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THE DISSEMINATION AND REPRODUCTION OF DOMINANT IDEOLOGIES ON
SOCIAL MEDIA: REDDIT THROUGH THE LENS OF COLOR-BLIND RACISM AND
GENDER-BLIND SEXISM

BY

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DISSERTATION

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in

Sociology

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On July 14, 2021

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of New Hampshire Graduate School.

DEDICATION

To Tara and Sam, my two favorite people.

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I would first like to thank my advisor and mentor, Dr. Cliff Brown. Your support and encouragement throughout the past few years was an invaluable resource for me. You helped make me a better student, researcher, and teacher. Our conversations helped me get through the times when I was struggling or felt discouraged.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the frameworks of color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism as they are disseminated through the social media site Reddit. I analyze data in the form of posts and comments submitted to the site. Qualitative discourse analysis reveals employment of the frames of color-blindness and gender-blindness as well as narratives which function to anchor the dominant ideologies to apparent lived experiences. This dissertation offers two major contributions to the scholarship of racism and sexism. First, the findings demonstrate that ideologies of race and gender are often articulated through common narratives and intertwined rhetoric, establishing a foundation for future research into ideologies of White masculinity. Second, the study reveals the crucial role of definitions of racism and sexism play in justifying systems that maintain racial and gender inequality. In particular, how a rigid adherence to an individual-level approach to definitions of racism and sexism is necessary for ideologies that support those systems. Taken together the findings demonstrate the power of social media in maintaining and reproducing the dominance of color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism.

Keywords: color-blind racism, gender-blind sexism, Reddit

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In May of 2014, college student Elliot Rodger went on deadly rampage, killing six people and wounding thirteen others in the small California town of Isla Vista. The attack ended after Rodger took his own life following a shootout with local police. In the hours before the attack, Rodger posted a video on YouTube to voice his frustration with sexual rejection and his anger at the women he considered responsible (Lovett and Nagourney 2014). Six years later, the murder of George Floyd at the hands Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin during an arrest sparked civil unrest and protests in Minneapolis that eventually spread across the United States. The demonstrations grew to be among the largest in American history (Buchanan et al, 2020) and Chauvin was convicted of murder charges (Demsas 2021). These two highly publicized events represent extreme examples of sexism and racism, respectively. Too often, incidents like these are examined in the public discourse in a vacuum, disconnected from the dominant ideologies from which they arise. In the Elliot Rodger case, the focus was often placed on his “vile manifesto” and identified him as a “deranged... loser” (Massarella, Rodenbuam, and Greene 2014) instead of connecting his ideology to a sense of male entitlement fostered by the patriarchy (Manne 2018). For some, such as U.S. Representative Jim Jordan of Ohio, Derek Chauvin’s conviction is evidence that “the justice system works” – as opposed to a reflection of a larger system of racial oppression in which his case represents an exception to the norm (Demsas 2021). This is not to say that we should ignore individual agency, or altogether avoid examining the specific details of these extreme cases. I argue instead that we should more attentively consider the ways in which dominant racial and gendered ideologies lay the foundation for these

extreme and violent examples of racism and sexism, as well as the broader organizing principles of our social structure.

Among the avenues through which dominant ideology is disseminated is social media. Digital technology has become increasingly embedded in our everyday life. The ubiquity of the internet as a source for news and information leads to users opening a dialogue through social media to engage in public discourse. There is virtually no limit to the variety of topics discussed online. Online public discourse is becoming progressively more meaningful to the American cultural milieu. Social movements, such as *Black Lives Matter* and *Arab Spring*, have utilized social media to promulgate their messages. Former President Barack Obama and other political leaders have engaged with the public using social media in ways that grant legitimacy to the public discourse happening online. Interaction with social media has become a regular feature of cable news programs, and even presidential debates. All of this works to increase the salience of online public discourse. During the lead up to his election and while in office, President Donald Trump utilized Twitter daily to reach an audience of millions. Trump himself believed his social media activity is what vaulted him to the Presidency – “Without the tweets, I wouldn’t be here,” Trump told *The Financial Times* in April 2017 (Berber, Sevastupulo and Tett 2017). Trump’s January 2021 ban from the Twitter, as well as other social media platforms, has effectively muzzled the former President, demonstrating the power of social media through its absence (Conger and Isaac 2021). The impact of social media is apparent in survey research as well -- nearly a quarter (23%) of adult social media users in the United States – and 17% of adults overall have “changed their views about a political or social issue because of something they saw on social media in the past year,” (Pew Research Center 2020).

Among the most popular social media websites in the United States is Reddit.com. The site has roughly 330 million users worldwide (Ohanian 2018), and as of 2021 was the seventh most popular website in the United States, above popular websites such as Yahoo, Twitter, and Netflix (Alexa 2021). Reddit's user base is disproportionately young and male, and mostly White. According to Pew Research Center (2020) 48% of U.S. adult Reddit users are aged 18-29, 67% are men, and 59% are White.

For a number of reasons, Reddit is a particularly effective platform for the diffusion of dominant ideologies and analyzing the dynamics of virtual interactions. First, Reddit can be seen as an access point for user-vetted content that presents subscribers with a personalized, continually updated, and inherently interactive way to locate and discuss online content. Unlike many online bulletin boards, content aggregation sites, or social networking platforms, Reddit offers a forum for sharing content and opinions on a seemingly infinite range of topics, but importantly, it also promotes efficient access through its use of subreddits to organize content thematically. Its breadth enables us to examine public discourse on race and gender as it arises in connection with a diversity of issues, websites, and news stories. Second, Reddit's system of upvotes and downvotes (both overall and within discrete categories and topics) brings select material to the forefront by increasing its visibility to subscribers and creates a mechanism for gauging the popularity of a particular post or sentiment. Here, it becomes possible to ascertain whether overt expressions of racism and sexism or more subtle manifestations of hidden racism and sexism are more likely to find favor on the site, when "old" or "new" ideologies of oppression are most likely to emerge, and how the various forms of discourse interact.

Third, Reddit's tremendous popularity offers a meaningful window into the evolution of online interaction in contemporary society including, but not limited to, discourse on race and

gender. Finally, given its broad appeal and the number of subscribers who use Reddit as a platform for digital interaction, it seems likely that the site may not just reflect, but also perpetuate the dissemination of specific frames or lines of discourse. By exposing users to discourse and world views that they might not otherwise encounter while simultaneously immersing them in a digital milieu that publicly rewards and sanctions individual sentiments, Reddit has considerable potential to “virtually socialize” its users.

The focus on this study is to examine dominant ideologies as they pertain to race and gender in online discourse. My analysis pays particular attention to the ways in which racial and gendered discourse intersect, occasionally even working in tandem to reinforce a cohesive White patriarchal belief system. The plan for the dissertation is as follows. Chapter 2 offers a review of current sociological thinking regarding institutionalized racism and sexism, as well as the theoretical foundation of the study. Chapter 3 will be a review of the data and methods used in this research. Chapter 4 begins the analysis. I explain the important role of definitions of racism and sexism and the way in which they shape our interpretations of beliefs and practices that shape a racial and gendered hierarchy. Chapter 5 details the four major frames of color-blind racism and how these frames are used in contemporary racial discourse. In Chapter 6, I apply parallel frames of gender-blind sexism to public discourse around gender. Chapter 7 features a discussion of common narratives that function to disseminate the dominant ideologies of race and gender. Finally, Chapter 8 features a comprehensive discussion of the analysis, limitations, and areas of further research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Dominant Ideologies

A dominant ideology is a system of ideas and beliefs shared by the majority of people that serve to benefit the dominant group. The concept of dominant ideologies is derived mainly from the teachings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In *The German Ideology* they write,

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (1846/1947:39)

From a Marxist, critical theory perspective, the ruling ideas are disseminated by the capitalist class to the proletariat for the purpose of maintaining an oppressive capitalist system. Antonio Gramsci expands upon the concept with his introduction of hegemony. Hegemony is a concept that explains the process through which inequalities are sustained, despite arising out of systems that benefit a few at the expense of the masses. The hegemonic ideologies encourage the consent of the proletariat by framing the norms, values, and rules of a society as beneficial to all, despite the fact that these elements of culture work to maintain the status quo. The dominant group can then rule without fear of reprisal because of the perception of a fair system (Gramsci, 1971).

Dominant ideologies are particularly effective in maintaining various systems of oppression. Gramsci applied the concept of hegemony primarily to socioeconomic stratification of capitalist societies, but other forms of hegemonic ideology have been expanded beyond simply social class. Hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity (Kessler et al. 1982; Connell et al. 1982; Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985, Connell 1987) continue to be among the most salient concepts in the study of gender and the maintenance of the patriarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The dominant ideologies that work to construct gender and maintain

patriarchy have been revealed through studies investigating the ideology of intensive motherhood (Hays 1996), men's feelings about fatherhood (Townsend 2010), young adults' attitudes about family structure (Gerson 2010), and teen boys' ideas about masculinity and sexuality (Pascoe 2011).

Hegemonic ideologies are not limited to upholding gender-based inequalities. A good example of cultural hegemony is found in the common refrain, "in America, anyone can grow up to be whatever they want if they work hard enough!" This sentiment resonates with the American ethos of meritocracy but ignores the structural impediments that many Americans (particularly members of marginalized groups) face when striving for upwards social mobility. Often, proponents of the belief in meritocracy will point to exceptional stories of people who rose up from modest beginnings to achieve wealth and prestige. These "rags to riches" stories are the exception rather than the rule, but they serve as anecdotal evidence that anyone can achieve success. The implicit message is that those who do not achieve wealth and prestige are limited by their own personal failings.

Dominant ideologies are instrumental in maintaining the current racial hierarchy as well. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2014) argues that color-blind racism represents the new dominant racial ideology. A racial ideology can be understood as "the racially based frameworks, used by actors to explain and justify or challenge the racial status quo" (2014:9). Bonilla-Silva's research highlights why it is so important to analyze the dominant ideologies. Prior to the civil rights movement, "old racism" was largely acceptable. Whites¹ were frequently open about their

¹ Throughout this study, I capitalize both "White" and "Black" when referring to members of the racial groups. There is some disagreement among linguists, sociologists, and journalists on whether the either term should be capitalized, but I am sympathetic to the argument that "Black" and "White" are both powerful social constructs with historical importance to justify capitalization. For a longer discussion see works by Painter (2020) and Eligon (2020).

opposition to desegregation. During the Jim Crow Era, overt racism was acceptable, or at least not stigmatized. Following the Civil Rights Movement, being openly racist became increasingly taboo. The legacy of racism as a feature of the entrenched social and political structure of White supremacy has persisted despite the growing stigma associated with old racism. Bonilla-Silva's book, *Racism Without Racists*, raises an important question: How can a social structure that perpetuates racial inequality exist in a society where the term "racist" is a stigmatizing label? A new racial ideology became necessary to maintain the racial order without the stigma of racism. Bonilla-Silva identifies an ideology of color-blind racism, a set of discursive strategies that reframe racial inequalities through non-racial explanations. As part of this study, I investigated the degree to which ideologies related to gender work in a way that parallels the process described by Bonilla-Silva. Furthermore, while Bonilla-Silva uses interviews explicitly about race relations to demonstrate the color-blind ideologies held by his study participants, I hypothesize that evidence derived from social media posts will reveal that dominant ideologies show up frequently in online public discourse regardless of a clear connection to the topic. This lack of connection speaks to the way in which dominant ideologies are weaved into everyday life and are reinforced through an often subtle, unconscious process.

I have explained what a dominant ideology *is*, but it is also important to note what a dominant ideology is not. Bonilla-Silva articulates this as well as anyone: "...an ideology is not dominant because it affects all actors in a social system in the same way and to the same degree. Instead an ideology is dominant if most members (dominant and subordinate) of a social system have to accommodate their view vis-à-vis that ideology, (2014:200)." Not everyone in a society must adhere to the dominant ideology, but all must account for it. For example, this pattern plays out in mothers who reject the dominant ideology of intensive mothering. Not every mother

strictly adheres to the dominant ideology, but when they deviate from it, they feel compelled to explain themselves with reference to the prevailing model of appropriate child rearing (Hays 1996). The next section will describe contemporary racial inequalities and outline the role of color-blind racism in maintaining them.

The Era of Color-Blindness

When the civil rights movement put an end to the era of Jim Crow, the United States was forced to adapt to an evolving racial structure. Gone was the formal legal apparatus that upheld and reproduced explicitly racially discriminatory practices. Discrimination in politics, employment, education, and housing were suddenly unlawful, and African Americans were ostensibly free to participate in the American society. However, the end of the explicitly racist system of Jim Crow did not end systemic racial oppression (Alexander 2012; Caldas and Bankston 2007; Conley 1999; Feagin 1991; Massey and Denton 1998; Pager, Bonikowski, and Western 2009; Shapiro 2004; Wilson 1987, 1996, 2009). Instead, the system adapted to the new legal and social structure.

To begin with, the legislative efforts to dismantle the formal system of racial control associated with the post-Civil War era of Jim Crow did nothing to address the deeply entrenched racial inequalities that had accumulated over centuries. Equality for minorities was true in theory but not in reality. Following the admittedly substantial gains of the civil rights movement, Whites increasingly believed that equality had been achieved, and that any remaining disparities between Whites and Blacks were primarily due to cultural deficiencies in the latter (Wilson 1987, 2009). Whereas racial disparities could be attributed to the legality of discrimination in the pre-civil rights period, their persistence into the 1970s and beyond seemed to hint at deeper, more pernicious deficiencies among non-Whites that would not disappear by legislative fiat. As

the United States entered the 21st century and the Jim Crow period receded ever farther into the past, temporal distance from legally sanctioned discrimination and de jure segregation further eroded historically sensitive understandings of contemporary racial inequality. Newer generations of Whites came to accept that they were living in a color-blind society, and evidence of racial progress in the form of successful minority celebrities, athletes, performers, and politicians as well as hopeful trends in education and earnings data seemed to validate that perspective (Gallagher 2003; Love and Tosolt 2011). Furthermore, the influx of an Asian-origin population in the United States and their socioeconomic success led to the formation the “model minority myth.” In addition to the negative impact on the Asian-origin population in the United States, the model minority stereotype works to buttress the claim that the United States is devoid of racism (Zhou 2004). Whites demonstrated an inability to understand their own experiences as racialized – that is, partially shaped by ongoing patterns of racial identity formation, segregation, and inequality (Gallagher 2003; Lewis 2004). In this context, explanations for lingering racial disparities were less likely to emphasize the role of white supremacy and the institutional arrangements that preserve white privilege and instead focused on the alleged failings of minorities themselves, particularly Black Americans.

Coinciding with shifts in the racial structure of the United States were shifts in the norms and values regarding race relations. Expressions of overt racial animus became increasingly taboo as color-blindness took over as recommended approach to racial matters (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Lewis 2004). Expressing overtly racist sentiments, or worse acting on them, violated emerging social norms that had evolved in conjunction with the color-blind narrative (Berry and Bonilla-Silva 2008: 207). However, America’s racial groups were still largely segregated, and the fortification of inequality that had developed over decades perpetuated

tenacious racial disparities in labor markets, housing, education, incarceration rates, and family structure (Oliver and Shapiro 1995: 5; Rugh and Massey 2010; Shapiro 2004). Most Whites are insulated by a “White habitus” that prevents meaningful interactions with other groups and impedes appreciation of the social and historical circumstances necessary for a nuanced understanding of such disparities (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 2006; Gallagher 2003; O’Brien and Korgen 2007; Zamudio and Rios 2006). Bonilla-Silva defines White habitus as “a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates white’s racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters,” (Bonilla-Silva 2018:121). However, to the extent that Whites confront these enduring racial inequalities at all, it is difficult to do so in overtly racist, or even racial, terms.

The theory of color-blind racism is part of a larger trend in recent decades of growing scholarly attention to the evolution of more subtle, indirect, flexible, and veiled expressions of racism. For instance, speakers often buttress such expressions with reference to widely shared values that honor equal opportunity and individualism, invoke narratives that reify “natural” or inevitable group differences, and deploy rhetorical strategies that deflect or compartmentalize evidence of persistent discrimination (Bonilla-Silva 2014: 73-99). This allows critical, negative appraisals of minorities to be presented as “non-racist.” A number of scholars in sociology and other fields have described the various ways that expressions of racism and racialized understandings have shifted in the post-civil rights era. As Augoustinos and Every (2007: 124) suggest, there is a general consensus that such “modern,” “symbolic,” or “new” forms of racism have become more prevalent than the overt expressions of prejudice characteristic of the pre-civil rights era (Bobo 1997; Barker 1981; Duster 2001; Maxwell, Dowe, and Shields 2013; McConahay 1986; Meertens and Pettigrew 1997; Olds 2011; Zamudio and Rios 2006).

Typically, analysts in sociology, social psychology, and linguistics have identified various types, categories, or frames into which these discursive tactics fall. I do not attempt a comprehensive overview here, but instead focus on the main analytical frames that parallel and have emerged from Bonilla-Silva's (2014) work. The four frames are Abstract Liberalism, Cultural Racism, Naturalization and Minimization of Racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018: 56-57).

Color-Blind Racism

The first frame discussed by Bonilla-Silva is *abstract liberalism*. Abstract liberalism employs ideals associated with economic liberalism, including the principles of liberty, equal opportunity, meritocracy, fairness, and individualism. (Bonilla-Silva 2014: 78-84). Widespread support for the principles of liberty, equal opportunity, meritocracy, fairness, and individualism can be called upon to justify positions that might otherwise seem racist or prejudicial (Augoustinos and Every 2007: 134-37; Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Every 2005: 319; Berry and Bonilla-Silva 2008; Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2014: 78-84; Zamudio and Rios 2006). Opposition to affirmative action, for instance, can be justified on the common sense basis that it discounts merit and hard work, undermines equal opportunity, and prioritizes group affiliation over individual qualifications (Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Every 2005: 319; Hughey and Daniels 2013: 338-340). Invoking abstract liberalism without acknowledging the historical basis of contemporary racial inequalities or the fact that an individual's ability to act is a function of the power held by the groups to which he or she belongs insulates those who oppose race-sensitive policies and programs from charges of racism (Augoustinos and Every 2007: 136; Bonilla-Silva 2014: 84). The contradiction between using egalitarian rhetoric to defend a position that perpetuates inequality is managed through a selective evaluation that discounts the

enduring effects of past inequality and prioritizes the liberties of some individuals and groups over others without necessarily appearing to do so.

Naturalization represents the second frame of color-blind racism. This frame holds that racial inequalities or phenomena result from “natural occurrences.” Residential segregation and homogamy among friends and intimate partners may be interpreted as being normal and even inevitable, a simple manifestation of individuals’ preferences for similar others (Bonilla-Silva 2014: 84-87). This obscures important racial asymmetries in power and implies that minorities have chosen to live in communities with failing schools, higher crime, and less valuable real estate (Alexander 2012; Caldas and Bankston 2007; Massey and Denton 1998; Shapiro 2004). To view differences in group experiences and opportunities as a product of choice and to see enduring segregation as something desired equally by racial minorities and Whites assumes that all individuals – regardless of racial group – are endowed with the same set of options for education, employment, residence, and social relationships. Such assumptions ignore the ways that racial background shapes the range of choices individuals actually have and many of the resulting consequences (Bonilla-Silva 2014: 87).

Bonilla-Silva’s third frame is cultural racism, which relies on assertions about cultural deficiencies as an explanation for racial inequality (2014: 87-89). The cultural racism frame is built from beliefs about the values and behavior of minorities. A lack of work ethic, failure to value education, individual health choices, criminality, and deficiencies in family values are all common tropes of the cultural racist frame. One unique quality of cultural racism is that it has support not only among the general public, but also in academic circles, albeit in a somewhat more sophisticated form. John Ogbu (1978) first introduced the notion of oppositional culture theory, a perspective that explains racial disparities through adaptations to structural factors. The

use of cultural explanations to explain racial inequality has been used by other academics in the years since, with varying degrees of acknowledgment of structural factors (Massey and Denton 1998: 163-169; Murray 1984; Wilson 1987, 2009).

The minimization of racism frame downplays the impact of discrimination in the life chances of people of color, while dismissing the systemic nature of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2014: 91-95). Even exceptional cases such as the 2012 death of Trayvon Martin at the hands of George Zimmerman are met with skepticism over the role of race (Cohen 2012). Deployment of the minimization frame is often coupled with a belief that members of minority groups are overly sensitive to racial issues and are quick to impose racial significance onto situations where it is not relevant, referred colloquially as “playing the racist card,” (Bonilla-Silva 2014: 91-95) or simply the “race card.”

