Rethinking epistemology, methodology, and racism: or, is White sociology really dead?

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Abstract

This paper examines the influence of racial epistemologies on social science research methods and knowledge production. Neo-liberal understandings of positivism and the institutional power that perpetuates them are criticized in favor of epistemological diversity in the academy. Drawing on the insider/outsider debate in sociology, particularly the dialogue with the "new Black sociology" movement of the 1970s, and feminist methodology and epistemology studies, the article outlines five typical racial epistemologies: (1) the Black/White racial epistemology, (2) the assimilationist epistemology, (3) the colonial domination epistemology, (4) the critical intersectional epistemology, and (5) the neo-liberal positivist epistemology. The author assesses the impact of each of the epistemologies on sociological research and discusses how these racial "ways of knowing" affect the creation of research questions, choice of analytic categories, selection of sociological theories, analysis of data, and ultimately, the knowledge and power relations we reproduce.

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Keywords: Racism; Sociology; Epistemology

How does racism affect sociological research and knowledge production? Many have answered this question by explaining that science allows us to neutralize any outside influences on the research process, keeping it objective and free from the contaminating influences of race and other social constructions. I contend that racism and power are not outside of the research process at all, and that in fact, they affect nearly every aspect of how researchers conduct their research from the choice of research questions to the interpretation of their data (Andersen, 1993). Drawing on the literatures of the insider/outside debate in sociology (Hare, 1973; Metton, 1972; Wilson, 1974), and feminist methodology and epistemology studies, I will outline how racial knowledge is infused in the knowledge production process.

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from start to finish, and how the act of critical reflexivity, coupled with an examination of
and ultimate change in power relations, can help researchers see their hidden assumptions
about race and racism more clearly.

The modern concept of race developed out of the Western European colonial project
beginning in the fifteenth century (Smedley, 1993; Takaki, 1993). They used the ideology of
race, which included a belief in the inherent inequality between human groups, to justify their
plunder of other people and lands. Race remains an ideology of the taxonomy of bodies built
on structural inequality. The ideology of race is flexible, however, and has shifted over time.
For example, the long-time focus on biological differences between the races has shifted
somewhat, at least in the U.S., to an ideology that focuses on cultural differences as the basis
for inequality. Race began as, and remains today, a "folk classification" that describes human
differences as inherently unequal (Smedley, 1993, p. 25). Although many scholars now argue
that race is not "real" in the biological sense, race is still very much a socio-cultural reality.
Individuals and groups receive differing amounts of resources according to their ascriptive
racial categories. Race is a social construction that refers to different types of human bodies
for the purpose of creating and maintaining a matrix of material and ideological domination
of one group by another (Om & Winant, 1994).

I borrow Bonilla-Silva's (2001) definition of racism to describe the systemic, materi-
alist nature of this process. "... races in racialized societies receive substantially differ-
ent rewards. This material reality is at the core of the phenomenon labeled as racism" (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, p. 22). He goes on to argue that Whites in the United States have
developed a racial praxis that allows them to maintain their systemic advantages and to
obscure the fact that the system is unfair (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). In this way, racism is not
just an ideology, but a material reality, and a structural system that sorts resources unequally
according to race.

This article outlines five racial epistemologies that represent some of the most common
understandings of race and racism in the United States. I have chosen the term epistemology
to describe theories of knowledge adopted by individuals and created in collective contexts.
Epistemologies are theories of knowledge that make basic claims about the nature of knowl-
edge: who can know, how we know, and what counts as evidence for our claims (Harding,
1987). The five racial epistemologies this article will review are: the Black/White racial
epistemology, the assimilationist epistemology, the colonial domination epistemology, the
critical intersectional epistemology, and the neo-liberal positivist epistemology. Each of
these "ways of knowing" structures the method for conducting research, as well as for un-
derstanding race in society at large. Using these five epistemologies as examples, I illustrate
how each one affects various aspects of the research process including the construction of
research questions, the choice of analytic categories, and the choice or construction of so-
ciological theories. Epistemologies do not exist outside of the people who construct and
use them. Individuals and groups adopt various epistemologies at different points in time
to make sense of the world. Epistemologies are also not equal in status, in society at large,
or in the academic community. Epistemologies are situated within political, historical, and
economic contexts that can provide power and legitimacy to their knowledge claims.

