WHITE RACE DISCOURSE

*Preserving Racial Privilege
in a Post-Racial Society*

JOHN D. FOSTER

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Transcription Symbols

I	Interviewer
R	Respondent
word=	Latched utterances; No interval
=word	
[xxx]	Overlapping talk
[yyy]	
Wor-	Abrupt cutoff
(.)	Micropause
(1.0)	Timed silence in seconds
word.	Falling intonation
word,	Continuing intonation
word?	Rising intonation
↑word	Higher pitch
↓word	Lower pitch
wor:d	Stretched sound
word	Emphasis
WORD	Louder talk
°word°	Quieter talk
>word<	Faster talk
<word>	Slower talk
wo(h)rd	Laughingly spoken
((word))	Transcriptionist's note and comment
(word)	Transcriptionist's uncertain understanding

Preface

In U.S. society today, many believe that we live in a time of tremendous progress and prosperity. More specifically, there is the notion that people are more racially tolerant than at any other time in our history. Previous studies of white racial attitudes, using surveys with large samples, have often concluded that whites' prejudice has declined since the 1950s. However, more recent studies have found that the racial attitudes may not have changed so much after all. These studies have discovered that white Americans answer survey questions on race matters in unprejudiced ways, but then contradict those answers when interviewed in more depth. How do we make sense of these contradictions? This study examines the numerous contradictions white college students exhibit as they discuss a variety of race matters, including their identities as white Americans, interracial dating, and affirmative action. Data for this project were derived from the in-depth interviews of 61 white college students. The findings suggest that they initially project ambivalence and tolerance towards these matters, but upon further examination, they cast images of themselves as intolerant of, victimized by, and suspicious of nonwhite (particularly black) Americans.

However, given the era of political correctness when communicating in public spaces, this sample of white Americans cannot express these antiblack feelings plainly and unambiguously. Thus, they must use a variety of verbal tools that aid them in making such statements. These tools give them the ability to appear not prejudiced while making prejudiced statements. Moreover, regardless of their intentions, this form of discourse rationalizes the racial status quo and undermines attempts to deal with systemic racism. This study exposes an important way in which racism reproduces itself in the post-civil rights era.

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Chapter 1
Introduction: How Does Racism Continue to Exist in U.S. Society?[1]

Empowered by the political success of Reagan and other conservatives in the 1980s, a plethora of authors and pundits, lavishly funded by conservative think-tanks like the Olin Foundation, emerged in the 1990s to declare "the end of racism" in American society.[2] Despite a strong pushback by well-researched scientists in academia,[3] the damage had already been done in that large numbers of white Americans came to believe that racism was (at least largely) a thing of the past. The counterattack against the Civil Rights Movement had been launched and was winning the battle, affecting policies and programs designated to enforce the creed that America was the land of opportunity for all its inhabitants.[4] Evidence that the United States remained a separate and unequal society existed, but much of it was either hidden from view or blamed on the victims for its existence.

But then along came Hurricane Katrina in 2005, or more consequently, the botched government response to the storm's aftermath. Americans of all races were presented media images of mostly black Americans trapped in New Orleans without basic necessities like food or clean water, a moment when conservatives struggled to maintain the "it's their fault" storyline.[5] Viewers saw pictures of dead bodies floating in floodwaters on city streets, while many elders died, waiting for assistance that never came.[6] For at least a brief moment, the reality of U.S. society could not be ignored: that it is both a racist and classist society.[7] Coupled with a war in Iraq that was going badly and a financial meltdown, Democrats enjoyed significant gains in Congressional races in the 2006 midterm elections and regained the White House in 2008 with the election of Barack Obama, America's first black President.