In using these frames, speakers often ground their comments and opinions with reference to evidence, experiences, or stories that seem to impart factual legitimacy to the narrative (Augoustinos and Every 2007: 127; Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 2006). Such stories organize our experiences and reinforce our arguments by making them more persuasive, and they may also appeal to shared common sense understandings (Bonilla-Silva 2014: 10, 123). Prominent storylines suggest that racial injustices of the past have little bearing on the present (e.g., “I never owned slaves”), that reverse discrimination penalizes Whites (e.g., “I didn’t get that job because of affirmative action”), and that other groups’ (e.g., Asian Americans) success is evidence for racial egalitarianism and color-blindness in modern society (Bonilla-Silva 2014: 123-35; Bonilla-Silva, Lewis, and Embrick 2004).

Taken together, these frames serve to justify continuing racial inequality, allow for the expression of racial hostility in non-racial terms, reinforce in-group/out-group dynamics, and

provide a logical basis for opposing racially progressive policy. Color-blind frames need not be intentionally or consciously utilized, and indeed, they may derive much of their power from being habitually deployed in conjunction with a sense that they are natural, shared, and rooted in common sense. As Augoustinos and Every (2007: 134) have argued, the wide appeal of such justifications may help to insulate them from challenges or scrutiny, in part because they are received as “rhetorically self-sufficient.” Different frames can be invoked (or not) depending on the situation. Indeed, Augoustinos and Every (2007: 137) note that speakers will sometimes abandon a defense of principles rooted in abstract liberalism in the name of practicality, especially when “being practical” supports the status quo (e.g., “You can’t expect government to make everything equal”). Goodman and Rowe (2014: 42) find evidence for a “hierarchy of opposition to out-groups” such that individuals will acknowledge their own prejudice but do so as part of an effort to deny their racism. The pliability and situational nature of racialized meanings and of frame deployment allow individuals to hold seemingly contradictory views, selectively offer evidence, and adjust their positions to keep accusations of racism at bay (Bonilla-Silva 2014: 96; Augoustinos, Tuffin, and Every 2005: 320; Goodman and Rowe 2014).

Institutionalized Sexism

The ongoing reality of sexism has been the focus of a great deal of scholarship. Like racism, gender stratification is a historically embedded system of inequality. Throughout the history of the United States, women have been deprived of political, social, and economic power. Women were not granted the right to vote until the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Labor force participation among women has increased dramatically in the past fifty years, though a gap remains, due in large part to a culture that values men’s and women’s work differently (Greenwood et al 2016). One manifestation of this is the tendency for men to return to work

more quickly after the birth of a child (Kleven, Landais and Sorgaard 2018) and that women, particular mothers of children under ten, have been slower to return to work during the pandemic (McKinsey 2021).

These sort of patriarchal structures are maintained, in large part, through a careful cultivation of attitudes, behaviors, and systems that benefit men at the expense of women. Rawyn Connell's research offers a powerful insight into the ideologies that maintain gender stratification. Connell explains that we are socialized into accepting essential differences between masculine and feminine traits. Men are rewarded for embodying masculine traits such as strength, dominance, and assertiveness (Connell 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

The dominance of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity as gender ideologies explain the gendered expectations related to family structure, occupational choice, and labor market participation. Broadly speaking, men are still presumed to be breadwinners while women are expected to do the majority of work related to child rearing (Eagly et. al 2000). This remains true despite the increased role of women in the workplace in recent decades. Despite reported shifts towards egalitarian views on family gender roles (Gerson 2010), women still experience increased expectations for working in the home. These gendered expectations lead to a "second shift" where women come home from their day jobs to a home where they are expected to do most of the house work and child rearing (Hochschild and Machung 2012). According to the American Time Use Survey by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), full time working mothers spend about nine more hours per week on household chores and caring for household members than full time working fathers. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to spend their time on leisure activities after work.

Much of the sociological literature on sexism concentrates on work and the family. Scholars have focused on the work family dynamics that put a strain on mothers, rewarding them less while demanding more (Hochschild 1997; Hochschild and Machung 2012; Hays 1996). Although gradually narrowing, the gender pay gap persists. In 2015, female full-time workers earned 81 cents for every dollar earned by men (Hegewisch & DuMonthier 2016). While this gap has narrowed since the 1970s (Blau and Kahn 2017) the gender pay gap as a societal issue persists in a manner that is emblematic of the complicated ways in which contemporary institutionalized sexism works to disadvantage women. Much in the way that the civil rights era ushered in new rules regarding race relations, so too have norms and laws around women in the labor market shifted away from overt discrimination. Legal milestones such as the 1963 Equal Pay Act, Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*, and the 1994 Violence Against Women Act both reflect and encourage gender-based cultural, educational, and employment. The abundance of social research on the gender pay gap (Kleven, Landais, and Sorgaard 2018; Bertrand, Goldin and Katz 2010) has led to a number of policy makers calling attention to the issue, putting it on the forefront of discourse related to gender inequality.

While overt discrimination does account for a small portion of the gender wage gap (Goldin and Rouse 2000), it hardly tells the whole story. Women are less often the victims of overt discrimination than they are subject to gendered expectations around occupational choice and childrearing. The socialization of girls and women into lower paying occupations, the devaluing of “women’s work” and the expectation for women to put “family first” are all explanatory factors (Bertrand, Goldin, and Katz 2010). Research has demonstrated motherhood

wage penalties as well fatherhood wage premiums (Budig and England 2001; Kleven, Landais, and Sogaard 2018).

The attention paid to contemporary women's issues is not without a backlash. As with racism, claims of sexism are met with grumblings about political correctness or outright denial of the institutionalized inequalities. There is no shortage resistance to movements that acknowledge systems of oppression, and the internet proves to be a useful tool for those who wish to deny the realities of systems of oppression. For examples, as of 2018, four of the top five most viewed videos that appear when searching for "gender wage gap" on YouTube promote arguments that deny its existence or excuse it as natural.² An important point is the ideological connection between the gendered expectations and the social outcomes like the second shift, the gender wage gap, and the motherhood wage penalty.

Gender-Blind Sexism

This research is not the first to discover parallels between color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism. Laurie Cooper Stoll writes persuasively of these parallels and provides a general guide for mapping the similarities between these two ideologies (2013). The concept of gender-blind sexism as originated by Stoll (2013) has since been applied to rape myth acceptance (Stoll, Lilley, and Pinter 2017), higher education administrator narratives (Channing 2020), and faculty discourse in higher education (Myrick 2021). Gender-blind sexism as an analytical lens remains underutilized, but this study will demonstrate that the applications are broad within the realm of gender-based discourse.

² As of November 2018 these results were "Jordan Peterson debate on the gender pay gap, campus protests and postmodernism" (Channel 4 News - 12M views), "There is No Gender Wage Gap" (PragerU -5.2M), "Wage Gap: Last Week Tonight With John Oliver (HBO)" (LastWeekTonight – 3.8M), "The Gender Pay Gap is a Lie (CS:GO)" (Also Fitz – 3.4M), and "The Myth of the Gender Wage Gap" (PragerU – 2.8M)

Gender-blind sexism enables individuals to decipher issues related to gender through frames akin to those used for race: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural sexism, and minimization of sexism. As applied to racial discourse, abstract liberalism is a central framework, and allows users to focus on abstract interpretations of concepts like individual responsibility and equal opportunity to deflect from the ongoing reality of racism. Abstract liberalism operates much in the same way for gender-blind sexism. In fact, among the chief primary drivers of abstract liberalism is the idea that no group deserves preferential treatment. Individuals often rely on the abstract liberalism frame to decry policies such as affirmative action or other practices geared towards redressing racial and gender inequality (Stoll 2013).

As it pertains to race, the naturalization frame is often used to defend practices such as de facto racial segregation in housing and socialization. For example, a White male may explain his preference for dating White women as “natural” and “just the way it is.” Naturalization is arguably more appealing as a framework within gender-blind sexism than color-blind racism, because the reliance on biological differences between males and females is far less taboo than alluding to biological differences between racial groups. For this reason, the balance for color-blind racism has shifted away from naturalization towards cultural racism in the twenty-plus years since Bonilla-Silva’s original study. Within gender-blind sexism, there’s little reason to believe a similar shift has occurred because the persistence of biological explanations for gender differences. That said, cultural sexism still has its place. What men and women value or how culture influences gendered expectations is an important element of gender-blindness. Stoll argues, “within [cultural sexism] deviation from traditional gender role socialization based on hegemonic masculinity, emphasized femininity, and homophobia is generally called upon to justify the unequal station of boys and girls and women and men in the larger society,” (Stoll

2013: 5). My conception of cultural sexism is broader, including deviation from traditional gender roles, but also using gender roles as an explanation for gender inequality, and particularly, the uncritical acceptance of gender roles.

Finally, minimization of sexism is utilized by those who wish to downplay the role of sexism or the existence of gender inequality. In the context of racial discourse, the minimization frame is used to deemphasize the role of race, and dismiss claims of racial discrimination, particularly in hiring and promoting practices. Similarly, minimization of sexism will come into play for issues like the gender-based discrimination or gendered expectations that influence social outcomes.

Online Interaction

The systems of oppression that form our racial and gendered hierarchy require ideological backing in the form of the dominant ideologies described above. The role of the internet as a proliferator of these ideologies is a subject ripe for research. The internet as a medium for interaction offers individuals a unique avenue for expression. Research suggests that people “use the Internet to both form and reaffirm individual racial identity and seek out communities based on race and racial understandings of the world” (Daniels 2013: 698). The internet has long served as a valuable tool for White supremacist groups who have used the medium to circulate their overtly racist ideas in an arena where social sanction is less likely. The anonymity afforded by some websites proves an invaluable feature for the expression of sentiments no longer accepted by polite society (Bangstad 2014; Burke and Goodman 2012; Cleland 2014; Cleland and Cashmore 2014; Goodman 2010; Simi and Futrell 2006; Weaver 2011). Many U.S. newspapers have adopted the strategy of moderating their comment sections and removing offensive submissions. This strategy may have the unintended consequence of

reinforcing the ideology of color-blind racism (Daniels 2013). So long as the commenter knows not to “cross the line” into overtly racist or sexist territory, the comment will be allowed to stand. Anonymity can aid in a cultivation of Whiteness as a default for users in seemingly non-racial arena such as online video games (Dietrich 2013) and Phish-centric discussion boards (Brunsma, Kim, and Chapman 2020). The internet also allows those with common beliefs to find each other online. Researchers have found people choose to expose themselves to information that confirms their already held beliefs (Sears & Freedman 1967) and use the internet to that end (Garrett 2009). The combined effect of this tendency with the availability of discrete ideologically based online communities has the effect of limiting the challenges to particular racial perspectives (Bangstad 2014: 16). The “echo chambers” that proliferate in virtual space allow even those with the most extreme views to find validation. In addition to White supremacist sites, researchers have investigated the extreme ideologies of communities such as Men’s Rights Activists and The Red Pill communities (Mountford 2018) and the larger “manosphere” (Ging 2017).

The distinct features of online discourse provide an interesting test for Bonilla-Silva’s theory of color-blind racism and Stoll’s theory of gender-blind sexism. Face to face interaction is an important element of Bonilla-Silva’s (2014) analysis. The palpable discomfort presented by White interview participants exists in large part because they are put on the spot and must come up with responses in the moment. Online discourse allows for commenters to disguise any discomfort. The “rhetorical incoherence” (Bonilla-Silva 2014: 115) exhibited by respondents will likely be undetectable in online comments. On the other hand, the time afforded to individuals to craft their typed comments will perhaps bolster their ability to more clearly conform to dominant ideologies. All of this creates a very public discourse on race happening online. There’s a great deal of research looking at racial discourse, but my primary theoretical

framework will be that of color-blind racism. In his book, *Racism without Racists* (2014), Eduardo Bonilla-Silva discusses the discourse surrounding race in contemporary America. His dissection of seemingly non-racist comments shows how racial discourse has evolved and how newer, subtler forms of racism are cloaked in often egalitarian, non-racial language. Bonilla Silva argues that these color-blind ideologies should really be thought of as color-blind racism. Color-blind racism has become the dominant belief system presented by Whites in regards to race relations.

This study uses a qualitative method approach to a content analysis of comments made by users on Reddit. The research questions are as follows:

Q1 – To what extent do color-blind and gender-blind ideologies appear in online discourse?

Q2 – What parallels exist between gendered and racial discourse online, particularly regarding the scope, and style of dominant ideologies in the discourse?

Q3 – How does the utilization of racial and gendered ideologies differ across specific online communities?

Although the nature of these research questions is largely exploratory, the overarching hypothesis of this of this study is that this online public discourse relies heavily on, and serves to disseminate and reproduce, dominant ideologies as they relate to race and gender. The next chapter details my methodological approach and data collection strategies.

CHAPTER 3: DATA AND METHODS

Data Collection

I collected data in the form of submissions and comments found on Reddit.com. Reddit combines elements of content aggregation and social media. The data collection took place during five sessions from April 2019 to July 2019. I analyzed comments from the top five submissions of the week³, from thirteen distinct subsections of the site. These subsections, known as subreddits, function as discrete communities within Reddit. All of Reddit is divided into subreddits, and every post is submitted to a particular subreddit. Users are free to subscribe or unsubscribe to subreddits based on their interests.

The sample subreddits are divided into two categories. Seven standard subreddits make up the first category: *News*, *WorldNews*, *ChangeMyView*, *Politics*, *AskReddit*, *All*, and *Popular*⁴. Six targeted subreddits make up the second category: *The_Donald*, *MensRights*, *TheRedPill*, *UnpopularOpinion*, *TumblrInAction*, and *ShitRedditSays*. The standard subreddits were chosen on the basis of their popularity and discussion centric focus. The targeted subreddits were chosen due to their relevance to racial and gendered discourse.⁵ This data collection strategy enabled me to analyze a large set of comments that are both highly visible and diverse in their subject matter. The above methods allowed for analysis of 322 comment threads, which ensured a comprehensive analysis. From this dataset I analyzed the comments in search of emerging themes and patterns to test my hypothesis regarding the prevalence of dominant ideologies.

3 Reddit gives you the option of sorting submissions and comments in various ways, including the top submissions of the past hour, day, week, month, year and all-time.

4 All and Popular are not technically subreddits, but instead a subsection the site where you can see posts from all subreddits, or only the most popular subreddits.

5 For a longer description and explanation of each subreddit, see the appendix.

To code my data, I first completed an open reading of the comment threads in my sample. The layout of Reddit is such that a limited number of comments are displayed, and a certain amount of clicking through to view additional comments is necessary. Additionally, I used the various sorting options offered by Reddit to view the top comments, controversial comments, and newest comments. I took field notes on each thread and their relevance to racial and gendered discourse. My field notes consisted of descriptions of the submissions themselves and the comment threads, with particular attention to top comments, controversial comments, and patterns throughout the comment section. My open reading and field notes guided me in formulating emergent themes which I identified in the forms of narratives and definitional approaches. The three definitional themes are ‘Reverse Discrimination’, ‘Dismissing Sociological Approaches to Racism/Sexism’ and ‘Condemnation of Overt Racism/Sexism.’ The three narrative themes are ‘Political Correctness Gone Too Far’, ‘Taking the Red Pill’, and ‘They’re the Real Racists/Sexists.’ The coding rationale for these themes are laid out in Appendix C.⁶ Upon establishing these six emergent themes, I took a second, more in depth reading at the text threads. In my analysis of each text thread, I coded for the six emergent themes as well as the pre-established frames of color-blind racism (abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism and minimization of racism) and gender-blind sexism (abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural sexism and minimization of sexism). These fourteen categories are the basis of my coding schema. Comments that fit the coding definitions laid out in Appendix C were logged, with the comments that best exemplified these themes and frames are highlighted in the presentation of my findings. This coding model follows the example of

⁶ For a more in depth explanation of these themes see Chapter 4 (manifestation of definitional approaches) and Chapter 6 (narratives).

similar virtual ethnographies using Reddit (Darwin 2017; Workman 2014), as well as guidelines of virtual ethnography generally (Hine 2000).

When referring to subreddits, I use the common format employed by Reddit users: /r/SubredditName. This style of referring to the subreddit is derived from the full web address, which would be www.Reddit.com/r/SubredditName. Subreddits feature *submissions*. Submissions can either be text posts or link submissions. When submitting a text post, clicking on the title will bring users directly to the comment section where they can read the submitted text and leave a comment of their own. Clicking on the title of a link submission will bring the user to the link – be it a website with a news article, image, video, or other media.

At its core, Reddit is a website where users can submit links to outside content -- pictures, videos, news articles, etc. -- or they can write a text post for discussion. The key idea behind Reddit is that users vote on the content they take in using up and down arrows that appear next to links and comments. The content that receives the greatest number of upvotes compared to downvotes will be featured most prominently on the site. The score of a post or thread loosely translates into the posts upvotes minus its downvotes. The same system works for comments. Essentially, any individual who visits the Reddit homepage will see the posts and comments that have gained the approval of the most users. The features of Reddit described above make it particularly useful for a qualitative content analysis.

Virtual Ethnography

As I explored each comment section, I applied an ethnographic approach to the content analysis. Virtual ethnography is an emerging method for online research (Mason 1996; Hine 2000; Hart 2017; Toledano 2017; Morais, Santos, and Goncalves 2020). Much like ethnographic research done in-person, virtual ethnography relies on balancing methodical observation with

processing social interactions as they happen organically (Hine 2000; Toledano 2018). Markham (2017: 653-4) argues, “The ethnographic attitude doesn't necessarily change when we study the digital. But the digital is transforming what it means to be social and human in the world.”

Reddit's structure lends itself to ethnographic analysis, because it enables rich interactions and fosters a strong sense of community. Individual subreddits exist within the Reddit landscape, but often operate as their own subculture, with norms, language, and values distinct from the larger site. The democratic voting system allows users to hold each other accountable to a given subreddit's norms and values. Not only can we see what the user has said, we can see how many people have upvoted the comment, which essentially amounts to agreement and approval. By upvoting, other users are saying “this is how I feel” or, at the very least, “I like this.” In contrast, users can downvote something until it has a negative score. Negative scores tell us that the community rejects the content of the comment. The website is divided into “subreddits,” smaller communities that serve some common function or deal with one area of interest. For example, if you wish to just view content about U.S. politics, you would read the /r/politics subreddit. If you would like to see content about movies you would go to /r/movies. Some subreddits call on users to follow a unique format that goes beyond simply an area of interest. For example, one subreddit this analysis will draw heavily from is called /r/AskReddit -- users submit an open-ended question and users respond with answers.

Just as a field researcher employing participant observation does not hear every word uttered during their fieldwork, I was unable (and did not attempt) to read every single comment in the submissions I collected. The number of comments in each thread ranged from the tens of

thousands⁷ to the dozens. In analyzing comment threads I placed myself in the shoes of a person exploring the submissions organically -- reading comments in the order they appeared, clicking through replies at my own discretion, and navigating the virtual space.

Data Presentation

Throughout the analysis I refer to direct quotes from Reddit comments and submissions. Although I occasionally excerpt longer comments, I always attempt to provide a full and fair context to be as faithful to the original intent of the author as possible. I do not correct misspellings or grammatical errors, of which there are many. Because of the frequency of misspellings and grammatical errors, I chose to omit the use of “[sic]” in quoted text. Reddit is a social media site, and the difference between grammatical errors and intentional misspellings/slang can be difficult to assess. I present quotes exactly as they appear on the site. Included in the quoted comment is a bracketed number. This number represents the comment score.

Through this methodology, I was able to collect rich textual data that demonstrates color-blind and gender-blind ideologies on a wide array of subjects. In my examination of the data, I discovered the various manifestations of these dominant ideologies and their durability in the face of direct challenges. My next chapter begins the analysis. I explore how definitional approaches fuel the dominance of color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism.

⁷ The most commented on post in my sample was a submission to /r/AskReddit titled “People getting off planes in Hawaii immediately get a lei. If this same tradition applied to the rest of the U.S., what would each state immediately give to visitors?” The comment thread contained 38,793 comments.

CHAPTER 4: DEFINING OPPRESSION

You know, to just be grossly generalistic, you could put half of Trump's supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right? The racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it. And, unfortunately, there are people like that. And he has lifted them up. -Hillary Clinton, September 9, 2016 (quoted in Reilly 2016).

The quote above, uttered by Hillary Clinton in the lead up to the election of 2016, serves as a reminder that labels can wield a great deal of power in our social worlds, particularly when those labels are as stigmatizing as “racist” and “sexist.” The statement gained infamy among Trump supporters and media pundits alike, particularly for the use of the phrase “basket of deplorables.” Many Trump supporters went on to adopt the “deplorable” moniker, adding it to their identity for their social media handles. Media pundits treated the comment as a political faux pas, painting Clinton as an out-of-touch liberal elitist who sought to vilify her opponent’s supporters as bigoted. The comment proved to be a miscalculation, and Clinton herself has written that it was among the factors that played into her eventual electoral loss (McGraw 2017).

