made by some in ethnic studies that ethnicity should be substituted for the concept of race. Some have suggested that the term race should be dropped, in part because of the wish to disassociate race from biological identity. Although this work is centered on the sociological idea that race is a socially constructed category, race is not just an illusion. Race is a socially constructed category, but the consequences of racial construction are real. Understanding otherwise reduces questions of group difference primarily to culture and identity when far more is at stake. Seeing race only as ethnicity or culture tends to ignore questions of class and economic status, as well as differences in group power—critical realities when analyzing contemporary race and ethnic
relations. Power and domination are central to understanding race and ethnic relations: any analysis that ignores this, as the ethnic framework alone is prone to do, runs the risk of eclipsing the ongoing power differences that define groups' experiences in the United States. To eliminate the concept of race would thus be a theoretical and political error, because, unlike ethnicity, it makes the analysis of power central to our thinking. Doing so leaves the analysis of race and ethnicity only at the level of culture and encourages "color-blind" analyses that ignore the continuing structural bases for racial inequality (such as those that dominated conservative thinking in the 1990s).

Whatever the conceptual flaws in the term "race," race remains a major part of the structural apparatus of society. It is a concrete social status with profound political, economic, and social consequences. The influence of postmodernist theory has helped us see the sometimes elusive, shifting, fluctuating nature of race, along with class and gender, but recognizing this shifting character should not cause us to lose sight of the reality of social structure. As Patricia Hill Collins writes, "It is common location within hierarchical power relations that creates groups, not the results of collective decision making of the individuals within groups. Race, class, social class, ethnicity, age, and sexuality are not descriptive categories of identity applied to individuals. Instead, these elements of social structure emerge as fundamental devices that foster inequality" (Collins, 1987:376).

Understanding diversity without understanding oppression leaves us confused about race and racism. Sometimes diversity seems only to call for recognition of the presence of different groups, but not to demand action or analysis that produces greater social justice—as if we were all part of a cultural smorgasbord, but not arrayed in a system of power and stratification. We would then be celebrating cultures, discovering the past, noting ethnic heroes and heroines, recognizing difference, but not structural connection, and perhaps making objects of "exotic others."

The tendency to reduce race to a matter of culture and identity, ignoring the study of power, not only leaves us analyzing racial—ethnic experiences only at the level of culture, but starts imagining forms of oppression as if they were all alike. Thus, it becomes easy in the politics of inclusion for students to state the importance of studying race, class, and gender, but knowing little, if anything, about the historical and contemporary realities of race in America. Like the white privileged characters in Neely's fiction who think they are all-knowing, but do not see the black domestic worker as fully "there," privileged groups in our classrooms see with cultural blinders—despite their good intent to recognize diversity and appreciate group difference. Restricting our thinking to ethnicity as multiculturalism (or diversity) means that
understanding race and ethnic relations becomes solely a matter of appreciating group differences and learning about the “other” (and oneself), but it does not make questions of group power, equity, and access central to a social and political agenda.

This is most problematic in discussions about multiculturalism—a growing educational movement and widely used term. I am myself committed to this movement and to multicultural change and inclusion, but I see multiple problems with the term “multicultural.” Multiculturalism has been most associated with the movement in higher education to be more inclusive in teaching about diverse group experiences. Multiculturalism gives attention to the historical exclusion of groups from the educational curriculum. It is a movement for institutional inclusion. The language of multiculturalism and diversity emphasizes difference and appreciation, and it has come to be expressed as including a range of “voices.” Indeed, “giving voice” has become a new phrase, intended, however grammatically awkward, to represent a process by which previously silenced groups can be heard.

True inclusion is more than a matter of “voice”—to use the metaphor that has become popularized in postmodernist discussions of identity and difference. Inclusion means access, rights, influence, power, and money. But, like most euphemisms, terms like multiculturalism and diversity have begun to blunt the imagination, since when they are associated only with culture, they ignore issues of justice, power, and equity. And, multiculturalism can polarize people into their own camps, working against an understanding of the very systems it was originally meant to illuminate race, class, and gender inequality. As a result, people can now conceptualize diversity as an individual group experience, wherein knowing all groups is an endless list of prefixes, histories, and conditions.