This paper is not another treatise on how to reinstate objectivity into the social sci-
ences, nor is it an argument for postmodern cultural relativism. Instead, I argue that a shift
in racial power relations, coupled with the practice of critical reflexivity in the research
process, is fundamental to the project of addressing racist knowledge production. Through the ongoing act of critical reflexivity, researchers can begin to see what they are not seeing in their “default epistemologies.” Debates over the assimilation patterns of Asian and Latino immigrants provide one example where critical reflexivity is useful. A researcher who critically reflects on the contemporary assimilation literature will be able to see how the current immigrant experience is understood through the Black/White racial paradigm: sociologists interpret assimilation patterns as mimicking either White ethnics (total assimilation) or African Americans (blocked assimilation). I return to this example in more detail after a fuller discussion of racial epistemologies and objectivity.

Although critical reflexivity is a crucial tool in examining epistemologies, attention to unequal power relations in U.S. society at large and how they affect our knowledge production processes is vital. It is not sufficient to reflect on or think about different ways of understanding racism. It is imperative to uncover the way that U.S. power relations validate some ways of knowing and denigrate others (Cazenave & Maddern, 1999). Gaventa (1980) suggests that power not only coerces people to do things against their own interests, power has the ability to affect our very understandings of the world and perceptions of our society. Gramsci’s concept of hegemony is an excellent example of the power of dominant epistemologies to shape our knowledge and elicit submission to elites (Hoare & Smith, 1971). For example, some forms of racial knowledge are used to perpetuate state-sponsored racism through social and economic policies. The knowledge production process will ultimately only change when significant shifts in racial power change. I envision the process of critical reflexivity as one part of that process.

Although debates over the role of science and objectivity have been present within the discipline of sociology since its inception, several African American sociologists brought the issue to the fore in the early 1970s. In 1973, sociologist Joyce Ladner and other social scientists declared the “death of White sociology” in her edited volume of the same name. Ladner and others were critical of the canonization of sociological research done in the name of objectivity and value-neutrality that confirmed and perpetuated racist assumptions about African Americans. “Mainstream sociology, in this regard, reflects the ideology of the larger society, which has always excluded Black lifestyles, values, behavior, attitudes, and so forth from the body of data that is used to define, describe, conceptualize, and theorize about the structure and functions of American society” (Ladner, 1973, p. xxiii). Ladner and others argued that sociology and other social sciences are not value-free or scientifically objective and never can be. Consequently, they tried to lay the groundwork for what would be a new Black sociology: created from the lived experiences and perspectives of Black people,1 using theories and analytic categories organic to the Black experience. Although a new Black sociology never developed in an institutionalized way, the dialogue initiated by these scholars was an important one. In fact, this debate carries on today. The theme of the 2002 Association of Black Sociologists meeting was “Black Sociology vs. Sociology by Blacks: An Examination of Theoretical and Methodological Paradigms.”

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1 I use the terms “Black” and “White” to refer to the socially constructed and racialized groups of people in the United States who have significantly different access to resources and power. These terms remain problematic because racial taxonomies themselves serve to perpetuate racism, so I use them with caution and an awareness of their limitations. I also use the term “African American” interchangeably with “Black.”
Much of the same kind of theorizing was also happening in the Chicano community led by Chicano sociologists such as Alfredo Mirande (1978) and Maxine Baca Zinn (1979). Chicano sociologists, for example, insisted that using the immigrant framework developed by the Chicago school of sociology to understand the Chicano experience was racist and uninformative. It ignored the realities of American colonialism and the experiences of living with racism in a U.S. internal colony (Mirande, 1978; Rendon, 1971; Romano, 1973; Vaca, 1970). Like Ladner’s work, the voices of radical Black and Chicano sociologists also led the call to abandon disciplinary claims to value neutrality and objectivity that often masked racist agendas.