A fundamental reason why Clinton’s comment backfired is that it challenged the dominant view of what makes someone racist or sexist (or homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic, etc.). The notion that tens of millions of people in the United States are “deplorable” for their level of racism and sexism is at odds with how Americans conceive of themselves as well as their family, friends, and neighbors -- including when those family, friends and neighbors disagree with them on political matters. Even among non-Trump supporters, a common reaction to Clinton’s comment was “Well, I may not support Trump but my uncle/friend/neighbor does and they're not racist!”

Shared definitions are a crucial aspect of all discourse. When there is disagreement over what terms mean, communication can break down. In this chapter, I argue that definitions of

racism and sexism are central to the ideological approach of color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism. In describing this approach, Bonilla-Silva argues, “Hunting for racists is the sport of choice of those who practice the ‘clinical’ approach to race relations--the careful separation of good and bad, tolerant and intolerant Americans” (2018: 14). Bonilla-Silva offers this point as a caveat to his larger argument -- he makes it clear the individuals who appear in his analysis should not be thought of as “racists.” The meaning behind the title *Racism Without Racists* is that the United States has an entrenched system of racism, and yet very few people consider themselves racist. The response to this is not that “actually, these people who think they are not racist actually are racist,” but instead a rejection of the paradigm and its underlying assumptions. The *system* of racism survives despite the lack of *individual* level racism, as it is commonly understood.

Likewise, the purpose of this research is not to assign the label of “racist” to the users whose comments I examine, or to otherwise vilify those people. The ideologies expressed by individual actors should be understood as products of the systems in which they operate. Many of the comments analyzed in this study are written and upvoted by well intentioned, “normal” people. In fact, that these comments come from normal people is elemental to the broader argument. The importance of avoiding this clinical approach to racism goes far beyond fair treatment of the authors of the comments. In this chapter I will argue that an individual level approach to racism, as well as sexism, is foundational to color-blind and gender-blind ideologies.

Individual Level Racism

By narrowing the definition of racism to individual level prejudice and discrimination, we create distance between ourselves and the label of “racist.” Merriam-Webster (2020) defines racism as “a belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits and capacities and that

racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.” A large majority of people can read that definition and honestly say to themselves -- “that does not describe me.” Few individuals openly believe that some races are superior to others or endorse overt racism to that degree. To admit to such a belief would invite social ostracism, and perhaps more importantly, beliefs of this nature have been aptly labeled as immoral. For example, 70% of Americans say that White people should never use the N-word (Pew Research Center 2019). To be a racist is to be a bad person in the minds of most Americans. This conceptualization is not conducive to a comprehensive understanding of the policies and practices that maintain and reproduce racial inequality.

For this reason, sociologists have gravitated away from an individual level approach towards a structural interpretation. Among the first writers to rethink racism in this way is David Wellman in his 1977 book *Portraits of White Racism*. Wellman argues “The essential feature of racism is not hostility or misperception, but rather the defense of a system from which advantage is derived on the basis of race” (1977: 210). Other sociologists have followed Wellman’s tradition of suggesting that the discipline move beyond prejudice and discrimination as the primary/sole markers of racism (Winant & Omi 1986; Bonilla-Silva 1997).

Beverly Daniel Tatum (2017) argues convincingly that sociological definitions of racism serve as a paradigm shift compared to dictionary definitions. White people, Tatum suggests, often experience a great deal of discomfort and guilt at the realization they benefit from systems of racism. That all Whites benefit from systems of advantage based on race can occasionally provoke a question about their own racism. Tatum writes,

I once asked a white teacher what it would mean to her if a student or parent of color accused her of being racist. She said she would feel as though she had been punched in the stomach or called a ‘low-life scum’.... [A] provocative question I’m often asked is “Are you saying all Whites are racist?” When asked this

question, I again remember that White teacher's response, and I am conscious that perhaps the question I am really being asked is "Are you saying all Whites are bad people?" The answer to that question is of course not (p. 89-90).

The distinction Tatum draws here is key--understanding racism as a system of advantage is necessary to move past the counterproductive individual level approach. This is not to say that individual actors within the system do not have agency, nor does it absolve individuals of their responsibility to disrupt racist systems. It does however place individual actors in their proper context.

Individual Level Sexism

There are clear parallels between definitional approaches of racism and sexism. As is the case with racism, sexism is too often understood as an individual personality flaw. Merriam-Webster's (2020) definition of sexism refers to "prejudice or discrimination based on sex" though the definition does go on to note "especially: discrimination against women." The reduction of the concept to prejudice and discrimination poses a similar problem that it does for racism. Sexism, when understood purely as individual level prejudice and discrimination, would not include many behaviors that reproduce and maintain a system of advantage that benefits men at the expense of women. Feminist writers have long understood this fact, favoring approaches to sexism that go beyond individual level prejudice and discrimination. Feminist author bell hooks discussed sexism as a "system of domination" (1984:5). Critical race theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) have discussed the ways in which sexism and racism act as are situated as distinct but related systems of oppression. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality to explain the multidimensionality of Black women's experience within the context of systems of oppression that marginalize them based on their gender and race.

Despite these sociological approaches to sexism, discourse on gender inequality runs into similar issues as that of racism. The coexistence of sexism as overt prejudice/discrimination and as a system of advantage that benefits men at the expense of women is one that leads to a status quo of “sexism without sexists.” One attempt to disentangle this issue comes from Kate Manne who makes a distinction between sexism and misogyny. Manne (2015:79) writes, “Sexism should be understood primarily as the ‘justificatory’ branch of a patriarchal order, which consists in ideology that has the overall function of rationalizing and justifying patriarchal social relations.”

Such a conceptualization is useful as the foundation for gender-blind sexism that distinguishes itself from the more blatant forms of sexism which Manne would describe as misogyny. Much like color-blind racism, the role of sexism under this conceptualization is to justify an ongoing system of oppression while simultaneously leaving room between the ideology expressed and the stigmatizing label of “sexist.” Justifying gender inequality becomes a question of what is natural. “Misogyny should be understood primarily as the ‘law enforcement’ branch of a patriarchal order, which has the overall function of policing and enforcing its governing norms and expectations” (2015:79) Manne’s explanation offers a clean, useful distinction between these two concepts that are often used interchangeably. Using these conceptualizations, misogyny is linked to a level of hostility that is often absent from sexism.

Notable are the distinctions in contrast to the sociological discourse around racism. When discussing sexism with Manne’s conceptualizations, several precise terms are at our disposal. The system of male domination is called “patriarchy”; the hostile, enforcement branch of the patriarchy is “misogyny”; the justifications of sex-based inequality is understood as “sexism.” In contrast, the system of advantage based on race is generally referred to as “racism,” while the

enforcement of such a system is also referred to simply as “racism,” as is the justification of racial inequalities. Confusion that arises out of this broad usage of the term racism contributes to the definitional problem explored in this chapter. It would be useful if distinctions that Manne applies to the realm of gender discourse existed for racial discourse. If misogyny is the law enforcement branch of the patriarchal order, then perhaps racial hatred, racial discrimination, or White supremacy could be considered the law enforcement branch of our racialized system of oppression. That said, within the public discourse (as distinct from the academic discourse) “racism” and “sexism” are broadly used in similar ways (i.e., to describe overt prejudice and discrimination).

Reverse Discrimination

One of the important ways in which the individual approach to racism is maintained is to equate prejudice and discrimination directed towards Whites with prejudice directed towards non-Whites. Similarly, prejudice against men is given equal footing to prejudice against women. Often these sorts of attitudes and behaviors are referred to as “reverse racism” and “reverse sexism.” It is worth noting that those who wish to focus on so-called discrimination occasionally reject the “reverse” prefix. The idea is that discrimination against Whites is not reverse racism, it is just plain racism. Although the terms “reverse racism” and “reverse sexism” did not appear in the sample of comments available in this study, the concept itself is still applicable. One example appears in a thread about a white South African being told he’s not a real South African. One user commented, “Apparently racism against white people is getting big in South Africa. Its apparently to get back at the white people for apartheid, but all they’re doing is ruining what Nelson Mandela spent more than 20 years in jail for. [1163]”

This comment is particularly effective at equating discrimination facing Whites and non-Whites because it adds an important new variable -- going outside the United States. It is safe to assume that most Reddit users do not have an in-depth understanding of the sociopolitical dynamics of South Africa and ongoing conflict between the majority Black population and economically privileged white population. The comment itself is rather vague (“racism against whites is getting big”) but can plausibly be interpreted as an allusion to conspiracy theories about rampant attacks on White farmers in South Africa. The false claims are common talking points among White supremacists and were repeated by then President Trump in 2018 (de Greef and Karasz 2018). By twice using the word “apparently,” the comment projects a degree of uncertainty over the alleged racism against White people South Africa and the motivation behind it. The comment echoes as a common narrative around reverse racism generally – that it is perpetrated as retribution for the sins of White people of the past. This idea comes up when discussing racism in the U.S. as well, particularly conversations around reparations. Whites concede that racism existed in the past, but instead of engaging with their ongoing impact, they frame attempts to redress the legacy of racism and its persistent impacts as retaliation for past mistakes.

Occasionally, the notion of reverse racism is called upon to excuse overt racism. The next example from the data requires some background information about YouTube personality Jon Jafari. Under his pseudonym, JonTron, Jafari creates videos for his YouTube channel JonTronShow+. As of February 2021, JonTron has 6.48 million subscribers. His videos consist mainly of video game and movie reviews with a comedic twist. Jafari had not been known for his political views, but shortly after Rep. Steve King’s statement that “We can’t restore our civilization with somebody else’s babies,” Jafari spoke out in support of King. Jafari tweeted:

“Wow, how scandalous, Steve King doesn’t want his country invaded by people who have contempt for his culture and people! NAZI!!!” Following this controversy, Jafari doubled down on these ideas in a conversation with a fellow video game youtuber Steven Bonnell, who uses the pseudonym “Destiny” for his streaming content. In the conversation, Jafari made numerous racist claims about immigrants and minority groups and his concern about the future of the White population given current immigration trends (Gajanan 2018). The rhetoric used by King and Jafari are both connected to what’s known as the “White genocide myth” (Coaston 2018). Central to this myth is the notion that the White population is decreasing relative to other racial groups, through a combination of lower birth rates, immigration, and interracial relationships. With this context, two users get into a disagreement about the nature of Jafari’s racial ideology. In a comment thread for a submission featuring Jafari the following exchange took place:

User 1: Please don't post white supremacists here. [-42]

User 2: He's not though. [23]

User 1: Dude, have you seen what he said? He's literally repeated white genocide conspiracy theories. [-24]

User 2: Yeah, I did, and it wasn't white supremacist. Dude, it's the same logic as "Hitler drank water too bigot." He was railing against multiculturalism and said that it was okay if white became a minority as long as the people immigrating assimilated into their culture. He was mad because he thought that when white people were being racially replaced in white countries nobody cared, but when white people started to take over a non-white country, people got mad. You ever consider that he's not a political figure and might have just been wrong? Also conspiracy theory isn't an argument, it's a term the CIA made up to suppress anyone who questioned government stories, deadass. It's always been a weaponized slur against arguments people don't like but don't want to bother refuting. Regardless, white people are now a worldwide minority, and mass immigration is happening in many western countries at a rate some would argue is unsustainable. There are incompatible cultures, and if you import a shitload of people from them, you end up with inevitable conflict between the immigrants and the natives. Europe's already been getting hit with that. [17]

When User 1 refers to Jafari as a White supremacist, his perspective is challenged both in the form of downvotes (indicated by the negative score) and a reply from User 2. The back and forth culminates in a long explanation from User 2 where he employs a number of rhetorical strategies geared towards dismissing the notion that what Jafari said is in anyway “White supremacist.” He argues that accusing Jafari of White supremacy is “the same logic as ‘Hitler drank water too bigot’” -- this is a reference to an argument that sometimes appears in reactionary circles. The accusation is that drinking water is not a racist act, just because Hitler also drank water. Thus, having something in common with Hitler does not make one racist. Of course, the argument ignores the substance of User 1’s claim, since Jafari’s actions in repeating the White genocide conspiracy theory is not substantively similar to drinking water. For User 2, that White supremacists make similar arguments to Jafari does not make Jafari a White supremacist. User 2 then moves on to affirming the White genocide myth, dismissing the conspiracy theory label as something fabricated by the CIA, and repeats some of the key components of the racist narrative -- “incompatible cultures”; “inevitable conflict between immigrants and natives”; “white people are now a worldwide minority/”

Reddit users also push the notion of reverse sexism. One example appears in the subreddit /r/Mensrights. The submission is titled “Is consent to sex consent to reproduce? | A key legal right that women have but which is explicitly denied to men by our current laws [3669]” and links to an image with a column for both Male and Female that reads:

Female: No. A female who has consented to sex is under no obligation to an accidental pregnancy. She cannot be held liable to a third party and does not need permission to alleviate herself of responsibility. Her options include early termination, place in an adoption agency, or simply dropping the child off at a safe haven.

Male: Yes. Once a male agrees to sex he agrees to reproduce and support children. The law enforces this. He has no options that do not involve the consent

of a third party to alleviate himself of this obligation in the event of accidental pregnancy. This consent is present in the face of any birth control used.

The image has a vaguely professional look about it which gives it the appearance of authority. However, the graphic is unsourced and misleading. For instance, fathers do have legal rights when it comes to giving children up for adoption. The broader framing of the message is that a legal double standard exists, and that is further translated by one of the top comments which states “*so, legal sexism. legalized discrimination based on gender.*” In this example, the user does not refer to “reverse sexism” but instead just sexism. For this user, since women⁸ are able to get pregnant and men are not, the legal right of a woman to terminate her pregnancy amounts to sexism.

It is easy to see how a person, particularly young men who frequent Reddit, might find this idea appealing. The prospect of sex leading to such a life changing consequence as parenthood is one that may evoke a strong negative reaction. By ignoring the sex specific realities and burdens of pregnancy, the users are able to convince themselves and others that they are victims of an unjust system. Indeed, the entire Men’s Rights subreddit relies heavily on this notion that men are the more discriminated group.

Occasionally users jump at a perceived opportunity to call out reverse sexism. One example comes after use of the term “mansplaining” in the title of a thread:

User 1: It's great watching a bunch of 20-something dudes argue in this thread about the existence or nonexistence of condescension based on sex; especially when what they're arguing about can only be experienced from a woman's point of view lol. [24] [“Controversial” flag⁹]

⁸ It is worth noting here that many transgender men and non-binary people are biologically capable of pregnancy and that such a possibility does not even occur to the Reddit users during this discussion. I speak here of women getting pregnant as a generality for the sake of clarity.

⁹ Occasionally comments on Reddit will be flagged with a red dagger (†). This symbol is meant to indicate that the comment has been both upvoted and downvoted significantly

User 2: its great watching people continue to use and defend a word created for the sole purpose of insulting men and disregarding what they say. Now watch me get downvoted. [77]

The crux of the comment is a claim of reverse sexism, that “mansplaining” is meant not as a term to explain a pattern of gendered condescension but to insult men. The comment is a popular one in the thread [77], particularly relative to its parent comment defending the term [24]. The comment defending the use of the term mansplaining receives a fraction the score of the comment denouncing it as sexist, which sends a clear message about which is the more popular view.

Occasionally, the reverse racism framework will appear in the more overtly sexist spaces on Reddit. One example comes in the form of a comment thread in /r/MensRights. In March 2017 the *Washington Post* published a profile of Karen Pence, wife of then Vice President Mike Pence. The article brought attention to a detail from a 2002 interview in which Mike Pence revealed he does not eat alone with women other than his wife nor does he attend events serving alcohol without her (Parker 2017). This factoid garnered a great deal of attention on social media, leading to various articles being written about the “Pence Rule” as it became known. On Reddit, the issue is thrust into a thread about a tweet that reads “Imagine a woman with enough power in the workplace to say, ‘I just won’t hold meetings alone with men.’”¹⁰

Guys. This seems to have hit a nerve on these sexist bigots. Which means, we should do a lot more of it. Go Mike Pence all the way. Exclude women from any situation where they can become personal with you. Seems to be their primary door to manipulation, so the door shall be closed then. It seems that they are trying to protect their bread and butter, like a parasite who complains why the host is not available enough to be taken advantage of. So this indicates, we are onto something. [79]

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/emilylindin/status/1137756966271348736?lang=en>

The “sexist bigots” in this context are feminists -- specifically, feminists who criticize Mike Pence’s policy of not holding meetings alone with women. Any nuance associated with the critique of the policy is lost. The sexism here is blatant and overt, and the corresponding score reflects the acceptability of this level of sexism on this subreddit. Crucially however, the commenter still fits within the larger paradigm of gender-blind sexism, because they do not conceive of themselves as the sexist in this circumstance. For this user, feminists are the sexists, while men’s rights activists purport to preach justice and equality.

Dismissing Sociological Approaches to Racism and Sexism

While the individual level approach to racism and sexism is dominant, users on Reddit do appear to be generally aware of more structural interpretations. However, structural frameworks are often referred to in a sarcastic manner to suggest that such approaches should be dismissed. One example appears in a comment thread for an NBC News article titled “12 white male officers sue San Francisco police for race, sex bias [31,700].” One commenter replies, “Everyone knows you can't be racist towards white people or sexist towards men. /s [69].” The comment is delivered with a “/s” meant to signify sarcasm. The idea that White people and men cannot be victims of racism or sexism respectively is part of the larger definitional argument. When we apply a structural interpretation of racism and sexism, we understand Whites and men as members of the dominant groups existing in a system from which they benefit. On the whole, the systems of racism and sexism benefit Whites and men, at the expense of women and non-Whites. To think of this as merely meaning “you can’t be racist towards white people or sexist towards men” is (at best) reductive. Whether knowingly or not, the user is exploiting the lack of understanding of a structural interpretation of racism by stating something that would be obviously untrue under an individual approach to racism without doing anything to clarify the

point. These sorts of statements are commonplace on Reddit and represent a cohesive approach to sociological approaches to racism.

A similar sarcastic response appeared in a comment thread for a Guardian article titled “US will run out of avocados in three weeks if Trump closes Mexico border. President says there is a ‘good likelihood’ he will close border this week if Mexico does not stop immigrants from reaching US.” The comment reads, “Only a vile racist bigot could think the US actually has a right to things like sovereignty and the same strict immigration policies that neighboring countries have. #triggeredbytheorangeman [62].”

The user is expressing their rejection of the notion that the anti-immigration stance of the Trump administration should be perceived as racist. From a sociological perspective, the connection between the “Build a Wall” rhetoric and a larger system of structural racism is relatively straightforward. Trump’s focus on undocumented immigration throughout his campaign and into his presidency can be considered as part of a larger appeal to White racial resentment, particularly the way Trump infamously insisted that “Mexico is not sending their best. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people,” (The Washington Post 2015). The strategy worked, in large part because of White racial resentment within the U.S. electorate. Dismissing the connection between Trump’s rhetoric and racism with the exaggerated sarcasm relies on that individual level framework. Either you’re a “vile racist bigot” or you’re a “non-racist.”

Condemnation of Overt Racism and Sexism

In modern America we believe racism to be the property of the uniquely villainous and morally deformed, the ideology of trolls, gorgons and orcs. We believe this even when we are actually being racist. In 1957, neighbors in Levittown, Pa., uniting under the flag of segregation, wrote: “As moral, religious and law-abiding citizens, we feel that we are unprejudiced and undiscriminating in our

wish to keep our community a closed community.” --Ta-Nahasi Coates “The Good, Racist People” (2013)

In order for color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism to serve as effective ideological foundations for their corresponding systems of oppression, more overt racism must be identified and denounced. Reddit users demonstrate that this is a comfortable space in which to operate. When a person labels someone else as a racist, it allows them to separate themselves from the label. Racism is for, as Coates puts it, the uniquely villainous and morally deformed. Of course racism exists, but it is confined to the narrow definition of an individual ideological flaw. One way this manifests is through explicit condemnation of overt racism. In a thread for a news story titled “White supremacist gets life for running down black man“ one Reddit user argues for the immoral nature of racists. They write,

The unspoken truth about racism in 21st century, it's no coincidence that the majority of hardcore racist are degenerates. It works the same way with internet trolls or people attacking celebs on Insta & Twitter [491]

There’s a lot of subtle messaging packed into this short comment. The user begins by asserting that what he’ about to say is an “unspoken truth” -- there is hidden knowledge about racism in the 21st century that goes undiscussed. This rhetorical framing hides that the user is echoing a sentiment consistent with the dominant ideology around racism -- that it is an individual level phenomenon. Particularly interesting is that the user is framing this as a relatively recent development by specifying the 21st century. The implication is that perhaps racism was common for ordinary people in centuries past, but in the modern era racism is relegated to degenerates.