I see this discomfort whenever Patricia Hill Collins and I develop a new edition of our anthology. Race, Class, and Gender (Andersen and Collins, 2001). an anthology intended to analyze the intersecting social structural bases of race, class, and gender relations. We wrote this book to reveal the social structural axes of race, class, and gender inequality and to do so by placing the experiences of diverse groups at the center of sociological analysis. In the book we try to represent the many diverse groups that populate U.S. society, but when the the book is reviewed for a new edition, we are often asked to include everyone’s group. For example, reviewers suggest adding a white, heterosexual conservative man; a Cambodian-American working-class heterosexual woman, a gay, disabled African-American man, or “whatever!” Ultimately, this is an impossible task (even if our publisher gave us unlimited pages). Most importantly, such requests miss the point of an inclusive structural analysis, which is not to “count” every ethnic, racial, sexual,
gender, abled, class group, but to dissect the institutional arrangements by which systems of group privilege and disadvantage are created and sustained through group oppression. If diversity is just differentiation, it is culturally neutral, not a matter of equality, justice, and power. Furthermore, diversity taken this way means people continue to be defined as other, rather than as seeing race, class, and gender as central to the fabric of U.S. society. Little wonder then that campus politics about multiculturalism can pit groups against one another, instead of helping students see the unifying components of social structural organization.

CONCLUSION

In countless observations of university campuses and as revealed in the comments by faculty reviewers cited above. I sense among many faculty—sociologists included—a fear of teaching about race and the ongoing disadvantage that characterizes society. Sometimes faculty express that the problems of inequality are too depressing and thus make classroom teaching too difficult. This is, in part, an accommodation to growing conservatism among students (and faculty), but it raises questions about how we can teach students about the consequences of restructuring without depressing them so much that they become immobilized for action and change. Sociology does have a pessimistic edge—at least if one is realistic about the dynamics of power, race, class, gender, and privilege (Killian, 1971). Because of this, it is important that we also use sociological research to show students the possibilities for social justice and social change.

A good example is found in work by Becker (1998). Becker studied two church organizations, both of which were located in Chicago neighborhoods undergoing significant social and demographic change, making the communities more racially diverse. These changes posed a challenge for these churches to become more racially integrated if they were to reflect their local identity and maintain a feeling of community, closeness, and friendship among their members. The congregations underwent major transformations, developing a multiracial, multicultural identity and fostered a sense of inclusiveness. Becker analyzes the process by which these congregations redefined race, not as a “problem” but as a strength, thereby allowing the congregation to develop common institutional goals, without becoming fragmented by racial and class divisions. Within these two organizations, people developed a strong sense of inclusiveness that led to “an inclusive space across traditional cleavages” (1998:451). We have much to learn from her analysis. Perhaps in thinking about other such models, sociologists can find examples and analyses that encourage, rather than discourage, inclusionary, not exclusionary, behaviors and organizations.
Too often sociologists, like others, "race for innocence," as Pierce (1999) calls it, asserting that they are not individually racist, even while missing the basic sociological point that institutional racism can exist in the absence of individual prejudice. In an age when conservatives have appropriated the color-blind, gender-blind ideology of liberalism to retract the gains of recent years, I find many in dominant groups unable to articulate an understanding of race or gender that connects these experiences to systems of inequality. Thus, the ideological framework to not be conscious of race has actually made people unconscious of persistent structural racism, thereby encouraging a laissez-faire attitude toward existing institutional arrangements. Therefore, people can simultaneously recognize diversity, but not oppression; deny difference and appreciate diversity; be conscious of racial differences, but not conscious of continuing racial injustice. And, if, as Gilkes (2000) writes, "the discipline of sociology cannot comfortably confront the issues of gender, race—ethnicity, and class—issues that are at the foundation of our theoretical origins—how can we expect people in society to learn about these issues and envision social justice?"

We need new ways of thinking inclusively, such as recognizing the continuing significance of race and ethnicity, shifting our focus from the perspective of dominant groups and recognizing the multiplicity of experiences while placing this in the context of an analysis of privilege and power. Yet, I fear that the liberal framework of color blindness makes us silent in our thinking and speaking about race.

Writing about literature, Morrison (1992:11) has written that there is a "polite repression" of speaking, thinking, and learning about race and its interconnectedness with gender and class. She writes, "... in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate... The habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous liberal gesture. To notice is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce its visibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body" (1992:9, 10).

As in literature, so in sociology. In conclusion, if we do not speak about/write about/think about race, we cannot understand race and racism. But to do so we must move beyond the limits of liberal thinking, thinking that is framed in a perspective that race and class and gender should not matter. Without some hope that sociology can make a difference and without the work that shows how much race, gender, and class still do matter, we cannot expect to create a more socially just society. Surely by listening to those who have been most silenced and using the tools of sociological thinking we can make the invisible visible and envision a more just world.
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