Despite overwhelming opposition to Obama during the campaign, conservatives turned his electoral victory into a positive for their cause: that we had elected a black man President, further proof that America is beyond race and racism.[8] The "we" here did not refer so much to conservatives per se but to white Americans; however, a majority of white Americans did not vote for

Barack Obama in that election.[9] The lack of support for Obama serves as another instance of white Americans opposing racial progress; another was whites' opposition to the March on Washington in 1963.[10] Nonetheless, shortly after conservatives used Obama's election to reinvigorate a narrative that had been shaken following the Bush years (i.e., that white conservatives were not hostile to people of color), they quickly moved to criticizing him at every turn, even using blatantly racist imagery when doing so.[11]

What are we to make of such contradictory events in this country's history? Is this a society hopelessly trapped in little more than a caste system in which whites prosper at the expense of blacks and other nonwhites? Extensive research tells us that Americans of color continue to lag behind their white counterparts in numerous indicators, including income, wealth, educational attainment, and health.[12] On the other hand, is there an inevitable progression to a truly just and equal society? While perhaps not inevitable, some gains have been made over the years, including an increase in the number of black elected public officials and years of formal schooling, an emergence of a black middle-class, and an almost universal condemnation by white Americans of overt antiblack action.[13] Obama's election was certainly a testament to the hard work and dedication of those before him who had fought tirelessly for racial equality.

The answer is neither and both at the same time; that is the peculiar nature of U.S. society, dating back to the days of Jefferson and Washington. "America" is a contradiction itself—a society with liberty and fairness as its foundation while simultaneously allowing, even promoting, the enslavement of human beings. Although slavery is no more, the contradictory nature of U.S. society continues. I stipulate that the subject matter of this book—contradictions within the racetalk[14] of white Americans—reflects the very nature of U.S. society.

An Introduction to White Race Discourse

While previous studies have exposed contradictions within the race discourse of Americans,[15] little is known about why white folks speak in such a way. Few sociological studies have analyzed this phenomenon in a systematic fashion. This form of racetalk is the focus of this book: how do we make sense of the myriad contradictions in the race discourse of white Americans? What purpose do these contradictions serve those who use them? In this book I examine this discursive phenomenon, employing a synthetic approach that attempts to avoid the pitfalls of previous studies.

Despite the gains achieved since the Civil Rights Movement, why has U.S. society failed to eliminate the racial gaps in areas such as education, income, and employment? Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that a "racial grammar"[16] exists so as to maintain racial domination even when more overt and blatant means fall out of favor with the public. He stipulates that racial grammar "is a distillate of racial ideology and, hence, of white supremacy."[17] This grammar teaches people

the rules of engagement when discussing race matters, and these teachings take place within society's institutions while being verified, negotiated, and even modified or revolted against within daily interactions.[18]

Indeed, various social structures contribute to the perpetuation and maintenance of the racial order. They include mental or cognitive as well as social or "objective" ones, such as institutions.[19] These structures have an impact on how we interact with each other, and responses within such interactions. How can a racial group so large in white, non-Hispanic Americans support a particular social system while never expressing it, at least on the frontstage of social life? In order to address this issue, social scientists have begun to analyze the more covert forms of social action that maintain white supremacy; e.g., discursive forms that masquerade as antiracist and egalitarian, yet serve to perpetuate that supremacy.

Race discourse is important to examine because "discourse is a form of social action"[20] and "discourse is intimately involved in the construction and maintenance of inequality."[21] Discourse is a critical tool in the legitimation process of the social order. How do white Americans claim to support racial equality and fairness while simultaneously opposing programs and policies deemed necessary to achieve racial equality and fairness? How can they claim to have no problems with black Americans yet report so few quality[22] relationships with them? Such a conundrum forces whites to walk a discursive tightrope when discussing racial matters, and contradictions are commonplace. Race is a social fact,[23] and whites' race discourse is unique in various ways.

Following events like the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, white Americans have a lot to answer for, given that these vast racial disparities in life chances continue in a society in which the proponents of racial equality had presumably prevailed and are celebrated today.[24] Whites must immediately find (through little effort or time) that their privileges far exceed those of black Americans. While it is understandable that whites might take considerable care to appear nonracist in formal interactions due to present day customs discussing racial issues, would whites just say anything to maintain an appearance of nonracism to avoid such a label (e.g., admitting that they receive unfair privileges)?