A unique feature of Reddit is that comments can receive negative scores, and thus demoted to the bottom of a given comment thread. The site, however, gives users the option of sorting by *controversial* which will reveal the comments with the highest number of downvotes. By looking at these controversial comments, we can learn about when Reddit users deem a

comment unacceptable. For instance, in a submission to /r/pics titled “A college grad took photos with her immigrant parents in the fruit fields where they worked to give her a better life [119,000].” One user was heavily downvoted for posting “This is why I support the wall for more legal immigration [-53].” That this comment attracted downvotes is an interesting look into what provokes a negative reaction from Reddit users, particularly for a submission that received as much attention as this one (score of 119,000; 2989 comments). One possible reason for the negative score is that the user referenced Trump’s “build the wall” campaign promise. Trump’s effort to center his campaign on undocumented immigrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border is largely understood as a symbol of racism. Until Trump’s presidency, “build the wall” rhetoric may have not been recognized as overt racism. Comments like the one above may not have been interpreted as racist before Trump. Another possible reason that this comment was downvoted is that it is inserting a negative racialized narrative into an otherwise feel-good story of a college graduate with her immigrant parents. That this user saw a picture of immigrant parents in a fruit field and felt compelled to comment on immigration policy in a racialized way is perhaps more unwelcome than a comment about the wall in a news article about immigration. That this comment attracted downvotes is instructive -- users who see this sanction on pro-Trump, racist rhetoric will learn something about what is out-of-bounds for racial discourse.

The structure of Reddit contributes to the way that ideologies together and supporting narratives are disseminated. A useful approach to demonstrate this is to look in depth at a full comment thread as a case study to illustrate how definitional approaches feed into the dominant ideology. The thread in question is for a submitted link to a Cincinnati Enquirer article (Londberg 2019) submitted under the title “Ohio prison guards laughed as white supremacist stabbed cuffed black inmates.” The article describes an incident in June of 2017 where two

White prison guards watched with “callous indifference” as one inmate, and known White supremacist, managed to release himself from handcuffs and attack four Black inmates. Most Reddit comments appropriately denounce the behavior of the prison guards and White supremacist prisoner. The top comments include questions about how the inmate got a knife after a history of violence (“Reinke had a history of carrying knives. On two occasions prior to June 2017, he'd stabbed or attempted to stab other inmates.”), what sort of accountability the guards will face (“I didn’t see any mention of the guards’ fate. If the accusations are true, they were accomplices in the attack, and they deserve substantial time behind bars,”) and an overarching theme of the lack of justice for the victims (“So they charge the guy with more years even though he's already on life term. What's the point? He might as well continue stabbing them later.”)

Why is this comment thread of interest? To begin with, it offers a safe outlet for users to denounce racism. The racism described in the news story is overt and grotesque. Users can denounce this particular type of racism and justifiably distinguish it from anything they would ever be involved in. By putting the spotlight on this type of racism, users reinforce the already dominant ideology around what racism is. Sorting this thread by “controversial” proves to be highly illuminating about the acceptable discourse surrounding this incident. One user comments “Prison system built to uphold white supremacy upholds white supremacy. More at 11. [1, controversial flag]” while another user quotes the article and comments directly writing:

“Reinke was sentenced to 54 years in the bloody attack, video of which was obtained by the Associated Press and went viral late last year. Reinke was sentenced to an additional 32 years behind bars for an attack about eight months later on a corrections officer. Prosecutors said Reinke and another inmate stabbed the officer 32 times. Reinke was already serving a life sentence for a 2004 Cleveland murder before the stabbings.” [User quoting the article] So he was never punished for this. But there is no systemic racism in America. Nope. /s [-6, controversial flag]

Both of these comments seek to link the incident to a larger system of racism, and both are met with downvotes. Although Reddit does not reveal the number of downvotes relative to upvotes with their score, the downvotes still serve the purpose of burying the comments towards the bottom of the page, where they generally will not be found unless searched for by those sorting by controversial. The overall message from this comment thread is that specific types of racist acts are to be denounced, but also that they are to be treated as isolated incidents and are not indicative of a larger system of racial oppression.

Conclusion

Definitions set the ground rules for conversations about race and gender related issues. The “dictionary definition,” which I refer to as the individual level approach, dominates the conventional thinking about racism and sexism. My findings suggest that the individual approach shapes discourse around race and gender in three key ways. First, it allows for reverse discrimination, i.e. discrimination directed towards dominant groups, to be placed on equal footing with discrimination directed towards marginalized groups. Second, it encourages people to dismiss sociological approaches to racism and sexism in favor of a narrower, less complex understanding of the concepts. Finally, an individual approach offers us the opportunity to separate ourselves from the labels of racist and sexist, allowing us to maintain our self-conception as good people, while abdicating ourselves from the burden of grappling with our own role in perpetuating racial and gendered inequality. The next chapter looks beyond the groundwork laid by definitional approaches and explores the frames of color-blindness.

CHAPTER 5: FRAMING COLOR-BLINDNESS

While definitions are crucial to the dominant culture's conceptualization of racism, those who adopt color-blind and gender-blind ideologies are still left with a difficult question: If racism is rare, why is there still so much racial inequality? The individual level approach to racism does little to explain why people of color are disproportionately poor, less educated, unemployed, and incarcerated. One might suggest that in order to adopt a color-blind ideology, you would have to be unaware of the existence of dramatic racial inequality in virtually every measurable social outcome. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander describes this particular phenomenon of denial as it relates to racism in our system of mass incarceration. She describes the current situation of mass incarceration as a racist system about which Americans are in denial. She writes,

Today most Americans know and don't know the truth about mass incarceration. ... We know that large numbers of black men have been locked in cages. ... We know that people released from prison face a lifetime of discrimination, scorn, and exclusion, and yet we claim not to know that an undercaste exists. We know and we don't know at the same time. (2010: 182)

The notion that Americans “know and don't know” about the racism associated with the criminal justice system can be applied to the larger system of oppression that maintains and reproduces racial inequality. Americans know that racial inequality is prevalent. We know that our neighborhoods are segregated, our schools are unequal, and that people living in poverty are disproportionately people of color. Too often, Whites discuss the facts using color-blind language “That neighborhood can be dangerous at night.” or “The schools in that area aren't great.” We know the “good” and “bad” parts of town exist in the context of racial segregation, but we use euphemisms to discuss these sordid topics. Still, occasionally we are confronted with these topics directly and we require rhetorical strategies to square the positions that “the United

States is not racist” and “racial inequality is prevalent.” We do this using what Bonilla-Silva refers to as the central frames of color-blind racism. In this chapter, I will apply each of Bonilla-Silva’s four frames of color-blindness to my analysis of racial discourse on Reddit.

Abstract Liberalism

Bonilla-Silva argues that abstract liberalism is the most important of the four frames of color-blindness, and my more recent data supports this interpretation. Reddit users frequently employed abstract liberalism when discussing racial issues. In particular, discussions related to affirmative action attracted the abstract liberalism frame, as was the case in a thread on a news article about White police officers suing the city of San Francisco. One exchange exemplifies the abstract liberalism frame as it relates to Affirmative Action:

***User 1:** Diversity quota is discrimination in itself. They should be getting the best candidates, not meet a diversity quota to look good. This is why they will end up with lower quality candidates and look bad. If you don't want to look racist, try not being racist. Seriously, this is an insult to black folks and discrimination to everyone else. [2605]*

***User 2: [Direct Reply to User 1]** That's because the diversity quota is about equality of outcome not equality of opportunity. . .” [2047]*

The two respondents both utilize the abstract liberalism frame and in fact play off each other in order to further emphasize the underlying liberal concepts. To begin with, the first user categorizes the affirmative action program used by the San Francisco Police Department as a “diversity quota,” which is not what is described in the linked article. The article itself makes no mention of a quota, instead describing a system where “San Francisco ‘bands’ promotional test scores so that people who score within a certain range are treated the same, which means the department can consider other factors such as language skills and experience in awarding promotions,” (NBC News 2019). In addition to the misleading categorization of the system as a

diversity quota, the user declares the program discriminatory, culminating in the suggestion that the program itself is racist and will lead to “lower quality candidates.” The framing from User 1 requires a narrow interpretation of what constitutes “merit” paired with assumptions about non-White candidates being “lower quality.” The comment gives no credence to the notion that the police department for a diverse city may benefit from having people of color occupy positions of command. The allusion to meritocratic values is directly in line with the abstract liberalism frame.

User 2 further employs abstract liberalism by repeating the misleading claim of a “diversity quota,” arguing that its purpose is about “equality of outcome not equality of opportunity.” The “equality of opportunity” rhetoric is common among those rejecting efforts to redress the impact of systemic racism and raises an important question about what constitutes opportunity. For opponents of affirmative action, such as the highly upvoted comments above, opportunity occurs at the point of application for a job or admission to a university. If, during the application process, everyone who applies for a job is given “equal opportunity” to be hired, then the institution has fulfilled its obligation towards the ideal of equality of opportunity. Proponents of affirmative action take a more holistic approach to equality of opportunity -- one that considers how systems of inequality shape our life chances. They account for how racism impacts the opportunity for people of color to apply for the same jobs, achieve the necessary qualifications, and compete on equal footing with White (or otherwise privileged) applicants. The superficial reference to equality of opportunity that appears in User 2’s comment has become a useful rhetorical device for those standing in defense of color-blind racism.

One possible evolution of the focus of abstract liberalism is exemplified in another pair of comments discussing racial discourse as it pertains to Asians Americans.

*User 1: Asian people in North America are considered totally different when it comes to racial discussions. There's business asians who are extremely successful and don't qualify for the oppression olympics, then there's working class asians, known around here as "Chinatown asians" who work extremely hard but will never thrive because they refuse to accommodate to English only speakers and don't make up enough of the community to develop their own high functioning economy. **Basically I think this supports my theory that social class is infinitely more important than race when it comes to your "oppression ratings"** [emphasis added] [505]*

User 2 [as a direct response to User 1]: You're absolutely right, and the reason why there's so much resistance to pointing out that social, or socioeconomic, class plays a much bigger role in oppression than skin color, is because a significant portion of SJWs are upper-middle class or above. If they admitted the role of socioeconomic factors in oppression, then they'd have to stop railing against the "cisheteronormative, Nazi-esque Patriarchy", and start pointing their fingers at themselves and many of their compatriots. [231]

When User 1 begins his comments, it vaguely resembles a valid, albeit crude, intersectional approach to the complicated class dynamics that impact Asian-origin people living in North America. The post evolves into a reductionist view of intersectionality and the “sort of declining significance of race”¹¹ ideology that anti-racist activists tend to caution against. I emphasize the last sentence from User 1’s comment to highlight this logic, and the seemingly sarcastic reference to “oppression ratings.” While no serious critical race theorist or scholar of intersectionality would refer to “oppression ratings,” the reframing of these complicated systems into a simplified point system is an attractive option for those wishing to dismiss the nuance. This user is emphasizing class, while dismissing race altogether using hyperbolic language that suggests “social class is infinitely more important than race.”

User 2 emphatically agrees with the first comment, reiterating the point by arguing social class plays a “much bigger role in oppression than skin color.” The user further argues his case

¹¹ “Declining Significance of Race” is a reference to the William Julius Wilson book originally published in 1978, of which Bonilla-Silva is highly critical. For further discussion see Bonilla-Silva (2018:70).

by derisively referring to those who emphasize the importance of race as “SJWs” (“Social Justice Warriors”).

Naturalization

The naturalization frame relies on ideas about race that have become increasingly outdated. In the 20+ years since Bonilla-Silva’s original data collection, the dominant conception of race has continued to shift away from the biological towards a more cultural interpretation. Language that appeared in Bonilla-Silva’s original analysis is increasingly taboo. An example from Bonilla-Silva’s (2014) original analysis proves illuminating:

Bill, about the lack of integration in schools. “I don’t think it’s anybody’s fault. Because people tend to group with their own people. Whether it’s white or black or upper middle class or lower class or, you know, upper class, you know, Asians. People tend to group with their own. Doesn’t mean if a black person moves into your neighborhood they shouldn’t go to your school. They should and you should mix and welcome them and everything else, but you can’t force people together. If people want to be together, they should intermix more... Well individuals, just the way it is. You know, people group together for lots of different reasons: social, religious. Just as animals in the wild you know. Elephants grouped together, cheetahs grouped together. You bus a cheetah into an elephant herd because they should mix? You can’t force that.” (p 86).

Uttered today, the above quote would likely be perceived as uncouth -- comparing people to animals in the wild would likely present as too blatantly racist in the contemporary discourse. The quote reveals strong generational differences between the precise manifestations of color-blindness and how adept a speaker must be when utilizing the color-blind frames. Naturalization appears to be the least useful frame in contemporary color-blind rhetoric, at least among the disproportionately young population that regularly uses Reddit.

That said, some users still hinted at a naturalization framework. One example appears in the comment thread for a news article titled “Villagers kill Ebola health worker in eastern DR Congo.” The user responds:

Are you really surprised? This is Africa we're talking about, they've had just as much time as the rest of the world to move things along and they're still like this. Obviously there's a reason for this that is well beyond "education." [56]

While this comment is brief, it clearly evokes the naturalization frame. The user is dismissive of the (admittedly oversimplified) explanation of educational factors contributing to this incident. A hallmark of naturalization is dismissiveness towards cultural explanation, even ones that would very likely fall under the cultural racism frame. Instead, they allude to this unspoken other explanation that falls within the realm of the naturalization frame. Though the user does not say outright that struggles associated with Africa are due to natural differences, he leaves no room for other explanation. It is not outside forces (i.e. imperialism and colonization) since they have had “just as much time as the rest of the world to move things along” and it is not a reductive cultural explanation (“well beyond ‘education’”). Instead, the implication is that the propensity for deviance and murder is natural. That this comment received a positive score is an indication that overt racism can be hinted at, but not stated explicitly.

Cultural Racism

The cultural racism frame was prevalent in the data. The notion of “culture” as an overarching explanation appeared to be quite popular on Reddit, perhaps in part because it has managed to avoid some taboo implications of the naturalization frame. For this reason, Reddit users appear perfectly comfortable explicitly referring to cultural explanations. One example appears in a comment thread on the /r/funny subreddit. The submission is a nine-second gif titled “An elder passing on his wisdom” -- the video shows a Black man with his young son from a

distance. The father has his toddler son sitting on the top of a parked car, while appearing to have an intense conversation and includes the caption “Like wtf could they possibly be talking about that deep [laughter emojis].” We see what is meant to be a light-hearted moment in time between father and son. As many users point out, the image could very well have depicted the father singing or rapping to his son (which would explain why the “conversation” appears so deep). But like many submissions where the subject is a person of color, the comment thread attracts racial (and racist) rhetoric.

One feature of the Reddit community is that the comment threads and submissions are heavily moderated. It is not uncommon for a thread to have comments deleted by moderator for violating rules. Using the website “removeddit.com” we are able to observe the deleted comments from this particular thread. The most downvoted comments include “Ghetto Mufasa teaching simba who he is” [-54, removed by moderators]; “he’s trying too explain why he won’t be there for the rest of his sons life..” [-39, removed by moderators]; “It won’t help. He will still go to jail” [-26, removed by moderators]. These examples help serve to illustrate what is considered “unacceptable” by the standards of the /r/funny subreddit. Not only were each of these comments heavily downvoted, but they were deemed racist enough to be removed by the moderators. There is certainly variation between subreddits, but for the most part this level of overt racism will be deemed unacceptable (for a further discussion of what constitutes unacceptable levels of racism, see Chapter 4). In commenting on the racism in that appears in the comments section, one exchange between users appears as follows:

*User 1: ITT: [In this thread]
"Black people are notorious for being poor fathers"
Video of passionate black father with his son
"Probably telling him (racist statement)
Dumbass crackers are cracking. Source: am related to cracking crackers." [+1
controversial flag]*

*User 2 [in direct response to user 1]: There's always an outlier. Black people, when they are actually there as fathers, are no better or worse than any other ethnicity at being fathers. The problem is that the majority of black kids don't have fathers.
It's not racist. It's a statistic. The good of black culture should be celebrated; its great. Unfortunately, there's a very large amount of black culture that is absolutely terrible. [+24]*

These two comments serve as an illustrative example of racial rhetoric on Reddit. To begin with, User 1 is attempting to bring attention to the racism in the comment thread. Although his own critique is likely blunted by his own controversial language (“crackers are cracking” presumably means White people are acting White). It is unclear if their comment is downvoted because they are calling out racism, the manner in which they do it, or both. Cultural racism comes into play in the response to his post. “There is always an outlier” presumes that to be a Black father is to be an outlier. The absentee-Black-father trope has largely been debunked, most Black fathers live with their children or are otherwise involved in their lives (Jones and Mosher 2013), but this does not stop the user from making the false stereotypical claim that “the majority of black kids don't have fathers.” The user then explicitly refers to Black culture as “terrible,” an explicit utilization of the cultural racism frame.

One reason User 2's comment is of interest is that it is in direct response to a user making an accusation of overt racism in the comment section. The suggestion is that the racist jokes in the comment section are *justified* because “black culture is terrible” and “it's not racist. It's a statistic.” The notion of absent Black fathers is a common explanation for racial inequality. The narrative is employed by conservatives and liberals alike as a way to explain persistent racial inequality in terms of Black culture. Rarer are the explanations that look to systemic racism as a reason for why Black children are more likely than the other racial groups to live in single-parent households. Instead of understanding statistics related to single parent households by race as a

result of institutions that disadvantage Black men in the labor market, criminal justice system, and housing, these outcomes are reframed as a cultural problem at the root of other negative outcomes associated with racial inequality. Through color-blind discourse, the symptoms become the disease.

Occasionally, when users do adopt color-blind frames, they do so with a pseudo-sympathetic tone. The user below serves as a useful example of this style, adopting the cultural racism frame while still declaring the situation “heartbreaking.” In a response to a comment about institutional racism being a factor for Black Americans, this user states:

The problems that black communities face aren't institutionalized racism. The problems that black communities face are the black communities. Its a serious cultural problem that we literally have no ability to fix. They absolutely discourage education and social improvement, even to the point of violence, they've completely abandoned parental values when it comes to the importance of fatherhood, and they keep their own neighbors dependent upon drugs. Its heartbreaking and there's literally nothing outsiders can do. [22]

This comment references a host of “cultural problems” that apparently plague the Black community. This explicit reference to the cultural racism frame relies on a series of excessive fabrications to make the user’s case. While the hyperbolic nature of this comment may be interpreted as racist to some readers, the user is careful to adhere to the rules of color-blind ideology. Use of language that projects an image of being well-informed help to convert the overtly racist sentiment into color-blind ideology. “Blacks” becomes “Black communities” and use of phrases like “education and social improvement” and “parental values” and ideas like drug dependence offer the veneer of an educated analysis. In actuality, the user’s sentiments amount to the same basic ideas seen in more overtly racist language.

The comment also helps to demonstrate why the abstract liberalism frame is central to color-blind ideology as a whole. Although this comment is most explicitly employing the

cultural racism frame, it still utilizes the implicit assumptions of abstract liberalism -- a focus on individualism, particularly individual responsibility. By laying the blame of racial inequality on Black communities and declaring that “there’s literally nothing outsiders can do,” the user is suggesting that the Black community needs to take individual responsibility. This terminology also draws in-group/out-group boundaries by presupposing that Whites and others are “outsiders.”

This comment also illustrates a key difference between Bonilla-Silva’s analysis and my own. Bonilla-Silva observed the uncertainty with which some White people comment on racial matters in the context of in-person interviews. Bonilla Silva uses the term “rhetorical incoherence”¹² to describe the “grammatical mistakes, lengthy pauses, or repetition” that can become more noticeable when individuals are discussing uncomfortable topics (Bonilla-Silva, 2018: 91). The palpable discomfort some White people feel when asked to discuss racial matters in a face-to-face setting with a person of color is well documented (Jayakumar and Adamian 2017). The absence of such discomfort in the context of anonymity and the time available to compose and edit a written comment is notable and adds to the illusion that the user is a reliable source on the subject. A face-to-face interview happens in the moment, and a speaker does not have that same opportunity to craft and revise a statement. It is unclear precisely what the user means by “discouraging education and social improvement, even to the point of violence” but the apparent confidence underlying the user’s assertion may prove persuasive for those who read it.

¹² It is fair to criticize the judgmental nature of Bonilla-Silva’s use of the term “rhetorical incoherence.” I use it here to faithfully cite his work.