But what happened to the radical critiques of sociology through the lens of race initiated in the 1970s? The backlash of the 1980s, both popular and academic, led by the presidencies of Reagan and Bush Sr., neutralized any discussion of race as “racist” in and of itself (Giroux, 1993). This era ushered in the imperative of colorblindness, which cloaked the agenda to reverse civil rights gains of the 1960s and 1970s (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Crenshaw, 1997). The discourse of colorblindness, firmly established in the 1980s, and policed by the vilifying accusation of “political correctness,” set the backdrop for the neo-liberal positivist epistemology that I will describe in more detail shortly.

At the same time public discussions of racism were falling out of favor, significant developments in feminist methodology and epistemology were taking place. Early works in the 1970s set the tone for an explosion of feminist scholarship in the 1980s. The bridge between these two bodies of literature was led by women of color feminist and womanist scholars who were working within both racial and gender-based research frameworks simultaneously. Their work challenged the often sexist assumptions of some male researchers and the racist assumptions of some feminist researchers. Their paradigm-shifting work furthered the questioning of a singular scientific reality as defined by White male scholars, and laid the foundation for what I later describe as the critical intersectional epistemology. The publication of several major works by feminist scholars called into question academic scientific claims to traditional notions of objectivity in the research process and described much of social science as grounded in the ideology of patriarchy (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Cook and Fonow, 1986; Harding, 1987; Mies, 1983; Oakley, 1981; Smith, 1987; Stanley & Wise, 1983). These critiques were not limited to the social sciences, but were also strongly stated against the natural sciences (Fausto-Sterling, 1985; Haraway, 1989; Harding, 1986; Keller, 1984; Longino, 1990).

Scholars of feminist methodology and epistemology argued that scientific inquiry was not a value-free, objective endeavor that stood outside of culture, ideology, and discourse, but instead was a direct outgrowth of Enlightenment philosophy, a primarily male European invention of thought. “Feminists have argued that traditional epistemologies . . . systematically exclude the possibility that women could be ‘knowers’ or agents of knowledge; they claim that the voice of science is a masculine one; . . . that the subject of a traditional sociological sentence is always assumed to be a man” (Harding, 1987, p. 3). Feminist scholars offered new methodologies and epistemologies that validated the existence of women as historical agents. Like the new Black sociologists of the 1970s, feminist scholars were not calling for the end of scientific research, but for a re-examination and re-articulation of the research questions, analytic categories, and theories used in the research process.
The race and gender based critiques of science over the past 30 years were reacting to the very strongly entrenched academic epistemology of positivism. Positivism implements standards of knowing that require social distance and purported "objectivity" in relationships between the researcher and the subject of research. Positivism also assumes that an objective reality exists, that there is one truth, and that anyone can discover that truth using the scientific method (Lukes, 1982). Positivism is an epistemology; it is a theory of knowledge with assumptions about who can know, how one can know, and what counts as evidence for knowledge. Although positivism maintains its dominance as the only "appropriate" epistemology for the social sciences, it has been widely criticized by researchers in various schools of thought (i.e., the Frankfurt school, feminist methodologists, postmodernists, and critical anthropologists, among others). I share with these critics their concerns about the implications of assuming there is one objective reality, that it can be known, and that it can be known only with the scientific method. Positivism is the foundation of the neo-liberal positivist epistemology that I refer to in this paper.

1. Some variants on racial epistemologies

The following section outlines five commonly adopted racial epistemologies. These are not all the possible epistemologies of race, just a small selection to serve as examples in the discussion of research and knowledge production. I have created this sample of epistemologies from my own observations of research presented by professional sociologists, as well as from perspectives and worldviews adopted by people, including students, in less formal settings (Hunter, 2002). I describe these epistemologies as examples of intellectual positions from which researchers construct racial meaning and knowledge about the world. In addition, it is important to note that these epistemologies are not equally influential; some are situated in a more powerful web of social relations than others. Also, it is very common to think within more than one epistemology at a time. I will provide examples of research projects that display fragments of two or more epistemologies simultaneously. By exposing the often hidden assumptions of racial epistemologies, researchers may be better able to reflect on their own assumptions about racism, acknowledge them, and account for them throughout the research process. Reflexivity, as I will argue, is imperative in the research process in order to help make visible that which is invisible in one’s own epistemology. For each racial epistemology outlined below, I describe its basic tenets of knowledge production by answering the following questions: Who has the authority to know? How does one know? What counts as evidence for knowledge?