In fact, studies have documented how whites speak in certain ways to avoid an appearance of racism.[25] This is certainly true, but there is something more going on here: individual whites not only defend themselves within their repertoires but they also defend the racist social institutions that perpetuate white supremacy in U.S. society. Some linguists have pointed out that race as a conversation or interview topic is a delicate subject,[26] but little or no discussion of reasons for its delicacy takes place, as if the subject's delicacy is assumed. As it turns out, race as a subject in conversations is not treated as delicately by nonwhite respondents than by white ones, and there is an obvious reason to this: whites and the institutions they control have more to lose with the occasional gaffe as compared to nonwhites. Thus, when blacks[27] or other nonwhite respondents[28] uncover the myriad contradictions in the dominant race discourse (RD), they are more likely to acknowledge and speak to those inconsistencies; in

fact, they might even expose the contradictions themselves. In contrast, when whites see contradictions between their stated values and their opposition to various actions to fulfill those values, they utilize certain discursive tools to both rationalize the existing social structure and do so while appearing "open-minded." It is this form of RD, used by whites, that I call white race discourse (WRD).

(Re)producing the Racial Order Through Discourse

Despite advancements made in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, how does racism continue to exist, and more importantly, how do individual whites rationalize such a social system? A useful way to understand this process of rationalization is through the utilization of the dialectic. In this process, a contrary point of view challenges an initial claim, which then produces a synthesis of the two. In this particular situation, individual whites acknowledge the existence of white-over-black racism (thesis), but then add a peculiar antithesis to the thought process: that blacks discriminate against whites, or that "reverse discrimination" occurs. This creates a synthesis that racism is natural and unavoidable, producing an ambivalence towards racism in U.S. society. The antithesis is usually based on speculation, antidotal evidence, or fabrications passed onto individual whites (or thought up themselves). Such an approach is helpful in understanding how white racism continues in U.S. society due to the (re)creation of the social world in the minds of white Americans, often constructed through "sincere fictions." However, this image of society does not come about willy-nilly, but rather for two primary reasons: rationalizing the racist social structure and saving face when delivering comments feared as being interpreted as "racist." Whites may also use this technique to integrate incompatible frames of race.[29]

As a result of these sincere fictions of the white self,[30] whites are ambivalent towards aggressive measures to end racial injustice. This ambivalence is a synthesis of two components: first, the thesis that black Americans have suffered due to systemic racism; and second, the sincere fictions that structures the antithesis. The example of whites' explanation of racial segregation as the natural order of things and people[31] exposes their ambivalence toward "man-made design."[32] Systemic racism is the product of white America and the white elites in charge, rather than merely a product of nature. In this section, I discuss how both individuals and social structures work together to defend white privilege, and then discuss how this form of racetalk is a form of social control.

Preserving Whiteness and White Privilege

Do individual whites make the distinction between themselves and the social system, and if so, when? Members of a privileged class may not differentiate

themselves from the structure because, in a sense, they are the structure (or at least its creators). When a problem occurs, e.g. if there is a conflict between the interests of people and those of the mechanics of the system designed (at least initially), then agents may attempt to distance themselves from the structure. But the distance act may occur with fellow whites as well: if a problem occurs, such as the recent investigations of political corruption in Congress, then individual whites are labeled, particularly by members of the institution who fear a public backlash, as "a few bad apples." However, regarding the Katrina debacle, with so many individual whites in power, the focus shifts onto reified bureaucratic mechanisms that were too inefficient or too cumbersome for individuals to act adequately to the situation. Only then do we hear calls for structural inadequacies to be addressed.