Minimization of Racism

The notion that racial minorities are overly sensitive to racial issues is highly prevalent. In Bonilla-Silva's original analysis, the minimization frame referred to a general dismissal of claims of racial discrimination. As the awareness of the concept of structural racism has grown, so has the backlash against the concept. The predominant manifestation of the minimization of racism frame has evolved from "quit playing the race card" to "political correctness is out of control / the woke mob / cancel culture" (for further discussion of the political correctness narrative, see chapter 7). In addition to the specific political correctness narrative, the minimization of racism frame is relevant for those who wish to escape discussion of racial matters in entertainment. For example, Colin Kaepernick's pregame protest of kneeling during the national anthem caused a backlash among those who disagreed with the anti-racist protest or otherwise did not want to think about it while watching football.

A good example of this particular manifestation of the minimization of racism frame appears in a thread about the moderation of the /r/Games subreddit. On April 1, 2019, the moderators of /r/Games closed the subreddit for one day and wrote a lengthy post explaining their actions. They closed the subreddit to bring attention to "some of the more awful comments we see regarding transphobia, homophobia, islamophobia, racism, misogyny, pro-pedophilia/pro-rape, and vitriolic personal attacks against other users." By closing down the subreddit to new posts and comments, the moderators effectively mounted a protest against such comments, calling upon users to reflect upon their own prejudicial views. The action drew attention in another subreddit, /r/PCGaming, where a post was created to discuss the locking of the subreddit. The top comments were almost entirely negative towards the moderator actions, arguing that any bigotry was the result of a "tiny percentage of trolls and bigots" and the

“power hungry” moderators’ actions represented “virtue signaling” and “grandstanding.” The comments are the contemporary equivalent of “quit playing the race card” and the sentiments are highly upvoted. One exchange showed just how strong the inclination towards minimization frame can be:

User 1: Get your garbage politics out of video game discussion. [362]

User 2: [in direct response to User 1] The fact that you consider “don’t say shitty things about minorities” as “garbage politics” is very telling. [-143]

Note that “get your garbage politics out of video game discussion” is directed towards the moderators seeking to bring awareness to the racism, misogyny, and other bigoted commentary on the /r/Games subreddit as opposed to users who are inserting their bigotry into the video game discussions. To be political is to try to prevent racism and misogyny, but to engage in bigotry (or stay silent while others do) is not political at all. That the sentiment of the former is highly upvoted while the latter is downvoted is a signal to users about which view is perceived as correct by most other users. The lesson for some users is that bringing up social justice related topics, including racism, where it is unexpected or unwelcome leads to social sanctions.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I illustrated the ways in which users on Reddit employ the four central frames of color-blind racism: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. In many ways, these frames continue to operate in much the same way as Bonilla-Silva (2018) discovered in research based on data collected over twenty years prior. In other ways, however, the discourse has evolved. For example, the use of the naturalization frame seems to be rarer than during Bonilla-Silva’s analysis. Hinting at “natural” causes for racial inequality appears to still be acceptable, but explicitly reference to natural differences between racial groups is to be out of bounds. The minimization of racism frame has also evolved. The

employment of the minimization frame on Reddit tends to revolve largely around claims of political correctness and cancel culture being out of control. Additionally, the minimization frame manifests less in outright denial of discrimination and more of a “leave race out of this” attitude.

Conversely, abstract liberalism and cultural racism were employed in remarkably similar ways to those uncovered in Bonilla-Silva’s analysis. Users often sought out cultural explanations and employed liberal colloquialisms to justify ongoing racial inequality. Another element of the discourse that remains consistent with Bonilla-Silva’s analysis is that the frames work in concert with one another. Implicit in an appeal to the abstract liberal concepts of “equality of opportunity” in a discussion of affirmative action is that discrimination is overblown (minimization), and there are other explanations for the inequality of outcomes (cultural racism and naturalization). The way the frames work together, paired with their pliability and potential for evolution, are part of why they prove to be useful beyond racial discourse. The next chapter explores the applicability of these four frames to gendered discourse and examines the utility of a theory of gender-blind sexism.

CHAPTER 6: GENDER-BLIND SEXISM: SEXISM WITHOUT SEXISTS

There are several similarities between the dominant ideologies of race (i.e. color-blind racism) and the discursive strategies associated with gender inequalities. When Bonilla-Silva wrote *Racism without Racists* one of the main ideas he explored is the stigmatizing nature of the “racist” label. Few terms are as damaging to a public figure’s reputation. In most circles, to be branded a racist is to be marked as a disgrace. One of the primary functions of color-blind discourse is to avoid the stigmatizing label – to maintain a system of advantage based on race without being racist. Similarly, the public discourse surrounding gender maintains a patriarchal system – a system where the interests of men are favored at the expense of women. There are important and interesting parallels between color-blind racial discourse and the dominant discourse surrounding gender inequality. Color-blind racism ushered in a new dominant ideology for the post-Civil Rights era. I will use this chapter to argue that a similar process has occurred with an ideology used to justify, maintain, and reproduce gender inequality .

Gender-blind sexism (Stoll 2013) has emerged as the dominant ideology maintaining and reproducing the contemporary patriarchal order. In a social landscape that is increasingly hostile to blatant misogyny, gender-blind sexism utilizes subtle and covert forms of sexism as an avenue for the justification and minimization of gender inequality. Just as color-blind racism offers its subscribers plausible deniability for their role in contributing to racial inequality, gender-blind sexism allows its adherents to contribute to sexism without being labeled as sexist. When analyzing gender-related discourse through this lens, the parallels and divergences between the interpretations of racial and gender inequality are evident.

Abstract Liberalism

As is the case with color-blind racism, abstract liberalism holds an important position among the frames of gender-blind sexism. The foundational principles attached to abstract liberalism serve as a buttress to the moral justifications offered by those defending gender inequality. The illusion of equal opportunity becomes paramount in any defense of the current patriarchal order. A prime example of this frame in action on Reddit appears in a thread on the gender pay gap. The submitted link is to an article titled “Harvard Study: ‘Gender Pay Gap’ Explained Entirely by Work Choices of Men and Women” (Phelan 2018). This headline overstates the claims of the study’s authors, who analyze the gender pay gap among Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) workers (Bolotnyy and Emanuel 2018). The study makes no claims about the gender pay gap broadly. The article (not the study itself) is submitted to the subreddit /r/MensRights, and its position as one of the most highly upvoted submissions of the week is an indication that the audience is receptive to its message. The top comment replies to the headline with “And in other news, water is wet. [643]” conveying that the misleading assertion put forth by the headline is an obvious truth. Another user argues that “This study will be ignored by the crowd that infantilizes women to the point they make it seem women don't have any sense of individual responsibility. [81]” In both cases, abstract conceptions of individual choice and responsibility are at the forefront of the message behind the article and these comments. The notion that those who acknowledge the existence of the gender wage gap are disregarding women’s individual agency to the point that “infantilizing” puts forth the narrative that “they’re the real sexists.”¹³ One comment exemplifies the reaction of the users in this comment thread:

¹³ See Chapter 6 for a longer discussion of the “they’re the real sexists” narrative.

[The Gender Pay Gap] has been debunked time and time again, even by the U.S. Department of Labour, and people still believe it... It's incredible how people assume that since there's a gap it must be due to discrimination, and willingly filter out all the other factors that go into determining pay, such as hours worked, experience, occupation, etc. [147]

The above comment employs many of the same rhetorical devices that we see in color-blind racism. There is a projection of certainty and expertise with misleading claims (gender wage gap “debunked time and time again”) and the direct denial of the existence of discrimination (minimization of sexism frame). At its core, however, this comment is rooted in abstract liberalism. A superficial notion of equal opportunity and individual freedom of choice. The notions that men and women are not equally free to make choices about work as it relates to child care, that men and women are subject to gendered socialization, educational experiences, and social expectations regarding the type of work they should pursue, and that work that is understood as masculine or feminine are not compensated equally is not brought up in the discussion. For this user overt discrimination is the only form of sexism that counts. In some respects, the /r/MensRights subreddit is an embodiment of the abstract liberalism frame. In the subreddit’s FAQ section, the subreddit describes the Men’s Rights Movement as “a loose term for the collective activities of people that feel that men are not being treated equally by society,” and goes on to describe the movement as “pro-equality” particularly in contrast to feminism.

Reddit users do not have to venture into /r/MensRights or other ideologically specific subreddits in order to discover abstract liberalism being employed in defense of gender inequality. One example appears /r/changemyview, a subreddit dedicated to civil debate. The submission reads “[Change My View]: The pay-gap in Women's National Football is fair. [2829]” The user goes on to cite a number of sources related to the revenue and viewership of Women’s soccer teams relative to men’s soccer. The user writes, “The men's World Cup in

Russia generated over \$6 billion in revenue, with the participating teams sharing \$400 million, less than 7% of revenue. Meanwhile, the Women's World Cup is expected to earn \$131 million” and includes a list of citations at the end of the post. Broadly speaking, the post is articulate and thoughtful, but still relies on the assumptions of abstract liberalism regarding what constitutes “fairness.” The fact that women’s international soccer generates less revenue than men’s international soccer is not seen as a reflection of gender bias by viewers who are less interested in sporting competition among women than men. Instead, for Reddit users, that reality is simply a fact of life for women’s sports and not tied to a larger system of sexism. For those who employ the abstract liberalism frame, economic equality depends on the value brought to an employer as dictated by a capitalist system.

Tying economic inequality to the realities of the free market has long been used to excuse sexism and racism. That the general public is more interested in men’s sports, or movies with White male protagonists, or the fact that the racial composition of a neighborhood influences home values is often not attributed to racism or sexism, and those who make economic decisions in accordance with those economic realities are not seen as racist or sexist, despite the fact that such decisions contribute to the ongoing reality of racial and gender inequality.

Minimization of Sexism

Often, those who employ the minimization of racism frame accuse racial minorities of “playing the race card” or otherwise exaggerating the existence of racism. This can manifest in mocking efforts towards anti-racism (i.e. jokes about “SJWs”). Similarly, feminism is often the subject of ridicule on Reddit. The degree of opposition to feminism varies from more subtle (i.e. #notallmen, or “men have it bad too”) to the more overtly hostile (/r/theredpill, /r/mensrights). Even members of more aggressively anti-feminist communities generally deny that they are

“sexist,” but identify as “realists” or “pro-equality.” One subreddit takes the minimization of sexism frame to its logical extreme: /r/pussypassdenied. This subreddit purports itself as a space “where women are not allowed to use their gender as a handicap or an excuse to act like assholes. Yay equality!” and is “is not for misogynists.”¹⁴ While comments and submissions from this subreddit are not included in this analysis, its existence on Reddit demonstrates that the website provides space for the more vitriolic manifestations of the minimization of sexism frame.

Within my analysis, /r/Mensrights provides numerous examples of comments that are overtly hostile to women, particularly feminists. Among the comments that stand out are those that appear in threads that are otherwise unrelated to feminism. For example, a highly upvoted submission to /r/mensrights was a picture of a sign taped to a door that read:

*End the Stigma of Male Sexual Assault.
One in 6 men has been sexually abused.
It's not “no big deal” so get support.
Go to: 1in6.org or ICESA.org.
“Saying nothing fixes nothing”*

The submission title reads “Saw this in a high school. Thought it was interesting coming from a class room of kid [2800].” The submission itself is a positive message and is consistent with feminist critique of gender roles. That men feel shame and stigma following sexual abuse is a legitimate issue brought on in large part by a culture of toxic masculinity. Nevertheless, the second most highly voted comment took the opportunity to express hostility towards feminism by stating, “How long till the feminists tear it down and scream rape? I’ll bet it already happened..... [96].” The comment relies on the minimization frame in two ways. First, it offers a direct attack on feminism and the concerns of feminists by painting them as hysterical, false accusers who would condemn an effort to support male victims of sexual assault. The suggestion

¹⁴ <https://www.reddit.com/r/pussypassdenied/>

that feminists would reject the message of the original submission is unfounded, but the comment is highly upvoted regardless. Second, the user implies that feminists “scream rape” as a sort of objection, insinuating that rape accusations are not to be taken seriously and works to delegitimize sexual assault generally. Claims of sexual assault are belittled by the assertion that they are weaponized by women or otherwise made without just cause.

In the more popular and general subreddits, employment of the minimization of sexism frame relies on subtle downplaying of male privilege and the patriarchy. One example appears in the text submission for the /r/unpopularopinion subreddit. The “Unpopular opinion” is that “White men only get hostile about female or ethnically diverse actors being cast as heroes when the casting choice is turned into a social justice campaign [14,678].” The idea that casting women and racial minorities in roles is *only* met with backlash when it is “turned into a social justice campaign” is a clear use of the minimization frame.

The utilization of the minimization frame continues in the comment section of this submission, with one user bringing up the film Captain Marvel.

User 1: The problem isn't the character casting. The problem is the hypocrisy and the preaching. I honest to god can't count the number of seminars, lectures, hate fests I've had thrown at me from schools, media, workplace, you name it telling me all about how great my life is because I was born a white male. Apart from the fact that I can guarantee I had it a lot harder than the overwhelming majority of the people telling me this, why is it assumed that all white men walk around in some delusional bliss just because they were born white and male? Where does this idea come from? Well, actually, I know exactly where it comes from and it comes from privileged SJWs who don't know the first thing about hardship but feel that their own privilege and our shared skin color entitles them to speak and sign me up for their insane ideas to make up for their guilt. I won't watch Captain Marvel. Not because she's a woman but because I can't think of any good reason to pay to sit through yet another lecture on why white man bad/everybody else good. I was sick and tired of this crap by age 10. I got whatever message it is that they're trying to ram down my throat...shut the fuck up about it already! [230]

User 2: Clearly white male privilege is the suicide rates. [74]

The first user expresses their frustration with the feeling that they have been inundated with the message that they are privileged because they are White and male. The sentiment is not a novel one. Backlash against the notion of White male privilege is prevalent among Reddit users, frequently represented through this reductive interpretation of the notion. While sociological conceptions of White male privilege do not assert that the existence of such privilege makes life great or easy for all White men, the distortion put forth by User 1 serves as a useful diversion to make “privileged SJWs” sound rather unhinged. When “White male privilege” is reframed as “White men have it great and easy all the time” then the concept itself is easily debunked. A more accurate understanding of White male privilege requires a great deal more nuance and an intersectional approach consistent with critical race theory that is neglected by the user.

He goes on to bring up the film *Captain Marvel* -- a comic book movie that garnered attention for being the first Marvel Studios film that centers on a woman superhero (Grady and Abad-Santos 2019). Marvel Studios is well known for their *Avengers* movies featuring mostly male superheroes such as Iron Man, Captain American, and Thor. In fact, before the release of *Captain Marvel*, the studio had produced twenty feature films, all of which either centered on male superheroes as titular characters or featured an ensemble cast. This context is important because it helps frame the objections of User 1, who states “I won't watch *Captain Marvel*. Not because she's a woman but because I can't think of any good reason to pay to sit through yet another lecture on why White man bad/everybody else good.” The user states that they will not watch *Captain Marvel*, but is careful to note that it is “not because she’s a woman.” If the user were to say “I won’t watch *Captain Marvel* because she’s a woman” that would be too overtly sexist and likely be met with social sanction in the form of downvotes. Perhaps more importantly, such a blatant admission of sexism would likely be at odds with the user’s self-

conception as a non-sexist. This user goes on to equate the studio's first comic book film with a female lead to an anti-White male lecture, and by the end of the comment is quite hostile towards the perceived message. Readers may find themselves wondering what about this film sends an "anti-White male" message, but a substantial number agree with the comment enough to upvote.

The second user's comment here is illustrative of the way Reddit comment threads sometimes build on one another. The user sarcastically speculates that the "White male privilege" is evident from suicide rates. White males do have among the highest suicide rates, only American Indian or Alaskan Native males have higher rates as of 2017 (Curtin and Hedegaard 2019). The overarching point is to deny, or at least minimize, White male privilege -- how could White male privilege exist when suicide rates for this group a disproportionately high? The question itself represents another reductive framing of the advantages afforded to men in a patriarchal society. A sociological analysis of male privilege acknowledges that these advantages are not distributed equally among all men, nor does the existence of male privilege preclude the existence of pain and suffering experienced by men. Taken together, these comments rely heavily on the minimization of sexism frame, contributing to the dissemination of gender-blind sexism through Reddit.

Naturalization

The naturalization frame as employed within gender-blind sexism relies on gender essentialism. The framing of men and women as intrinsically different is the foundational assumption of the naturalization frame. Whether these assumed innate differences are rooted in biology, psychology, or something else is often left unspoken. There's a "this is just the way it is" quality to the naturalization frame. The frame often appears in the predominantly hetero-centric sexualization of women on Reddit. For example, a picture of a 70s era flight attendant

crossing her legs evokes the comment “Women can do some of the most elegant and perfect things. Man, I love chicks [93].” While the comment is not legitimizing or justifying any gender inequality, the user is prescribing an innate quality to “women” and takes on a tone of benevolent sexism by reifying the flight attendant’s physical appearance at the expense of all other qualities and attributes.

One of the attractions of Reddit is that it can provide users with bizarre and outrageous scenarios to contemplate. One subreddit that exemplifies this is called /r/AmITheAsshole (AITA). AITA describes itself as a place to “finally find out if you were wrong in a real-world argument that's been bothering you.”¹⁵ In a post titled “AITA for masturbating to naked pictures of my best friend? She feels like I violated her privacy whereas I feel like I did nothing wrong” the submitting poster describes a scenario where he discovers the anonymous, adult photos of a friend and eventually confronts her over them. One user relies on the naturalization frame when describing how women and men react differently to rude comments to their adult pictures.

*I run an adult subreddit. [...] ANYONE who posts nudes is very self-conscious about it. Any flaw is magnified to them. Are they flabby? They're scared they'll be called fat. Did they break a nose or a finger and it didn't grow back perfectly straight? They'll be scared people call them weird or mutants or any other horrible thing. People are skittish when they do something vulnerable. In terms of "fight or flight" response, **men will fight, women will take flight.** (On my subreddit, I've had maybe 300 guys deal with mean comments over the years, and probably 299 of them responded by firing back until it was a flame war frenzy. I've had maybe 1000 women deal with mean comments, and probably a dozen engaged in a flame war, and the other 988 just... disappeared. Photos gone, posts & comments gone. Half the time the entire account goes poof, too. Women are great at vanishing.) [Emphasis added] [9893].*

By invoking the “fight or flight” response, an instinctual, physiological reaction to stress, the user is asserting an innate, even biological difference between men and women in how they react

¹⁵ <https://www.reddit.com/r/AmITheAsshole/>

to a stressful situation. “Men will fight, women will take flight” treats these asserted differences in behavior as a natural difference between men and women.

Perhaps the clearest embodiment of the naturalization frame on Reddit is /r/TheRedPill (TRP). TRP is a subreddit dedicated to strategies for picking up women and philosophizing around why some strategies work.¹⁶ Foundational to TRP ideology is that women are naturally attracted to “alphas” and repelled by “betas,” and that this natural inclination can be exploited by men who have not bought into feminist indoctrination. As is the case in color-blind racism, the naturalization frame lends itself towards more overtly sexist ideology. Manifestations of gender inequality as “natural” leads to “women are naturally weaker” particularly within the red pill community. One example comes in a submission titled “Remain Unreactive,”

Women are attracted to you because you have a stronger frame than they do. That's all. What is a strong frame? Fundamentally, it's a sense of certainty in everything you do. This certainty manifests itself as calmness in the face of social pressure. Simply put, in a cold approach pickup, the woman becomes attracted to you because you're more relaxed than she is. That's all. [775]

The user does not explicitly state his theory is “natural” or due to biology, but the naturalization frame underlies the rationale he is using. By reducing complex and nuanced elements that go into interpersonal attraction to a “stronger frame” is absurd on its face, but the certainty with which the idea is postulated and the simplicity of it is undoubtedly appealing for those who may find comfort in simple explanations of social interaction. More than any other frame, naturalization offers a simplistic framework for those who adopt it.

My findings suggest that, while reliance on the naturalization frame in racial discourse is taboo, within gender discourse it can be acceptable in certain contexts. The existence of subreddits like TRP and others that revolve around the pickup artist subculture are a tribute to the

¹⁶ For a longer description of The Red Pill origins and subreddit description see Chapter 7.

more acceptable nature of naturalization. Communities like TRP rely on a framework reduces social interactions to natural psychological processes that are contingent on gender. No similar communities exist in the realm of race relations.