1.1. The Black–White racial epistemology

The Black–White racial epistemology is a commonly accepted way of knowing about and conceptualizing race and racism in the United States. Often referred to as racial binarism, this is a way of seeing the racial world, at least in the U.S., as primarily divided into two camps: Black and White (Feagin, 2000). Feagin describes this racial framework as archetypal for race relation patterns with other groups of color. Although this epistemology has been widely criticized, it is still very common in academia and society at large. This epistemology
identifies the root of contemporary racism as American chattel slavery. By conceptualizing the American form of slavery as the point of origin of contemporary racism, users of this epistemology typically construct African Americans as having a "true" or "authentic" experience of racism. Proponents of this epistemology generally acknowledge institutional power differences between Blacks and Whites and view them as an enduring feature of American race relations. They tend to focus on structural inequalities and discrimination in areas such as education, occupation, and income. One notable feature of this epistemology is that it usually downplays issues of cultural domination and cultural genocide crucial to the maintenance of White domination. Instead, the cultural similarities between Black and White Americans are taken for granted.

Gunnar Myrdal's (1944) pioneering work, *An American Dilemma*, is an example of this epistemology. His analysis focused on Whites' restriction of Black employment opportunities and civil rights. He also suggested that racism would begin to unravel when Whites realized the contradiction between American ideals of freedom and democracy and Black oppression. His work is an example of the Black–White racial epistemology because he focused on structural dimensions of oppression, viewed slavery as the defining aspect of racism, and focused his analysis on the African American-White conflict. Although Myrdal's work has defined a generation of American sociological studies of racism, his work is also situated in a particular context and epistemology that limit its view of the social world, and limit its view of African Americans (Ellison, 1973).

1.1.1. Who has the authority to know?

In this epistemological framework, the knowers of racism are almost always considered African Americans. People using this epistemology believe that African Americans have had the most authentic and direct experience with racism and therefore, must know better than others about how racism operates, how to make sense of discrimination, why people possess certain attitudes, etc. It is important to note that this is a belief in African Americans as “experiential knowers” of racism. That means that African Americans should be interviewed and surveyed about racism, but not necessarily relied on to provide “expert knowledge” in this area. Only recently have researchers begun to look at African Americans’ everyday experiences and understandings of racism and to treat them with authority (Essed, 1991; Feagin & Sikes, 1994).

1.1.2. How does one know?

In this epistemology, one knows about race and racism from experience. In this case, it is important to consider that typically only African Americans are thought of as raced. Whites are generally considered to be without race (“just human”) and other people of color are thought of as either “ethnics,” religious groups, or language groups, but not necessarily constituting a group defined by race. Consequently, African Americans know about racism because they, and only they, have experienced it.

1.1.3. What counts as evidence for knowledge?

Here, in order for something to be considered racial or racist, it must be material, as opposed to cultural, and it must be experienced by African Americans because they constitute the only group who is raced. If the act is not experienced by African Americans themselves
and is directed against another group (e.g., Asian Americans), then it must be an act that is directly parallel to racist actions against African Americans. An example of this might be denying someone a job because he or she was Asian American. Typically, racism must be expressed in either Black and White terms, or be something directly parallel to that experience, in order to be defined as racism.

1.2. Assimilationist epistemology

This epistemology is another way of seeing the racial and ethnic world in the United States. In this epistemology, race and ethnicity are seen as temporary barriers to progress. Consistent with Omi and Winant’s (1994) description of the ethnicity model of race, users of this epistemology see racial or ethnic discrimination as something that new immigrants may initially encounter, but that will eventually be overcome. Discrimination is viewed as a natural reaction to “foreigners” and as something that will diminish over time as assimilation increases. In this model, cultural and structural assimilation are taken for granted as desirable and as the best paths to social mobility.