Elites in this country, who remain largely white and male, are, with the help of the media among other social institutions (by all means structures and agents work together or cooperate, at least in this case), doing what they can to wipe Katrina out of the collective memory of Americans. Contradictions, at least in this context, serve as face-saving devices, whether for structures, agents, or for both when a distinction fails to have been made between the two. It should not be thought that white Americans are individualistic; it should instead be understood that individualism has more often served their needs in preserving their hegemonic power, both nationally and globally. Yet the moment the time comes, that individualism will be replaced with structural explanations once the need arises.

Do the agents feel separated from the social structure? Do they see the difference? Generally no, because is there really a need for white Americans to differentiate themselves from the structure. It is a structure they benefit from, despite gender, social class, or other differences between them. Since they have a stake in the survival of the structure, they do not generally want to see any changes, so how can one best defend that structure? A rationalization process is needed to legitimize the existence of that structure. One method to do this is to make it invisible: if a structure does not exist, it would be pointless to talk about it, much less allocate societal resources to change it.

The point is that white agents and social structures are interconnected: whites create the institutions, they oversee their operations, maintain, protect, and legitimize them, which in turn maintains their power. Even if white Americans give into pressure and say "okay, we are going to tweak some things here and there," with the machine of the media and gridlock in government, little of substance will ultimately be done to address these structural problems.

When discussing race, most whites avoid the issue as much as possible, and they do this in a way that resembles the efficiency, calculability, predictability, and nonhuman control of other bureaucratic (purposively rational) actions.[33] Indeed, patterns exist within their race discourse that perform the function of rationalizing the way things are concerning race relations in U.S. society. These patterns include *structured incoherence* to avoid admitting the existence of racism, mitigation statements to minimize societal racism, insistence that racial

segregation is a natural phenomenon, and blaming racial minorities for social inequality due to their inferior cultures.[34] Another function of WRD is to present oneself as nonracist.

This study deals with interactions in which agents are involved (see Table 1.1). Depending on the context at hand, individuals are involved in the maintenance of their group position and, in turn, the institutions that make those positions possible. In this social phenomenon, the quest lies in the maintenance of white supremacy. Built within the habitus is the ability to shift gears in one's status with the superstructure of society. This ability unsurprisingly causes myriad contradictions to appear across the times an agent speaks to various racial issues in various social settings.

Table 1.1   Relationships between Structures and Agents in Impression Management

Type of relationship	Parties involved in the interaction
Consensus	Agents and agents
	Institutions and institutions
	Agents and institutions
Conflict	Agents versus agents
	Institutions versus institutions
	Agents versus institutions

On one hand, the blurring of the line between oneself and the superstructure serves the function of maintaining the status of that superstructure; on the other hand, pressure to address structural concerns leads whites to distance themselves with the superstructure in management of their own faces. This is the way hegemonic power is reproduced. This process also occurs in relation to other agents: the common practice is the reference to "a few bad apples" in regards to differences between fellow whites, yet when feeling one's face threatened, a distancing act takes place between one's own position and that of another.

Do institutions have faces, as do individuals? Do individuals engage in impression management of institutions, beside themselves, as well as for other people? Other functions of contradictions include integration of incompatible frames or repertoires, frame switching, and constructing a convincing argument.[35] However, these functions all become rationalizations of the status quo, whether an intended consequence or not. In addition, they all can serve as face-saving devices for the speaker. If they think that respondents engage in impression management for an individual, that is too limited a scope; impression management could also serve the social structure, as well as for individuals, whether

for that immediate individual speaker but also for other whites as well, such as intimate whites defending a bigoted grandfather, saying "well, he's a good guy; he grew up in a different time," while stating that "people are more open-minded nowadays."

Thus, individual whites act as "optimistic robots"[36] when addressing racial issues or racialized social systems, and their actions are bureaucratic in form. Their (at least initial) optimism towards race relations in U.S. society assists in the legitimization of the status quo. Similar to loyal bureaucrats of an organization, they engage in impression management for the institutions that provide whites their privileges, while in turn those institutions speak glowingly of the "lily white," which often is defined and affirmed through the defined inferiority of the nonwhite Other. In addition, individual whites also speak (and defend) themselves, as well as for fellow whites whose face may be threatened. The way they speak in a particular social context depends on their relationship to the issue personally, the structure, and other white Americans.