Cultural Sexism

Cultural sexism relies on cultural arguments to justify gender inequality. In contrast to naturalization, the cultural sexism framework allows for more sophisticated explanations for gender inequality, even conceding the impact of gender norms and values. Indeed, sociologists and feminists will often employ cultural arguments during discussions of gender inequality. The difference is often that cultural sexism relies on reductive versions of cultural explanations and employs them in service of upholding a patriarchal system rather than critiquing it. A clear example of the cultural sexism frame appears in a thread submitted to [/r/im14andthisisdeep](#), a subreddit dedicated to ideas that seem profound on the surface, but upon closer examination are just immature. The submission is a satirical cartoon image of two restroom entryways labeled “MEN” and “WOMEN.” The men’s entry is a large square opening while the women’s entry is shaped in the profile of a thin, conventionally attractive woman. The cartoon is meant to draw attention to female beauty standards, particularly in contrast to the lack of standards men face. By submitting this image to this subreddit, the original poster is poking fun at the image, implying that only a 14-year-old would think this is “deep.” The submission is titled “The pressure society puts on men to be square is unacceptable” a sarcastic commentary on the cartoon. Most comments repeat some version of this joke, employing the minimization frame by being dismissive towards a genuine issue that contributes to gender inequality. One commenter, however, attempts to engage with the idea behind the cartoon by stating, “The only people putting pressure on women are usually just other women.” By framing gender norms around

appearance as coming from just other women, the user is signaling that to the extent that disparities exist, women themselves are to blame. This runs parallel to cultural racism in that there is a victim blaming mentality. “Blacks are the ones that aren’t instilling values of education” and “women are the ones who put unrealistic expectations on one another” represent parallel deployments of culture-based arguments. In both cases the “culture” of the oppressed group is being criticized and used to explain the inequality the group faces.

Another useful example appears in a highly upvoted submission to the /r/ChangeMyView subreddit. The post is titled “CMV: In heterosexual relationships the problem isn't usually women being nags, it's men not performing emotional labor.” The submission reads,

Original Text Post: *It's a common conception that when you marry a woman she nags and nitpicks you and expects you to change. But I don't think that's true. I think in the vast majority of situations (There are DEFINITELY exceptions) women are asking their partners to put in the planning work for shared responsibilities and men are characterising this as 'being a nag'. I've seen this in younger relationships where women will ask their partners to open up to them but their partners won't be willing to put the emotional work in, instead preferring to ignore that stuff. One example is with presents, with a lot of my friends I've seen women put in a lot of time, effort, energy and money into finding presents for their partners. Whereas I've often seen men who seem to ponder what on earth their girlfriend could want without ever attempting to find out. I think this can often extend to older relationships where things like chores, child care or cooking require women to guide men through it instead of doing it without being asked. In my opinion this SHOULDN'T be required in a long-term relationship between two adults. [Excerpted for brevity] [3720]*

Top Comment: *I think there is a tendency for women to underaccount for how much emotional labor they generate. [...] Here's an unfortunate reality: Women, in general, have very little patience for men's emotions that don't suit their needs. Our emotions aren't really concerned over, except insofar as they affect women. Literally nobody cares if we're sad, depressed, feeling hopeless, defeated, anxious, confused, uncertain, unsure of ourselves, and so forth unless it affects them, in which case it's usually a problem for them. Nobody wants to hear it. [...] Now your instinct here is to come up with something about how it's men who are punishing other men for being emotional (i.e. the ol' "don't be a pussy"). However, this is a myth. First of all, when men call each other "pussies" (qua *coward*) or some variant, it's typically to spur action, not punish emotion.*

Secondly, men share a great deal more emotional content with each other than women think they do. Other men are almost always the safer choice, because--- and here's the secret---women are far more punishing of men's emotions than we are. [Excerpted for brevity] [3905]

The original text submission offers a thoughtful, if somewhat stereotypical, analysis of gender dynamics in heterosexual relationships. The patterns described by the original submission are consistent with a feminist critique of household work patterns. In essence, the original poster is describing the “second shift” pattern found in many households, where both partners participate in the formal labor force, but women are expected to take on the bulk of the housework and child rearing responsibilities, in essence working a second shift (Hochschild 1989). While the user is arguably overgeneralizing, the analysis offered would broadly resonate with feminist scholars. In contrast, the top comment is also thoughtful and articulate, but relies on assertions that are oversimplified and arguably counterfactual. The idea that it is a “myth” that men punish other men for being emotional is a fairly remarkable claim given scholarly works that demonstrate the opposite (Kimmel 1994; Connell 2005; Pascoe 2011; Pascoe and Diefendorf 2018). The user seems to be denying the existence of toxic masculinity, or at least shifting the blame for certain elements of it to women. For this user, it is women who enforce the expectation for stoicism and punish emotional vulnerability, not men. The user makes truly outlandish assertions including that the word “pussy” when used as a vulgar insult by men is not meant to punish them for being emotional, but instead intended to “spur action” -- one man calling another “pussy” is simply a way to motivate them. The idea that insults like “pussy” are exclusively used to motivate and not shame men is difficult to reconcile with the available research (Pascoe 2011). Even if we accepted this framing at face value, the “motivation” would be driven by a shared understanding between men that having feminine attributes or being compared to female body parts is undesirable, and therefore sufficient to motivate men to display more masculine behavior.

Additionally, the user argues that women do not care about “men’s emotions that don’t suit their needs.” The misogynistic undertones of the comment are particularly fascinating given how highly upvoted it is with a score of 3905. The user seems to be harboring a great deal of resentment towards women generally, but the comment is written with a sort of calm and articulate tone that serves as an effective veil. This tone, paired with the confidence of the assertions, allows the comment to paint a convincing picture of male victimhood driven by a value and norms enforced by women.

Intersections of Color-Blind Racism and Gender-Blind Sexism Frames

Occasionally, the commentary on racism and sexism is intertwined in ways that demonstrate just how closely linked these ideologies may be. Let us turn our attention back to the /r/unpopularopinion thread titled “White men only get hostile about female or ethnically diverse actors being cast as heroes when the casting choice is turned into a social justice campaign.” This thread is of interest because it explicitly links the casting of women and ethnically diverse actors. The assertion laid out in the title can frankly be rejected on its face. Ethnic minorities and women are subject to online vitriol regardless of their political activism. A stark example appears in the movie *The Hunger Games*, which features a thirteen-year-old Black actress, Amandla Stenberg in the role of Rue. Although the character herself was described as having dark skin, the choice to cast a young Black actress was met with backlash from fans who tweeted out their reaction, including some using racial slurs (Stewart 2012).

That said, the “unpopular opinion” is met with broad agreement from fellow Reddit users. One user states “Upvoted from a center-left black guy. It's utterly stupid. ‘Inclusion’ is supposed to be organic. Most of my fellow left seemed to miss that memo [2529][Gold].” His self-identification as a “center left Black guy” commenting against the “forced diversity” lends

more credibility to the mindset, despite the possibility that the poster could very well be misrepresenting his racial identity.

Other users broadly agree throughout the comment section including statements like “If you have a movie with great characters I don't care what color, gender, or whatever they are. I will give anything a fair shake if it's in my sphere of interest [77],” and “Idgaf what color or gender an actor or actress is as long as they can act, and the flick is good [61].” The comments represent a direct claim of color-blindness and gender-blindness.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the employment of the frames of gender-blind sexism, Laurie Cooper Stoll's (2013) gender-based application of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2018) frames of color-blind racism (first edition published in 2003). The frames of gender-blindness, abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural sexism and minimization of sexism, run parallel to Bonilla-Silva's original four frames of color-blindness, and my findings illustrate the similarities. As is the case in color-blind racism, the abstract liberalism frame represents the most crucial frame in maintaining the veneer of egalitarianism. The minimization of sexism mirrors the minimization of racism frame in that both rely on a narrative that the pendulum has swung too far, resulting in a reverse discrimination or overly burdensome political correctness.

My findings also illustrate important distinctions that exist between the utilization of the frames in gender and race. In my data, users appear to rely less frequently on the naturalization frame overall, but it appears more often in gendered discourse than in discussions revolving around race. Reddit users appear to feel more comfortable alluding to natural differences between the genders than between racial groups, an indication that biological racism has fallen further into realm of unacceptability. In contrast, those participating in gendered discourse can

safely allude to biological differences based on sex. Naturalization often follows this track. Cultural racism also holds a unique position within color-blind racism. The prevalence of residential segregation as well as the possibility of racial identity mapping onto different countries of origin, allow Reddit users to comfortably categorize different racial groups as having discrete cultural identities. Since people of all genders are highly integrated, the cultural sexism frame requires more specific language about what women value. Overall, cultural sexism seems to be less easily employed by Reddit users.

The parallels are clear when looking at race and gendered discourse as two distinct ideologies. My findings suggest, however, that there is an underlying ideology at the root of both color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism. The analysis in my next chapter helps to further illuminate the intersections between color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism, through the use of narratives which, in many cases, function to maintain both racial and gendered social orders.

CHAPTER 7: HEGEMONIC NARRATIVES OF RACE AND GENDER

Hate speech is a magic word like 'racism'. It has a several definitions that can be rapidly swapped between to call for the shaming of wrongthink. They start with hate speech being essentially a call to violence, but then call any deviation from the mainstream Left's stance on a group to be hate. So they convict you of having some innocuous belief identified as "hate speech" then treat you like a terrorist.
[20]

Narratives are a crucial tool for building a shared understanding of the way the world works. We use storytelling in our everyday lives, to explain why a coworker annoys us, or what made any given encounter interesting. Stories also help us understand, in succinct fashion, a coherent ideology. Ideologies involving race and gender are no different. They must be made meaningful in particular contexts and in ways that connect directly with individuals' lived experiences and common-sense understandings. Because they bind observations drawn from daily life into a coherent story that is broadly applicable, narratives become critical elements of hegemonic ideologies and our shared understanding of the racial/gendered hierarchy.

Bonilla-Silva's research identified several racial narratives, which he referred to as "story lines" (2018: 97). According to Bonilla-Silva, story lines are "socially shared tales that are fable-like and incorporate a common scheme and wording," (97). For example, "I didn't own any slaves" or "I didn't get a job because of a Black man" act as story lines in the color-blind racial discourse. These often-repeated narratives are vague in nature and ultimately meant to undermine the impact of racism in the U.S. At the same time that they are vague, such story lines are usually at least partially true. For instance, a white person living in the twenty-first century United States did not "own slaves," and someone who applied for a position but was not hired "did not get a job." Because story lines blend verifiable facts with assumptions about the underlying causes, they can be difficult to discredit or counter. I will use this chapter to expand upon the ways that narratives about race serve the ideology of color-blind racism and gender-

blind sexism and demonstrate the way in which these stories have become more complex, interwoven narratives.

The above Reddit comment is in response to a picture of conservative commentator Steven Crowder at a table in front of the Google campus in Austin, Texas with a sign that reads, “HATE SPEECH ISN’T REAL -- CHANGE MY MIND.” Crowder’s YouTube show “Louder with Crowder” garners millions of views, and his “change my mind” signs have become a popular meme on Reddit and social media generally (Wurth 2018). The quoted comment above articulates more explicitly the implicit message of Crowder’s demonstration. An unspecified “they” have shifted hate speech from a “call to violence” to “any deviation from the mainstream Left’s stance on a group.” This is a powerful narrative describing a perceived persecution of the right, and it fits nicely with the first narrative explored in this chapter.

Political Correctness Gone Too Far

The Political Correctness Gone Too Far narrative is broad and encompasses both racial and gendered ideologies. The premise is relatively simple. Political correctness as a social constraint has become overbearing and problematizes behaviors that should not be considered problematic. A common refrain of those adopting this narrative is that they can no longer speak aloud simple truths about society out of fear that they will be unfairly maligned as racist, sexist, homophobic or otherwise bigoted. This narrative is sometimes called upon explicitly, as is the case with a submission to the “ChangeMyView” subreddit below:

In the UK there was a question on the latest GCSE maths paper that read: “There are 84 calories in 100g of banana. There are 87 calories in 100g of yogurt. Priti has 60g of banana & 150g of yogurt for breakfast. Work out the total number of calories” A number of parents and students across the UK have started complaining about a question regarding a woman's calorie intake, leading to it trending on twitter. [...] There's nothing wrong with the question and the board should not feel any pressure to apologize or remove it. CMV [Change My View].

*[...] I'd sum up my view now as this is Still **PC gone mad**. [1628] (Emphasis added).*

This submission is emblematic of the way in which the structure of Reddit is well suited to disseminate narratives that prop up hegemonic ideologies. The “Political Correctness Gone Too Far” narrative is called upon explicitly as the user writes “PC gone mad.” The user describes a math problem with a subtle gendered message about calorie counting that evoked complaints from parents and students who linked the question to social expectations related to female body image and food consumption. For this Reddit user, the idea that some people would call attention to this connection is a sort of “madness.” The user draws attention to the perceived outrage culture of Twitter.

Adding to the intrigue is that the math question itself is not obviously sexist. Certainly, there is a case to be made for how the question feeds into stereotypical gendered expectations, but on its face the question is just a practical math problem. A surface level reading is quite appealing for Reddit users in this case. Is a math problem really something to fuss about? If this math problem is deemed problematic, what else might be? Could I be cancelled if I talk about calorie counting? These hypothetical fears are almost certainly unfounded, but the temptation to dismiss the necessity for introspection is quite appealing.

The submission received the necessary upvotes to be among the top submissions of the week for the popular *changemyview* subreddit. That this submission captured the attention of Reddit users raises an important question about where Reddit focuses the collective attention of its users. The narrative that political correctness has gone too far is so ubiquitous on Reddit that there are two distinct subreddits that operate with the theme as one of their core premises. These two subreddits are known as */r/TumblrInAction* (“Tumblr in action”) and */r/ImGoingToHellForThis* (“I’m going to Hell for this”). The */r/TumblrInAction* subreddit is

dedicated to mocking “Social Justice Warriors” who use tumblr.com, a popular social media/blogging website. According to the /r/TumblrInAction wiki,¹⁷

A Social Justice Warrior is someone, essentially, who is in it to get a sense of moral superiority. They're extremists, plain and simple; although they talk about their causes a lot, they're there because it gives them an enemy to hate and an identity to claim. They're keyboard warriors, usually; teenagers and young adults who are happy to spout hatred and bile if it makes them one of the group, but not to actually try and accomplish something. Obviously, they don't try and tackle really serious issues, like classism, because SJWs are typically well-off middle- to upper-class girls, and that would make them the bad guys. Instead, they pursue anything that allows them to frame white men as the ultimate evil, because that gives them a group to despise; a source of all evil to attack.

There’s a lot to unpack in this explanation of SJWs. To begin with, they are framed as folks who should not be taken seriously because they do not “tackle serious issues.” But what are the issues that they do tackle? The vague nature of this explanation invites subreddit participants themselves to define what constitutes an “unserious” issue. The unserious issues, as it turns out, are primarily those surrounding racism, sexism, and anti-LGBTQ ideologies. One example appears in a submitted post that is a screenshot of a tweet.¹⁸ The text of the tweet says “could our generation give up social media? Probably not! But so what? ur generation wouldnt give up institutionalized racism so... idk janice” with the submission title “Janices generation was part of the civil rights movement though.” Here, a twitter user makes a joke about how the perceived problems of younger generation pale in comparison to the social structures defended by older generations. The popularity of this submission is telling on its own. It operates under an ahistorical assumption that civil rights were broadly popular throughout the course of the movement. An ahistorical approach is quite common in, and perhaps necessary for, color-blind and gender-blind ideology. Full historical contextualization would require a fuller appreciation

¹⁷ A wiki is a user guide that many subreddits offer explaining rules, frequently asked questions, and other information that may serve as an introduction to the subreddit.

¹⁸ Although the subreddit is ostensibly “Tumblr in action” it does not restrict its content only to Tumblr.

for the persistent impact of racism and sexism. The submissions popularity on the sub also demonstrates that the mere mention of institutionalized racism makes someone a SJW. Responses to this submission vary, but a clear example of the “Political correctness gone too far” narrative emerges in an upvoted comment. One user posted, “Can we bring back Jim crow laws so at least these whinging little bitches going on about institutionalized racism have a point? Kinda seems like everyone wants to be segregated anyways.”

This comment serves as an excellent example of the connection between the PC gone mad narrative and the ideology of color-blind racism. The commenter is making the case that institutionalized racism used to exist under the era of Jim Crow, but to engage in criticism of ongoing systems of racial oppression amounts to “whinging.” Racism is once again defined exclusively as overt racial discrimination. The user goes on to suggest that “everyone wants to be segregated anyways” which is a common defense of modern-day de facto segregation and offers a rare example in the data of the naturalization frame discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

One strategy Reddit users deploy in service of the narrative that political correctness has taken over is to spotlight celebrities who reflect their ideology. One such submission appears in the /r/TumblrInAction subreddit. The submission is an image of a tweet from New York Times Arts section that reads “Dave Chappelle hasn’t adjusted his material for Broadway: he’s still defending wealthy, famous men like Louis C.K. and making jokes about transgender people.” The Reddit submission reads (with implied sarcasm): “Dave Chappelle hasn’t adjusted his material for the woke crowd. This is very problematic.”

One major element of the “political correctness gone mad” narrative is that it portrays a version of reality where everyone is forced to conform to new rules or suffer consequences. That perception is alluded to here by the user who notes that Chappelle “hasn’t adjusted” his material.

Another user notes “Wait, the comic whos most memorable sketch was about a black member of the Ku Klux Klan isnt one for political correctness? [998]” The framing here is telling. The user here is alluding to a 2003 sketch from the Chappelle Show featuring a blind, Black man who was a member of the Ku Klux Klan. The sketch has been widely acclaimed for its clever subversiveness (Norman 2004). However, in this case the subversive sense of humor exemplified by the sketch was directed in opposition to systems of oppression, as opposed to in support of them. In common parlance, Chappelle has gone from “punching up” (subversive anti-racist humor) to “punching down” (jokes mocking transgender people). Instead of focusing on the power relations that Chappelle’s comedy alludes to, the user conflates anti-transgender jokes with Chappelle’s previous work under the same “politically incorrect” umbrella.

The impact of the PC gone mad narrative is twofold. To begin with, explicitly racist and sexist language is redefined as a more palatable “political incorrectness.” To be politically incorrect is to be real – not phony like politicians who are polished and careful with their language. The opportunity to portray oneself as irreverent, even subversive, may be appealing to those who are already indoctrinated into the ideologies of color/gender-blindness. The politically incorrect self-definition is a sort of faux-subversiveness because it serves to maintain, not challenge, the status quo.

The second impact is that the PC gone mad story line reframes any ideological challenge to systems of racism and sexism as politically correct nonsense. Instead of inviting a critical examination of social systems and how they work to reproduce the inequalities, this narrative encourages users to dismiss claims of racism and sexism. To challenge such systems is to attract the undesirable “Social Justice Warrior” label. Additionally, as with the comment thread about Dave Chappelle, the notion of political correctness is positioned in direct opposition to comedy.

One user makes this argument with the comment, “Comedians should be transgressors and go against the social order to incite a laugh or a reaction.” – Redefining ideologies that reinforce oppressive ideologies as going “against the social order.” By linking political incorrectness to comedy, users who challenge racist and sexist humor run the risk of being labeled “woke scolds” or “fun police.”

Taking the Red Pill

Linked to the pc gone mad narrative is the misogynist ideology of “taking the red pill.” The red pill is a reference to the 1999 film *The Matrix* in which the character Morpheus, portrayed by Laurence Fishburne, explains to Keanu Reeve’s character Neo that the reality to which he is accustomed is actually a computer simulation designed to keep the human population enslaved. In the film, Morpheus explains,

This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill—the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill—you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes. Remember: all I'm offering is the truth. Nothing more (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999).

In other words, “taking the red pill” represents accepting a harsh reality in a world where most people are blissfully ignorant.

This context is key because it represents the belief among red-pill adherents that they are rejecting the indoctrination of the modern world. Modern society, in their view, has been corrupted by feminists and, of course, political correctness. As Donna Zuckerberg writes, “Red Pill represents a new phase in online misogyny. Its members not only mock and belittle women; they also believe that in our society, men are oppressed by women,” (2018: 14). The red pill narrative is most fully adopted by a subreddit of the same name [/r/TheRedPill](#) (henceforth TRP). TRP describes itself as a “Discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a

positive identity for men.” Submissions to the subreddit include a mix of advice, storytelling, and news stories that amplify their message. Virtually every submission includes instruction on how to be successful in sexual exploits or a lesson about the “real” world (and thus more “red pilling”). The primary messages are clear: To be happy you must be an alpha male and see women as weak and easily manipulated. Many of the submissions revolve around how precisely a man can achieve alpha status and what exactly it takes to manipulate women. Much of the content in this subreddit is presented with a veneer of pseudo-philosophical language, albeit with a crude twist. An example comes from an excerpt in a text post titled “Discretion”:

You must understand that even though deep down every woman is a sex-loving slut, there is an incredible amount of social, moral, and internal pressure on them NOT to be slutty. That is why LMR [Last Minute Resistance.] and ASD [Anti-Slut Defense] are so universal. It gets at the core of the female dilemma. Here is some advice for you autistic bastards: Shut the fuck up. Seriously. Dont talk about it. You fucked a girl on the weekend, and now you're back at school/work with the boys? Eager to brag about your exploits and show off pictures of the 6-point buck you bagged? Dont. Keep your trap shut. [...] Always leave her hamster an escape route. The name of the game is plausible deniability. Never make a woman feel responsible for the interaction, and never make her feel like a slut. Even though you both know the night is leading to sex, always keep it innocent on the surface. You dont invite her back to your place to fuck- you invite her back to your place for a glass of wine, or to check out a record you got, or to feed your goldfish. And then things "just happen." Of course, it never really "just happens" for the guy, and it takes planning and escalation. But to HER, it should feel like things "just happened" [...] I recently went back to college, and despite being the oldest and fattest guy there, I soon slept with one of my classmates. I kept everything on the down-low (didnt even start sitting next to her in class) but eventually it got out anyways. A couple girls tried to get me to talk about it, but I said "that's my business" and walked away. I fucked one of those girls soon after, and she admitted to me that my unwillingness to spill the beans was a big turn on [805].