One of the most famous and enduring examples of sociological work in this tradition includes that by Robert Park and colleagues of the Chicago School of Sociology. Park’s (1950) studies of racial and ethnic minority groups in Chicago demonstrate his assumption that assimilation is natural and desirable. He believed that different racial groups would initially engage in conflict over resources, but that over time assimilation would result. The influence of Booker T. Washington on Park’s thinking is evident here. Park, like Washington, downplayed structural power differences between groups in favor of a model that viewed assimilation toward the dominant group as not only inevitable, but as desirable (Stanfield, 1985). Park’s work, though thoroughly criticized, offers an enduring and classic example of the role of the assimilationist epistemology in sociological research.

1.2.1. Who has authority to know?

In this epistemology there are two groups who are thought to have valid experiences. First generation “successful” immigrants who have culturally assimilated are viewed as “legitimate knowers,” as they are often cited in newspaper and magazine stories of “diverse” America. Their success in adjusting to life in a new country confirms the dominant presupposition that assimilation is desirable and will lead to material rewards and acceptance. The second group whose knowledge is validated in this epistemology is the dominant group, in this case, Whites. As keepers of the culture, Whites are seen as authorities on American life and secrets to American success.

It is also important to recognize in this epistemology who cannot know. In this case, colonized minorities within the society (e.g., Blacks or Native Americans) are defined as “non-knowers” because of their insistence on a paradigm of racial domination and enduring discrimination. The assimilationist epistemology is in direct conflict with the colonial domination epistemology described in the following section. This highlights the fact that only certain ways of knowing and certain kinds of knowledge are validated in each epistemology. Because of unequal power relations in the U.S., power elites and institutions only validate ways of knowing that support dominant ideologies about racism.
1.2.2. How does one know?
Like the Black–White racial epistemology, experience also produces knowledge. Individuals operating within this epistemology often believe or “know” that immigrant groups can succeed in this country if they work hard enough. The “American Dream” discourse structures knowledge and interprets social reality: It reads something like this, “Blacks do not do well because they think of themselves as victims and are lazy; many Latinos (and some other immigrants) do not succeed because they refuse to assimilate and learn English; groups who are willing to become “real Americans” will be allowed to do so, at least by the second generation.” This belief system, structured in bootstraps discourse, helps to shape the way believers in the assimilationist epistemology understand the world.

1.2.3. What counts as evidence for knowledge?
Personal experience is highly valued in the assimilationist epistemology. Individual and family experiences with upward mobility are treated as evidence that the American Dream is possible and that paths to social mobility are open to those who try. In fact, personal experience is often viewed with more legitimacy than social science surveys and large-scale data pointing to persistent discrimination against people of color.

1.3. Colonial domination epistemology
This epistemology uses the practice of European colonialism around the world as the point of origin for understanding contemporary racism. This kind of knowledge base is unique and quite different from the Black–White racial epistemology and the assimilationist epistemology. People who understand race relations through a colonial domination epistemology are often invested in a pre-colonial identity from which they may gain pride (e.g., Aztec culture, Visayan culture, or Algonquin culture). Cultural nationalist movements of the 1960s were strongly connected to such ideals. These identities are conceptualized as “true” and “authentic” identities that colonized people should return to if possible. The way that European values and aesthetics have insidiously seeped into colonized peoples’ value systems is only evident with a sense of a pre-colonial or pre-contact identity. These identities tend to value group pride and solidarity, as well as resistance to Americanization or assimilation. There are several social movements circumscribed within this epistemology; the growing movement around Afrocentrism is one example. The dialogue initiated by the anthology, The Death of White Sociology, edited by Joyce Ladner (1973) is another example of this epistemology. These scholars engaged in an empirical and epistemological movement during the 1960s and 1970s that posited an alternative way of studying African Americans: through the organic understandings of African American communities and intellectuals. In direct response to White researchers who often pathologized Black communities, the predominantly Black researchers of this movement believed that fellow Black researchers were more able to study their own communities and to avoid the contaminating influence of racism (Jones, 1973; Harris & McCullough, 1973; Saunders, 1973; Scott, 1973).