In addition to fulfilling their bureaucratic tasks, whites often feel empty, confused, and dissatisfied during interviews; this is due to the emergence of the formal rationality that dominates their WRD and within other domains of their lives. In the neo-apartheid[37] system, white Americans simply do not have a reasonable explanation for racial inequality since biological racism is no longer a justification they can use. Thus, they simply do not know how to speak about race, so they try their best to avoid the issue of race at (nearly) all costs. White Americans learn a particular racespeak, based on the color-blind ideology, from various (white-dominated) social institutions such as the family, schools, and the polity.

Racetalk as a Means of Control

In addition to rationalizing the racial order, racetalk is a form of social control. More importantly, this form of discourse keeps progressive (or potentially progressive) whites from joining in the struggle against racial inequality, and (thus) is a key component in perpetuating the racist status quo in U.S. society. By all means, this should not be taken as a strictly structuralist view that sees agents as mere cogs in the machine, but that the structure of whites' racetalk has a significant impact on the way whites come across as they speak about race. Previous studies have shown the number of progressive whites to be a minority within the racial group[38]; nonetheless, their participation in the movement is essential to the legitimacy of the movement, as they were during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

To address this issue, a necessary concept is the white habitus[39] in which whites develop a set of structuring mechanisms that creates a white bubble complete with sincere fictions of whiteness. Whites' racetalk has both external as well as internal constraints on the white subjects in which it exists (not to be

reifying a form of discourse). However, this racetalk is more than just an external constraint, imposed upon white agents by various social structures. Whites' "iron cage" is not exactly locked with the key out of reach; in fact, whites benefit from its form in that it (1) keeps race from being discussed in much substance, and (2) allows whites to come off as innocently nonracist. Hence, this form of discourse is also a method of impression management in which whites, within a frontstage setting, can somehow disapprove of actions needed to curb racial inequality in society while looking fair and open-minded at the same time.

Although other racial groups may well utilize the various frames, mechanics, and story lines associated with whites' racetalk, there are a few key distinctions that make it clearly a white praxis and white only. For instance, blacks and other racial minorities may invoke the frame of abstract liberalism, or even stress some of the same explanations for the racial gap in life chances that whites do; however, one key difference is the recognition of race as a factor in life chances, suggesting that whites try not to acknowledge race as salient.

Ambivalence and Racial Apathy

Ambivalence is a concept that has been used in a variety of ways, and I believe a clarification of the term is an order. It can be defined in three ways, including a more recent conception I implement for this study, including: (1) ambivalence is not knowing due to conflicting frames of reference; (2) ambivalence is knowing but uncertain of how to present oneself; and (3) ambivalence is a deliberate projection of oneself in an attempt to appear innocent (e.g., nonracist). This type of ambivalence relevant to the subject at hand is called racial apathy,[40] as developed by Tyrone Forman.

The first conceptualization of ambivalence is the most limited in the discourse analysis of whites' racetalk. A good example comes from Hass and colleagues,[41] which defines ambivalence as "a situation in which one has strong, competing, incompatible inclinations or attitudes toward a particular object." This viewpoint towards ambivalence is superior over common sense definitions of the term, which is too simplistic (in that an individual is neutral or uncertain about a particular topic). This definition gives us insight into the ways whites grapple with competing interpretive frameworks, such as individualism and equality. However, it is limited in that it is too individualistic and does not explain the differences whites talk about race in various social domains.

The second definition of ambivalence is that people know about an issue, and even have an opinion on the topic, but are unsure in how to present themselves in front of someone else. This usage is better than the first because it does account for the various ways individuals behave in certain social contexts. Indeed, in this study there are moments when respondents appear unwilling to make a statement without some sort of clue in my own stance toward the issue. However, the problem with this definition (like the first) is that ambivalence is