The above excerpt is demonstrative of the style and substance of a typical TRP submission. To begin with, the user presents himself as an authority based on his own experience and success with college age women despite the apparent disadvantage of “being the oldest and fattest guy there.” As he tells it, it is his discretion which allows him to overcome these obstacles. The

message is clear – follow his advice and you, too, can have sex with college age women regardless of your age and appearance.

Crucially, the core substance of the advice itself is not necessarily problematic in a vacuum. Fundamentally, the user is instructing his audience not to brag about their sexual exploits. One can easily imagine this advice being given through a non-sexist or even feminist framework. “Don’t kiss and tell” is an oft repeated cliché after all. This can be said about a great deal of the advice found on TRP. Common dating clichés such as “be confident,” “get in shape,” and “don’t get too hung up on one person” are wrapped up in the misogynistic framework and language associated with the pickup artist community and adherents of red pill philosophy. The crude and sexist trappings are crucial in turning standard dating norms (that can prove to lead to some success) into hidden secrets of adherents of red pill philosophy.

The style of this submission is emblematic of the framework employed by TRP users. Part of the philosophy of TRP is a rejection political correctness. To the subscribers of TRP, politically correct language distorts reality. Use of phrases like “every woman is a sex-loving slut,” “Here is some advice for you autistic bastards,” and “the 6-point buck you bagged” (comparing casual sex to hunting deer) are meant to project an image of rebelliousness that is quite common on the subreddit. In addition to the pervasive profanities, TRP has a number of terms and phrases with red pill specific meanings. For example, the excerpt above refers to terms like hamster, LMR, ASD. A visitor to the subreddit may be directed towards a link to “Glossary of Terms and Acronyms” which where they will discover meanings of terms like ASD and LMR -- “anti-slut defense” and “last minute resistance” as noted above. According to TRP, women routinely try to back out of a sexual encounter that is about to occur.

The glossary serves a few important functions for the community. Like with many subcultures, adoption of language is a way of indicating in-group status. Use of the term hamster, for example, is a signal that the user is in the know and has adopted not only the language of the community, but also its norms and values. The promise of in-group status may be an attractive one for those who find themselves on TRP. A gateway to such status may also be a gateway to acceptance of TRP ideology. The glossary sets a clear standard for the beliefs of the community and the “rules” of being red pill.

A second function of the glossary is to assert a version of reality in which TRP adherents believe. Hamster is defined by the glossary as “Used to describe the way that women use rationalization to resolve mental conflict and avoid cognitive dissonance. The core mechanism that allows women to say one thing and do a different thing.” In other words, the author of the glossary frames women as irrational being who regularly require rationalizations for their behavior, particularly as it involves sexual relationships. So when the user above states, “Always leave her hamster an escape route.” He’s not asserting that women need to rationalize any sexual encounter, his comment accepts that as definitional and his argument revolves around what the reader should be doing to counteract that established reality. A user who is not aware of this term, but open to TRP ideology, may seek out the definition glossary as a seemingly authoritative source. The existence of the term offers the illusion of legitimacy to the claim that this is typical behavior of women. Within the glossary, the idea of the red pill itself is concisely defined:

Red Pill – The recognition and awareness of the way that feminism, feminists and their white-knight enablers affect society. An awareness of the dark truths surrounding human sexuality; hypergamy, women's AF/BB strategies, society's Feminine Imperative, sexual differences in emotional attachment, women's attraction to DT traits and sexual dominance/violence; Extremely politically

incorrect, expect reflexive social ostracism for even mentioning the red pill in polite society.

The definition itself invites questions about the terms and phrases throughout, framing them as “dark truths of human sexuality.” What are DT traits? Hypergamy? The community invites you to read on if you can handle these dark truths. The implication is that the knowledge that lies within is forbidden, but valuable.

The red pill narrative is ubiquitous enough to trickle into other arenas besides the anti-feminist areas of Reddit. Conservatives generally have adopted the narrative and applied it to their ideology generally. For example, the quote below is a “The_Donald” subreddit submission that uses red pill language as a lead in to a Donald Trump tweet.

Cue the red pills! Wow! FBI made 11 payments to Fake Dossier’s discredited author, Trump hater Christopher Steele. @OANN @JudicialWatch The Witch Hunt has been a total fraud on your President and the American people! It was brought to you by Dirty Cops, Crooked Hillary and the DNC.¹⁹

To this user, the tweet represents dose of reality. For those in right wing spaces, taking the red pill has evolved from “learning the truth about gender dynamics” to learning the truth about everything -- particularly a truth that is hidden from view by the mainstream media. The example demonstrates both the prevalence of the narrative and the overlap between anti-feminism rhetoric and general right-wing spaces. The phrase even found a home in the twitter timeline of billionaire Elon Musk, a noted COVID-skeptic. Musk tweeted “Take the red pill” and it was retweeted by Ivana Trump with the caption “Taken!”²⁰ Musk and Trump have 41.1 million and 10.3 million followers respectively.

¹⁹ Note that in the time since the data was collected, /r/The_Donald has been banned from the subreddit. I was able to maintain access through archived sources, having collected the data prior to the subreddits removal from the site.

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/IvankaTrump/status/1262095075963736064>

They're the Real Racists/Sexists (and We're the Real Victims)

As discussed in Chapter 4, one of the primary rhetorical tools of color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism is the ability to define these systems of oppression in individualized ways. This narrow, clinical approach to oppression allows for an emphasis on discrimination against the dominant groups. In the case of racism, this means a focus on perceived anti-white prejudice and discrimination. In the case of sexism, the focus becomes discrimination and prejudice against men. According to some users, White men are the primary victims of institutional racism/sexism exists. A clear example comes in a Reddit thread for an NBC news article, “12 white male officers sue San Francisco police for race, sex bias [31,734].”

Among the top comments was a proclamation that “In SF racism against white people is approved if not encouraged” while another user claimed “A government service in a far left area is biased against white guys? No way [457].” Such comments are emblematic of an overarching belief that Whites are the real victims of racism. Such rhetoric is in line with survey data that demonstrates that Whites believe anti-White racism is more prevalent than anti-Black racism (Norton & Sommers 2012). In other words, they believe there to be more racism against Whites than Blacks. The user also connects the perceived anti-White/anti-male bias to “far left” politics.

On Reddit, discussions of anti-White and anti-male prejudice often center on affirmative action. The strategy of depicting affirmative action as a racial boogeyman has long been employed by the right in an effort to appeal to racial resentment of White voters. This effort began as part of a backlash to the civil rights movement. The centering racial discourse around

affirmative action is part of what leads to Whites believing they're the victims of racism, since affirmative action purportedly benefits people of color at the expense of Whites.²¹

How does the ubiquity of a concept like White male privilege impact public discourse?

For some users, the concepts themselves are oppressive. Take the quote from a thread on a news story titled “White supremacist gets life for running down black man”:

User 1: “One should really consider how society at large is pushing this narrative with argumentive shut-down terms like, "white privilege," and, "male privilege," particularly white male privilege. When a demographic is basically told by their peers/other demographics to shut up because whatever they have to say isn't considered to be valid (EI, their suffering isn't anywhere near as bad as XYZ's suffering,) they can either bow their heads in defeat or start seeing opposition to their plights and resort to methods of expression and communication that can't be so blatantly ignored. [2]

User 2: I left academia (white straight man) because these identity politics are so bad. It's not ok to be white or not a Marxist in academia. [1]

The comment from User 1 is a perfect example of how the reverse racism/sexism narrative is employed. The user frames his comment as one going against the grain of “society at large” -- positioning himself as deviating from the dominant culture. The argument he espouses, however, is absolutely in accordance with dominant ideologies of color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism. The user adopts explicitly color/gender-blind language “when a demographic is basically told by their peers/other demographic to shut up...” The specific racial and gender demographic (White males) is left out in favor of the vague general label of “a demographic.” By erasing these specifics, the user is able to isolate the perceived discrimination from any sort of larger sociohistorical context. Racism goes from a system of advantage that benefits Whites at the expense of people of color to any situation where one “demographic” tells another to “shut up.” The user suggests that White men have been told to “shut up” because of their race and gender.

²¹ The actual effectiveness of affirmative action policies in reducing discrimination or mitigating the impact of racism is debatable but an in depth discussion on such policies is outside the scope of this dissertation .

Thus, the substance of the comment is an assertion that White men have been discriminated against by other demographics in the form of silencing. Importantly, that White men are overrepresented in the power structure in the US is left out of the users' analysis. Additionally, by putting sociological concepts of "White privilege" and "male privilege" in quotes and deeming them "argument shut-down terms," User 1 insinuates that the mere use of these terms (or the acceptance of these concepts as valid) is discriminatory towards White men.

The comment from User 2 demonstrates that unique conversational style that Reddit offers, where users are able to respond both to the post broadly (parent comments) and to specific parent comments. User 2 is responding directly to User 1 and in fact taking User 1's argument one step further. We go from User 1 declaring White males are basically be told to "shut up" to User 2 claiming they "left academia" because you cannot be "White or not a Marxist in academia." The claim of being ostensibly shut out of an institution like a university may feel familiar to people of color who come across this comment given accounts of the toxic environment in academia for members of historically underrepresented groups (Niemann 2012).

Conclusion

Narratives are tools in the toolbox of dominant ideologies such as color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism. As the three narratives discussed in this chapter demonstrate, these two ideologies operate with a great deal of overlap and employ similar rhetorical devices. Each of the three broad narratives can be called upon in service of both color-blind and gender-blind ideology, and actually allow the two ideologies to be linked as part of a larger coherent message. These three broad narratives are linked to each other as well. Efforts to reduce racist and sexist speech are positioned under the same umbrella as "political correctness out of control." To be aware of the out-of-control political correctness, and to understand the "dark truth" about

feminism/sexuality/social justice efforts is to be “red pillled.” Furthermore, to fully understand racism and sexism is to understand that it either “goes both ways” or that White men are the actual primary victims of such oppression.

These narratives are important because they serve to buttress the corresponding ideologies. The ideologies in turn serve to maintain and reproduce the systems of oppression. Systems of oppression operate through a set of social and political practices that require ideological justification. Directing our collective political capacity towards addressing an issue such as the gender wage gap becomes next to impossible when a dominant narrative about the gap is that it is a myth. Addressing the institutional racism associated with mass incarceration becomes difficult when starting the conversation is deemed “political correctness.” By employing these broad, connected narratives, the beneficiaries of the current racial/patriarchal order maintain the status quo.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION

At the outset of this dissertation, I posed three research questions which I will restate here:

Q1 – To what extent do color-blind and gender-blind ideologies appear in online discourse?

Q2 – What parallels exist between gendered and racial discourse online, particularly regarding the scope, and style of dominant ideologies in the discourse?

Q3 – How does the utilization of racial and gendered ideologies differ across specific online communities?

These three questions represent the exploratory approach I took to this study. The qualitative nature of my data as well as the ethnographic methodology directed me towards an analysis which answered these questions in an integrated manner. Chapters 4 through 7 all contain findings which deal with these questions in part. Here I offer a cohesive summary of the findings.

Summary

Question one refers to the degree to which color-blind and gender-blind ideologies appear in online discourse. Throughout my analysis, I demonstrated the numerous manifestations of color-blind and gender-blind discourse. I began by demonstrating the foundational role that definitions play in laying the groundwork for racial and gendered discourse. Definitions are crucial elements of all discourse, but the unique disconnect between conventional and sociological approaches to racism and sexism lead to a lack of genuine engagement between the

public and academic understandings of racism and sexism. This disconnect and lack of engagement functions to bolster the ideological resistance to challenging systems of oppression. The “dictionary definitions” of sexism and racism dominate, given authority by their ostensible objectivity and the fact that they have been published by Merriam-Webster and other “established” sources. This approach, which I refer to throughout this study as the individual approach to racism and sexism, is one that confines the meaning of the concepts to overt interpersonal acts of prejudice and discrimination. Within sociology, and academia broadly, a more structural understanding of racism and sexism has emerged. Understanding this gap and its role in fortifying color-blind and gender-blind ideology is crucial. Its manifestations are evident in the findings presented in Chapter 4. Through the narrowing of what it means to be racist and sexist, social structures that maintain and reproduce racial and gender inequality persist unchallenged.

Chapters 5 and 6 further demonstrate the extent of color-blind and gender-blind ideologies by exploring the ways in which frames offered by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2018) and Laurie Cooper Stoll (2013) are employed by Reddit users. The original four frames of color-blindness (abstract liberalism, cultural racism, naturalization, and minimization of racism) and their adaptations to gender-blindness (abstract liberalism, cultural sexism, naturalization and minimization of sexism), appear throughout racial and gendered discourse on Reddit. These frameworks work in conjunction with one another to provide justification for ongoing racial and gender inequality. A fundamental strength of the frames is their adaptability. The frames offer discursive strategies to justify examples of racial and gender inequality or otherwise dismiss claims of racism and sexism. The gender pay gap and racial income inequality are not due to discrimination (minimization frame) but instead because Black people do not properly value

education (cultural racism frame) and women value different types of work (cultural sexism frame). If shown evidence contradicting these assertions, they shift to notions of equality of opportunity versus equality of outcome and individual choices (abstract liberalism). The frames' ability to complement one another proves quite formidable. Further, the genius of the color-blind and gender-blind frames is that they allow for (and are actually strengthened by) cases of overt and obvious discrimination or prejudice. By being able to point to cases of "real" racism and sexism, adherents to color-blindness and gender-blindness grant themselves absolution.

The final manifestation of color-blindness and gender-blindness took the form of the narratives demonstrated in Chapter 7. These narratives demonstrate the evolution of color-blind "storylines" offered in Bonilla-Silva's study (2018:97) and demonstrates the broad applicability to gender and race. The set of narratives described in this chapter are important because they offer a lens into how these two ideologies are often working in tandem, perhaps rooted in a singular coherent reactionary ideology. The narratives of color-blindness and gender-blindness offer individuals easily repeatable, coherent descriptions of the world as they choose to perceive it. For example, the narrative that "they're the real racists/sexists" offers Reddit users who employ this notion an opportunity to claim the moral high ground. That such a claim is largely illusory is not important, so long as the user can be convinced that the claim of moral superiority is legitimate while avoiding introspection of their own role in systems of oppression.

My second research question asks for parallels between color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism, of which there are many. Some are referenced in the summary of question one above – both ideologies utilize definitional approaches that run contrary to the contemporary scientific approaches, both offer adherents four frames as outlined in Chapters 5 and 6, and both employ shared narratives which help to illustrate their compatibility. The parallels run deep

because they share a core component. Both color-blindness and gender-blindness function as the ideological underpinning for the contemporary social order. The strength of the parallels that exist between these two ideologies invites an examination of the intersections of color-blindness and gender-blindness. I will discuss more about the utility of understanding these ideologies as a cohesive unit in my discussion of this study's contributions.

Question two refers specifically to parallels in the scope and discursive style of color-blindness and gender-blindness. The parallels in the scope of these ideologies are clear – both ideologies offer versatile discursive strategies that are applicable to virtually every issue related to race and gender. The topics covered in the data presented here range widely, including speculation about the messaging in the film, *Captain Marvel*, conspiracy theories about rampant attacks on White farmers in South Africa, Trump's rhetoric towards women and immigrants, and theorizing about masculinity and femininity as it pertains to casual dating. Indeed, there are few aspects of the social world that are untouched by race and gender.

In terms of style, there are striking parallels between the two ideologies, particularly as they occur on social media. To begin with, users have the ability to present themselves as an expert or authority when employing the frameworks of color-blindness and gender-blindness. Social media also lends itself to the use of sarcasm and humor, and many of the comments analyzed in this dissertation involve such tones. Perhaps the most important parallel in terms of discursive styles that appear in this data is the wide variety. Users expressed color-blindness and gender-blindness using a wide range of tones, emotional undercurrents, and varying levels of sophistication. Both ideologies were expressed in tones that ranged from abrasive and angry to compassionate and level-headed. One reasonable conclusion is that when an ideology is dominant, its articulation may assume all manner of rhetorical and emotional styles.

My third research question refers to the differences between color-blindness and gender-blindness. My findings revealed that the two approaches were particularly different in the naturalization frame. My data suggests that naturalization as a frame of color-blind racism has diminished in its utility over the past twenty years since Bonilla-Silva's original study. The naturalization frame does, however, appear to have utility within the gender-blind framework. Likewise, it appears that cultural racism may be more easily employed than cultural sexism, perhaps due to the limitations of the naturalization frame within racial discourse. More research is necessary to quantify these differences.

Contributions

The findings of this dissertation build upon the sociological literature in two major ways. The first is a foundation for an underlying ideology of white masculinity. Since Whiteness and maleness both operate as positions of power within hierarchies of race and gender respectively, the rhetoric and ideological frameworks that function to defend those positions of power overlap. My findings demonstrate that ideologies connected to race and gender are often articulated through common narratives and intertwined rhetoric. This ideological framework is important because it is employed through a set of discursive strategies that are used to legitimize and justify systems that maintain and reproduce inequalities. That the ideologies upholding gender and racial inequalities have significant overlap perhaps increases their appeal for White men. White men may see their own positions of power at risk, particularly in light of emerging norms around political correctness. The narratives that appear in my data serve as a useful conduit for white male backlash. This joint ideology helps to explain both extreme examples of white male rage (i.e. the violent rampage of Elliot Rodgers, United States Capitol attack) as well as broader more acceptable enforcement of White patriarchy (Trump's election, Blue Lives Matter counter

protests). Of particular importance are the comments and quotes cited in support of the *political correctness gone too far* and *they're the real racists/sexists* narratives. These two narratives demonstrate the possibility that color-blindness and gender-blindness are best understood, not as two distinct ideological approaches, but as manifestations of a singular underlying dynamic. The tendency for users to discuss “White males” as an unfairly maligned group demonstrates the way in which they understand a link between these two identities as they operate within the social order. The intersection of Whiteness and maleness informs an overarching worldview and perceived sense of victimization. Although it is impossible to be certain of the gender and racial identity of the users who write comments about White males being treated unfairly, it seems likely this is often the case given that 67% of Reddit users are men and 59% are White (Pew Research 2020). Even in cases when the comment author is not a White male, a disproportionately White male user base is voting on the content, making certain that this groups’ perspective is overrepresented on a site that gives increased visibility to the most upvoted content.

The second major contribution of this dissertation concerns the readiness with which people dismiss structural approaches to racism and sexism. My findings demonstrate that consistent rejection of approaches to racism and sexism that take a comprehensive look at systems of inequality is a necessary step in maintaining those systems. In other words, one way to ensure structural racism and sexism are never toppled is for the dominant culture to avoid conversations that acknowledge their existence. The Reddit users’ tendency towards an individual-level approach towards racism and sexism is perhaps linked to an overarching tendency among Americans towards individualism. Individualism is a common societal value in the United States, particularly among the White working class (Eppard, Schubert, and Giroux

2018) and is most commonly expressed by Whites and men (Pew Research 2017). Given that White men make up the largest demographic of Reddit users (Pew Research 2020), the propensity of Reddit users to adopt individualist frameworks for racism and sexism makes sense. The fundamentals of individualism are at odds with structural approaches to social stratification, because emphasis is placed on personal agency rather than external constraints. To the extent that Americans focus on the individualistic factors that shape life chances, they will downplay the structural factors. It also is largely because of these individual-level approaches to racism and sexism that abstract liberalism remains the predominant frame within the ideologies of color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism. Along with equality of opportunity and freedom of choice, individualism is a key component of the abstract liberalism frame.

An example of the rigid adherence to an individual level approach to racism is the current pushback against critical race theory at the forefront of U.S. political discourse (Illing 2021). Embedded in critical race theory is the notion that racism should be expanded to include complicated systems maintain inequalities, and the fact that such a notion is treated as a threat by some state governments reveals how crucial it is to maintaining the larger system (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). This underscores need to go beyond individual when examining racism and sexism. These two contributions serve as a jumping off point for further research into White masculine ideologies and the role of definitional approaches in the larger public discourse.