1.3.1. Who has authority to know?
In this epistemology, only members of colonized groups who have achieved pre-colonial identities, often described as being “decolonized,” have authority to know. This means that
other members of colonized groups who are not mentally situated in a pre-colonial identity do not have the authority to know about race and racism. This distinction can be likened to Marx’s class-consciousness (decolonized) and false consciousness (colonized) dyad. More importantly, supporters of this epistemology believe that the colonizers cannot be the knowers because their relationship to the colonized is distorted by a power differential. The dominant position of the colonizer clouds his ability to see the system of racial domination clearly.

1.3.2. How does one know?

In this case, one knows only through the study and reinterpretation of everyday life from the perspective of the colonized, not the colonizer. The colonized must understand their own position or location within the historical narrative of European colonialism and then challenge it. That is, they can truly know about race and racism only if they are located in a position of subordination in the colonial process. Further, one must acknowledge this location and have a pre-colonial identity in order to make claims about racism legitimately. This epistemology relies on the notion of epistemic privilege; subjects positioned in the subordinate role of a social relationship are better able to “see” and understand that relationship, and therefore better able to change it (Frankenberg, 1993; Hartsock, 1984).

1.3.3. What counts as evidence for knowledge?

Knowledge about race and racism can only be proven or understood in the context of historical European domination. In this epistemology then, history counts as evidence because it contextualizes all current racial and ethnic relations. Any claims made about racial oppression must incorporate an historical analysis in order to count as legitimate evidence in this epistemology. Also important is the “grassroots” element of the colonial domination model. In order for something to count as evidence, it must be experienced by the “grassroots” of the community. In other words, the majority of people who exist without much formal education and on the margins of the labor market must, through their experiences, validate the claims being made. It is this element of the colonial domination model that has so closely connected the working classes and the poor to movements in this tradition.

1.4. Critical intersectional epistemology

This epistemology is born out of the scholarship of women of color who have brought attention to the intersecting nature of oppression, or the “matrix of domination” (Collins, 1991; Zinn & Dill, 1994, 1996). This way of knowing about race and racism necessarily ties any knowledge of race, to knowledge of gender, class, sexuality, disability, and other intersecting identities that structure inequality. The premise of this epistemology is that axes of oppression such as racism and sexism are not separate, in reality or conceptually, but are intrinsically connected so that any racial identity, for instance, is experienced in a gendered way. Similarly, any gender identity is experienced in a particular racial way (King, 1988). This epistemology grew out of many women of color’s dissatisfaction with “monist” social movements: movements that were singular in their approach to fighting oppression (i.e., race based, or gender based, or class based) because they ignored the ways that different oppressions worked together and were inseparable in the lives of women.
of color. That dissatisfaction initiated a new dialogue on oppression that highlighted the interlocking nature of different systems of domination.

1.4.1. Who has authority to know?

Scholars situated in the critical intersectional epistemology have devised a clever way out of the insider/outsider debate that has plagued the social sciences for years. In their view, anyone can know about his or her own experiences, but must use caution when speaking for someone else. Collins (1991) best sums this up in her theory of partial perspective. Partial perspective describes a situation where each identity group is in the best position to create knowledge about its own reality: Puerto Ricans are best equipped to describe Puerto Rican social life, for instance. This does not preclude other groups from representing someone else’s reality, but it does caution that the analysis from the group itself is to be taken most seriously. This way of defining authority in the knower contrasts slightly to the notion of epistemic privilege in the colonial domination epistemology (where members of the dominant group can never be knowers), and also contrasts to the universal authority granted to knowers in the neo-liberal positivist epistemology (Alcoff, 1995).

1.4.2. How does one know?

This epistemology is open to various methods of inquiry including scientific method, experience, historical narrative, etc. However, individuals operating within the critical intersectional epistemology do require that all methods of inquiry be subject to reflexivity on the part of the investigator. That means that regardless of the method one chooses, the researcher must reflect upon her relationship to the people, or society, studied and examine how power dynamics might have affected the research.

1.4.3. What counts as evidence for knowledge?

Many researchers within the critical intersectional epistemology believe that research findings must be validated by the participants. For example, Collins (1991) states that in order for something to be considered Black feminist thought, it must be confirmed and validated by the majority of everyday Black women. This belief is also reflected in the trend of many feminist researchers to bring their research findings back to the community they studied for feedback. This practice is very common in qualitative research and usually involves the researcher making a follow up visit to the participants or community that she studied and eliciting feedback from them about her findings or conclusions.

1.5. Epistemology of neo-liberal positivism

This epistemology is the dominant and mainstream epistemology on issues of race and racism in our society and in the academy. Positivism is a theory of knowledge that presupposes one absolute truth that is knowable by anyone using the scientific method of inquiry. For research on race, this means that there is one reality about racism in the social world that is discernible through scientific inquiry by people of any racial background. Goldberg describes the relationship between racial knowledge and power. "Power is exercised epistemologically in the dual practices of naming and evaluating. In naming, or refusing to name things in the order of thought, existence is recognized or refused, significance
assigned or ignored, beings elevated or rendered invisible” (Goldberg, 1993, p. 150). Goldberg eloquently describes how epistemologies have the power to create realities that serve the ideological interests of the state or the dominant group. Neo-liberal positivists serve the interests of the dominant group by using science to create a reality that defines institutional racism as a thing of the past, primarily solved by 1960s legislation and the modern civil rights movement. Because racism is described as an artifact, merely a part of history and not a significant part of the present, these thinkers believe it is important to avoid “excessive” racial discussion and language (Giroux, 1993; Hunter & Nettles, 1999).

West (2002) also addresses the use of science in the service of dominant discourses. He argues that powerful discourses have the ability to “produce and prohibit, develop and delimit forms of rationality, scientifcacy, and objectivity which set perimeters and draw boundaries for the intelligibility, availability, and legitimacy of certain ideas” (West, 2002, p. 49). West outlines the power of science and its related discourse to make available certain ideas and to make invisible others. In this case, science, through the epistemology of neo-liberalism, makes available the reality of “colorblindness” and makes invisible “institutionalized racism” (Neubeck & Cazenave, 2001). Many argue that this way of discussing race, or evading it as the case may be, evolved in part from the 1980s Republican-led backlash against the civil rights movement. Methodologically, race can be “neutralized” or “controlled for” by assigning racially matched interviewers to gather data, by racially identifying all participants or data, or by being racially “sensitive” and trying to build trust and ensure an “objective” interpretation of otherwise racially situated social facts (Anderson, Silver, & Abramson, 1988). One example of research in this tradition is the work of William J. Wilson on racial inequality in the U.S. His highly influential work examines the racial reality of enduring poverty in African American urban segregated communities. Wilson (1978) made the argument in The Declining Significance of Race that racism was largely dealt with by the legislation of the 1960s and the remaining barriers to Black progress were largely economic. His more recent work sustains this basic premise in different iterations. His work has been further characterized by use of the scientific method (both quantitative and qualitative) to describe the racial reality of the United States. His work has been widely criticized for ignoring enduring issues of White privilege and White racism (Cancio, Evans, & Maume, 1996; Gould, 1999; Horton, 1995; Reed, 1999; Rosenthal, 1999; Sanchez-Jankowski, 1999; Steinberg, 1997; Wilson, 2000).

1.5.1. Who has the authority to know?

In this epistemology anyone can know, regardless of racial identity or status, as long as he or she is objective and uses the scientific method to gather information. In this way, this epistemology seems democratic—everyone has equal opportunity to know, providing each person follows the dominant way of knowing, i.e., positivism.

1.5.2. How does one know?

According to the neo-liberal positivists, one can only know through the traditional scientific method. This method will allow one to find the truth without being clouded by perceived racial bias or racial identities in the process. The scientific method must be applied to the problem in question: variables must be identified, data gathered in an “unbiased” way, and finally data must be interpreted within the theoretical rubric one set out to test. The scientific
method allows researchers to consider their own identities irrelevant to the research process as long as they tried to remain “objective.” In fact, this is the one epistemology that does not acknowledge the existence or influence of epistemologies at all.