In addition to these two major contributions, there are three ancillary contributions worth highlighting. First, the analysis builds upon existing theory of color-blind racism. Through the rich evidence available on Reddit, this study offers important updates to the theory as well as signs of the evolution of color-blindness. I present evidence that contemporary narratives have emerged, building upon the concept of “storylines” that appear in Bonilla-Silva’s original

research (2018). Additionally, my findings offer some initial evidence that the utilization of the color-blind frames has shifted away from the naturalization frame. This dissertation reaffirms the relevance of color-blind racism and the utility in employing the theory in an analysis of racial discourse.

This dissertation also offers a robust application and expansion of Laurie Cooper Stoll's (2013) framework of gender-blind sexism. While this model has been applied to a handful of specific gender related topics including rape myth acceptance (Stoll, Lilley, and Pinter 2017), higher education administrator narratives (Channing 2020), and faculty discourse in higher education (Myrick 2021), the framework is wholly underutilized. The wide range of examples available in my data shows the adaptability of the frames to different subjects related to gender discourse. My study expands upon Stoll (2013) by providing narratives that further illuminate how gender-blind sexism functions in a number of discursive arenas.

Finally, the dissertation demonstrates the importance in examining online discourse. With 330 million users worldwide (Ohanian 2018), a single Reddit submission or comment has the potential to reach millions of users. Social media is an area that sociologists must continue to turn their focus as the social media user base is more popular and more representative of the broader U.S. adult population than ever (Pew Research 2021). More people are using social media and more discourse is happening online as a result. Other researchers have applied the frames of color-blindness to social media. For example, Brunsma, Kim, and Chapman (2020) applied the four frames of color-blindness to the comment section of an online article about the dominance of Whiteness within the fan base of the band Phish. Such applications are rare, however, and a thorough literature review revealed no such application of the Bonilla-Silva's (2018) frames to Reddit's robust discourse. Stoll's (2013) gender-blind framework has yet to be

applied to any online discourse, including Reddit. The conversations happening through social media remain an area ripe for analysis for these two theoretical frameworks. This study demonstrates the particular benefit in utilizing Reddit for the purpose of discourse analysis, both as an accessible setting for research and as a prominent arena for social interaction. The system of upvotes and downvotes provides a metric to measure engagement and popularity for submissions and comments, adding a layer to conclusions researchers may draw. The anonymity provided by Reddit's users names limit the impact of social desirability bias in users' commentary on issues related to race and gender. As is the case in this dissertation, the above factors are uniquely beneficial in an analysis of dominant belief systems.

Limitations

This research has a number of limitations worth addressing here. To begin with, my qualitative approach does not allow for generalizability. Although data was collected in a systematic way, my sample includes highly upvoted submissions in both the standard and targeted subreddits, not a random sample of reddit comments or submission. In my subreddit selection, I favored discourse heavy subreddits, which do not necessarily reflect Reddit or online discourse as a whole.

Additionally, I cannot rule out researcher bias in my analysis. While I made every effort to be unbiased and objective in my analysis, it is impossible to eliminate my own perspective in interpreting the qualitative data. The lack of quantitative data adds uncertainty to some of my findings. My findings related to frequency of the employment of color-blind and gender-blind frames, for example, require further testing. It is also possible that these findings (for example the lack of use of the naturalization frame within racial discourse) was a result of the subreddits and submissions included in my sample.

My data collection methodology, guided by my exploratory research questions, led me to cast a wide net on the types of Reddit submissions I included in my sample. By limiting my data to the top five submissions in a given subreddit each week, I captured the most popular content for each subreddit, but not necessarily the most relevant to my study. The result was a number of submissions and comment threads that contained no discernable racial or gendered discourse. I stand by this approach – it allowed me to discover which areas of racial discourse captured the attention of Reddit users in general subreddits. However, a more targeted approach may have been more efficient or offered a larger quantity of relevant data.

I was also limited by my inability to read every comment for submissions in my samples. As I articulated in my description of the methods, some of the submissions contained tens of thousands of comments. Reading every comment was not feasible nor was it my intention. I entered the threads by placing myself in the shoes of a Reddit user. One does not need to read ten thousand or even one thousand comments to get an accurate picture of the discourse taking place in a comment thread. My adherence to strict field notes and coding for emergent themes mitigates the limitations of the ethnographic approach.

Directions for Future Research

Future research can build upon this dissertation in several distinct areas. To begin with, Bonilla-Silva's (2018) theory of color-blind racism is well established, but my study suggests there may be avenues to update some of the details of his work. My own findings suggest that color-blind ideology has evolved in the decades since Bonilla-Silva's original formulation of the theory. Researchers should continue to explore the changes within color-blind discourse, particularly in the aftermath of the civil unrest following the death of George Floyd. There is a perception that college students and young people are increasingly sensitive to anything deemed

problematic (Schlosser 2015) and as a result are being “coddled” by their teachers, parents, and school administrators (Lukianoff and Haidt 2018). These claims are connected to the notion of out-of-control political correctness outlined in Chapter 7, but further research should explore the extent to which color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism may be forced to adapt to rapid cultural changes.

The gender-blind framework offered by Stoll (2013) is ripe for further application. Gendered discourse impacts every arena of social life, from politics and law to dating and entertainment. There is a great deal of space in which to build on the foundation provided here. For example, how do gender-blind frames fit into gendered discourse around political elections in the context of the underrepresentation of women in Congress and elected positions generally? Another possible direction of research into gender-blind discourse is how it impacts transgender and non-binary communities. Where do transgender and non-binary people fit into the gender-blind paradigm? These represent two examples of the application of the gender-blind framework, but the options are numerous. More research is needed to further illuminate the utility of this theoretical approach.

Additionally, this study demonstrates the benefit of using Reddit as a platform, both for virtual ethnography and other more quantitative approaches. The scoring system as well as the search function, for example, provides an ample opportunity for research that measures the utilization of color-blindness, gender-blindness, or other ideological and discursive strategies. Reddit offers a unique and centralized lens through which researchers can examine online communities ranging from the mundane to the ideological fringe. Future research should examine the role of other online platforms and virtual spaces for reproducing and disseminating dominant ideologies.

Finally, there is great potential for research that combines color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism under the umbrella of one coherent, underlying ideology. This dissertation treats these two perspectives as relatively siloed, albeit parallel approaches, but through my analysis, preliminary evidence emerged that suggests the intersection of Whiteness and maleness play an important role in bolstering each individual ideology. The contexts in which color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism emerge together and are mutually constitutive deserve additional study.

Conclusion

Under the era of color-blindness, crude, overt racism is no longer acceptable. Where direct and hostile justifications have become taboo, new adaptive ideologies that function to maintain and reproduce systems of oppression are dominant. Color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism represent these dominant ideologies, and they are effective in their power to justify inequality. The findings from this dissertation indicate that color-blind racism continues to be a dominant force in the racial discourse, and the application of the four frames of color-blindness (Bonilla-Silva 2018) to gender-based discourse as articulated by Stoll (2013) is a useful analytical lens for understanding gender-blind sexism. The implications of this research suggest that dominant ideologies around race and gender are highly adaptive and are effectively disseminated through social media.

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APPENDIX A: TABLES AND FIGURES

FIGURE 1: REDDIT SUBMISSION

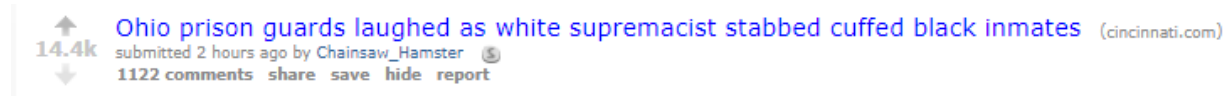


Figure 1 represents a submitted link as it appears the /r/news subreddit. Clicking on the blue link takes the user to the news article on Cincinatti.com. Clicking on the text labeled “1122 comments” takes users to the comment thread. Users can *upvote* or *downvote* to the left of the link, or click the comments to read and add their own. Figure 1 also shows the *score* for the submission (in this case ~14,400) and the user (“Chainsaw_Hamster”). The score roughly translates to upvotes minus downvotes.

FIGURE 2: REDDIT COMMENT THREAD

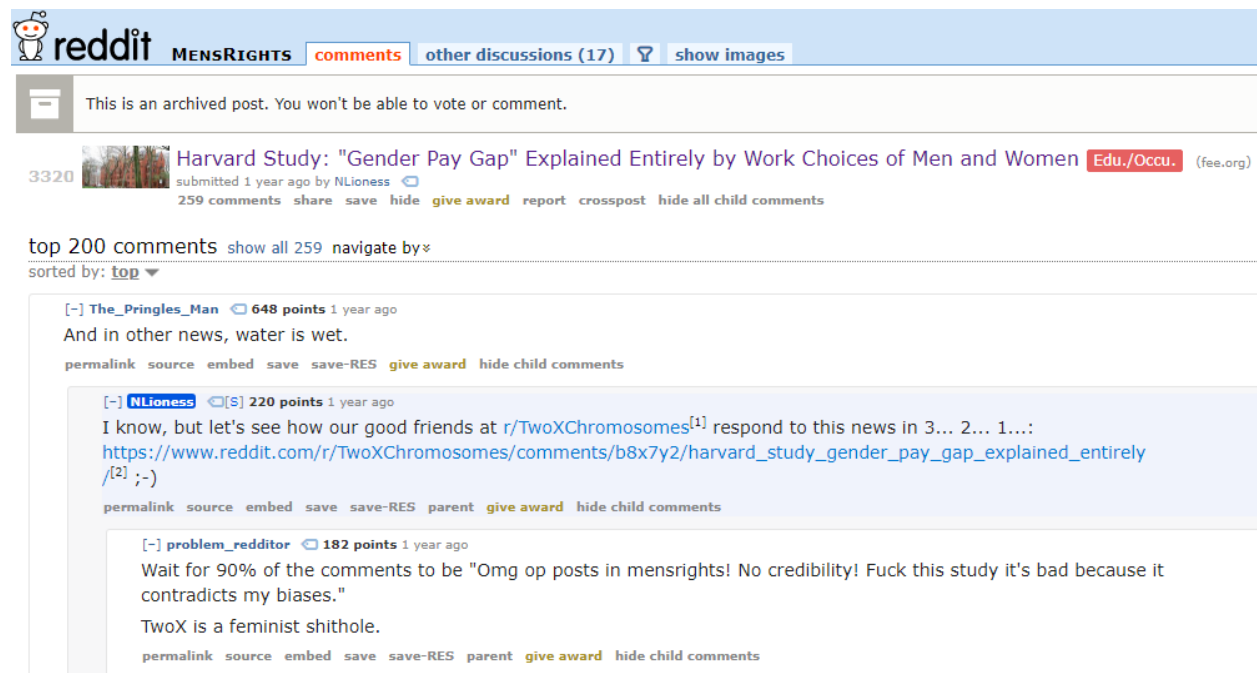


Figure 2 demonstrates the way in which comments appear for a submission. Throughout the paper I refer to the submission title with the score in brackets. For example, using the submission from Figure 2, “Harvard Study: “Gender Pay Gap” Explained Entirely by Work Choices of Men and Women” [3320]. Additionally, I refer to the *top comment* as the comment with the highest net upvotes as “And in other news, water is wet” [648]. That comment serves as the *parent comment* to the comments that follow as direct replies to the parent comment. Replies appear immediately under the parent comment, but are indented. When a parent comment has more than one reply, they generally appear in order of their score.

APPENDIX B: SUBREDDIT DESCRIPTIONS

While individuals can visit Reddit.com without an account, one is necessary in order to vote on posts and comments. Additionally, an account is needed to subscribe to various subreddits. One of the selling points of the website is that users can customize their experience by subscribing and unsubscribing to these subsections of the site. A basketball fan might customize their experience by subscribing to /r/NBA and /r/bostonceltics. A person who enjoys cooking might subscribe to /r/cooking and /r/food. There exists a subreddit for virtually every area of interest no matter how niche. Subreddits vary by their particular area of interest, but also by the number of subscribers as well as the specific rules and norms of the sub. The “sidebar” of the subreddit will generally include info regarding subscribers, people currently viewing the page, subreddit rules, FAQs, moderators, related subreddits, and other info. The following descriptions of each subreddit are taken largely from the subreddit sidebars.

Standard Subsections

The standard subsections include five subreddits: (*news*, *worldnews*, *changemyview*, *politics*, and *askreddit*) as well as /r/all and /r/popular. The subsections /r/popular and /r/all are best understood as “multireddits” – subsections that include multiple subreddits. Information about each standard subsection follows.

/r/news: The news subreddit is a highly active subreddit with over 17 million subscribers. According to the subreddit rules, /r/news is meant to cover “Factual, objective articles covering recent news.” The broad nature of the subreddit attracts a diverse set of articles and issues including those directly and indirectly linked to race and gender. It is worth noting that the /r/news subreddit explicitly excludes news articles that are opinion/advocacy pieces or political in nature. The subreddit rules also prohibit comments that are “racist, sexist, vitriolic, or overly crude.” Given my interest in color-blind and gender-blind ideologies, content that is categorized as not “racist” or “sexist” should prove analytically useful.

/r/worldnews: The worldnews subreddit has over 20 million subscribers and “is for major news from around the world except US-internal news / US politics.” Because of the broad focus on global events, the discussions on this subreddit will often intersect with topics related to race and ethnicity. The inclusion of /r/worldnews in my analysis will allow for a discussion of dominant ideologies of other nations and nationalities.

/r/ChangeMyView: the changemyview subreddit has over 704,000 subscribers, and is unique in the sense that commenters are inviting a conversation about a view they hold. The subreddit describes itself as “a place to post an opinion you accept may be flawed, in an effort to understand other perspectives on the issue. Enter with a mindset for conversation, not debate.” Debate, however, is at the center of /r/changemyview since opposing arguments are put forward in an effort to persuade the original poster.

/r/Politics: the politics subreddit has over 4.8 million subscribers and is described in the sidebar as “the subreddit for current and explicitly political U.S. news.” Discussion of the Trump administration dominates /r/politics.

/r/AskReddit: The AskReddit subreddit has over 21 million subscribers, making it the second most popular subreddit. The theme of the subreddit is to ask “open ended” and “generic” questions. The subjects of these questions vary greatly. From “What do you think is the single greatest photograph in history?” to “What are some ‘guy secrets’ girls don’t know about?” The subreddit’s popularity and diverse subject matter make it an ideal community to examine discourse.

/r/Popular: Users who visit Reddit.com for the first time are given a selection of subreddits in the form of /r/popular. This is advertised by Reddit as “the best posts on Reddit for you, pulled from the most active communities on Reddit. Check here to see the most shared, upvoted, and commented content on the internet.”

/r/All: Much like /r/popular, /r/all is a collection of subreddits. The difference is that /r/all shows all communities, while /r/popular includes only the most active. The inclusion of /r/all and /r/popular will allow for a greater amount of diversity in the type of comments I examine, while also including the most visible posts and comments regardless of subreddit.

Targeted Subsections

I targeted these subreddits because of their individual focus is uniquely suited for an analysis of racial or gendered ideology. These seven targeted subreddits are: *the_donald*, *unpopularopinion*, *theredpill*, *mensrights*, *TumblrInAction*, and *ShitRedditSays*. Information about each targeted subsection follows.

/r/The_Donald: As the name suggests, “The Donald” is a subreddit dedicated to supporting Donald Trump. Although the subreddit is self-described as “not politically correct” they include a “no racism or anti-semitism” rule on the sidebar. The potential contradiction offered by these two ideals makes the subreddit a place where color-blind racism and gender-blind sexism may appear. The subreddit had over 700,000 subscribers. After the original data collection, /r/The_Donald was removed by Reddit administrators for repeated violation of Reddit’s site-wide rules.

/r/UnpopularOpinion: According to its rules, the UnpopularOpinion subreddit “isn’t just opinions, but unpopular and/or controversial ones.” Collecting the most highly voted comments on the subreddit will allow for an analysis of what the users perceive as “unpopular” but still palatable to the subreddit’s subscribers. The subreddit has over 400,000 subscribers.

/r/TheRedPill: The red pill subreddit has over 330,000 subscribers and revolves around a “discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men.” The Red Pill is an ideology of gender that derives its name from the 1999 film *The Matrix* where the main character is offered a red pill (representing reality and truth) and a blue pill (representing blissful ignorance). In this context, members of the “Red Pill Movement” believe that they are choosing to take the proverbial red pill – acceptance of truth despite the delusion that’s being sold to them. The sub explicitly revolves around “pick up artist” culture, but does dive into other areas related to anti-feminism.

/r/MensRights: Men’s rights activists (MRAs) utilize /r/MensRights “to discuss men's rights and the ways said rights are infringed upon.” This framing sounds neutral, but the sidebar also links to a blog post “What’s the difference between the men’s rights movement and feminism” which argues that feminism “endorses legal bigotry” while the men’s rights movement “seeks to end it” (White, 2011). This framing may lend itself to more “gender-blind sexist” rhetoric among the subreddit’s 200,000+ subscribers.

/r/TumblrInAction: “Tumblr in Action” is a subreddit with 465,000+ subscribers oriented towards mocking “the weird and crazy world of social justice warriors.” The general idea is that the social media and blogging website Tumblr.com is dominated by “social justice warriors” (SJWs) who take their social justice activism too far or too seriously. On /r/TumblrInAction, users can submit posts directly from Tumblr or other social media sites meant to serve as examples of SJWs going too far.

/r/ShitRedditSays: The “Shit Reddit Says” (SRS) subreddit is unique in a few ways. This subreddit is what’s known as a “meta subreddit,” meaning submissions are links or screenshots of comments from across Reddit’s many communities. The sidebar states: “Have you recently read an upvoted Reddit comment that was bigoted, creepy, misogynistic, transphobic, racist, homophobic, or just reeking of unexamined, toxic privilege? Of course you have! Post it here.” SRS is in many ways the polar opposite of “Tumblr in Action” – posting links to people on Reddit expressing problematic views. SRS will prove as a resource of comments that push back against dominant ideologies in regards to race and gender, as well as a way to identify targeted comments that are in line with dominant ideologies.

APPENDIX C: CODING DEFINITIONS

Definitional Themes

Reverse Discrimination – A comment was coded as fitting under the reverse discrimination theme if it mentioned or aligned with the mentality that discrimination against White people and/or men is on equal footing with discrimination against other races or genders. This includes comments that suggest White men face disadvantages relative to other groups.

Dismissing Sociological Approaches to Racism/Sexism – Comments were coded under this theme when they reject the notion that racism should be understood as a system or the result of structural forces. This includes comments that derisively misrepresent structural approaches to racism/sexism.

Condemnation of Overt Racism/Sexism – Comments denouncing or otherwise calling out overt racial or gender prejudice were coded as examples of this theme. Additionally, comments that expressed overt racism or sexism but were sanctioned in the form of downvotes were included under this theme.

Narrative Themes

Political Correctness Gone Too Far – A comments that disparage shifts towards diversity and inclusion in social norms around policies, practices, and discourse around race, gender, and culture generally were coded under this theme. Negative references to terms such as ‘woke’, ‘social justice warriors’, ‘cancel culture’, and ‘political correctness’ are included under this theme.

Taking the Red Pill – This theme can be understood as comments that represent adherence to the ideology and terminology of the red pill. Comments that use red pill language, or otherwise suggest that they are among the minority of the population who see the real world and not the illusion constructed by feminists and the socially progressive left.

They’re the Real Racists/Sexists – This theme includes comments that suggest that feminism and anti-racism of social progressives are prejudicial while their own color-blind/gender-blind views are non-racist and non-sexist.

Four Frames of Color-Blind Racism

Abstract Liberalism – Comments coded into this frame use liberal ideas such as equality of opportunity, freedom of choice, and individualism to explain or justify racial inequality.

Cultural Racism – This frame relies on culturally based explanations, such as the idea that Black people live in poor neighborhoods because they do not work hard enough.

Minimization of Racism – Comments that suggests that racism is no longer a meaningful factor affecting life chances of people of color fit under this frame.

Naturalization – Comments coded under this frame are those that explain racial phenomena as if they were natural.

Four Frames of Gender-Blind Sexism

Abstract Liberalism – Comments that refer to liberal ideas of equality of opportunity, freedom of choice and individualism to explain or justify gender inequality.

Cultural Sexism – Comments that use cultural explanations to justify systems of gender inequality are coded under this frame. Included in the frame are allusions to social norms and values to legitimize gender stratification.

Minimization of Sexism – Comments that downplay the role of sexism in determining the life chances of women. Included in this frame are comments that dismiss or mock feminism as unnecessary.

Naturalization – Comments that treat social differences based on gender as natural. Included in this frame are comments that frame inequalities as rooted in biological differences.