1.5.3. What counts as evidence for knowledge?

Only evidence gathered through the scientific process counts as legitimate evidence or knowledge about racial inequality. That means that evidence (if quantitative) must often pass statistical tests for “significance” before being taken seriously by the academic community. Experience, history, and culture are all regarded as potential polluters of true knowledge, and are not considered potential providers of knowledge or truth. Consequently, the only things that can be “known” about racism are phenomena that can be operationalized and measured in a satisfactory way.

I include these five examples of racial epistemologies not as an exhaustive list, but as a series of examples of commonly taken epistemological positions by people, including researchers, as they construct knowledge about race and racism. Individuals do not always rely on the same epistemology, and how people use these epistemologies changes over time and in different contexts.

These five epistemologies do not exist in an equal power relationship to one another. They are not all equally used and are not all seen as legitimate or taken seriously by the majority of people in the U.S. (including scholars). The neo-liberal epistemology dominates because it has been adopted by powerful American institutions and individuals. As Goldberg (1993) and West (2002) both illustrate, positivism has served the dominant interests of the country well. It has helped to create certain “racial realities” that limit its own culpability in racial oppression and minimize the importance of contemporary inequality. The other epistemologies tend to be taken up by different communities of people of color. I outline these five ways of knowing so that I may draw on them throughout the rest of the paper as examples. In the following section on the construction of research questions and the choice of analytic categories in the research process, I will refer to each of these epistemologies and describe how they create both blind spots and ways of seeing that shape how we construct knowledge about race.

2. Creating research questions and analytic categories

All research questions are “raced” because they are created from particular epistemological positions. Each epistemology focuses on certain aspects of race relations and not on others. For example, researchers adopting the Black–White racial epistemology tend to focus on structural inequalities like income and wealth differences and not on issues of cultural domination. Conversely, proponents of the colonial domination epistemology often focus on cultural domination and cultural genocide as key concepts in understanding race relations. Thus, the epistemology that one uses to understand the world will make salient certain topics and not others. A researcher who understands racism through the Black White paradigm might examine income gap trends between Blacks and Whites over a 50-year period. A researcher who understands racism through the colonial domination epistemology may choose to research how the U.S. government schools culturally dominated the
American Indians. Although each of these research topics is important, any epistemology creates blind spots for the researcher, spaces of inquiry that he or she cannot see or understand from the current intellectual position. Exposing these blind spots is a crucial part of changing social science research methods.

Some Chicano scholars have highlighted the importance of epistemologies in regard to studies of the Chicano experience. If researchers use the assimilationist epistemology when studying the Chicano community, they may compare the assimilation rates and patterns of Mexican Americans with those of European immigrants from the early 1900s. However, if researchers used the colonial domination epistemology to study the Chicano community, they might compare the experiences of the Chicanos to those of the Native Americans, Africans, or other colonized peoples. This would be very significant both theoretically and empirically. For example, the meaning of assimilation would be very different in either study, either voluntary and desirable or coercive and oppressive. These two different epistemologies would give rise to very different research questions, analytic categories, and even interpretations of data.

The effect of racial epistemologies in constructing research questions is important because it exposes the fact that research questions are not neutral. All research questions arise from previously existing ways of knowing about race and racism that limit or make possible ways of understanding the problem. This in itself is not a problem. In fact, it is probably desirable to have research from many different perspectives on race, often referred to as epistemological diversity. The problem arises when one epistemology dominates academic discourse on a topic, and consequently, dominates the process of constructing research questions, and producing knowledge. In the academy, and particularly in sociology, the neo-liberal positivist epistemology has dominated knowledge production and precluded alternative ways of knowing.

Like research questions, analytic categories are also born from racial epistemologies. The choice of categories of analysis sets up the way the data will be understood, cataloged, and interpreted. Ultimately, the analytic categories determine what the data will mean. Most social scientists get their analytic categories from existing sociological theories or explanations of social life. This exposes the first problem: the vast majority of canonized sociological theories were created by people operating from an elite social location and a corresponding set of experiences (Sprague, 1997). Most of our canonized theorists are educated, White, European men. Few would disagree that these theorists have contributed invaluable knowledge to sociology, but the limited number of analytic categories developed by these sociologists is inadequate to describe the vast complexity of social life.

Karl Marx, for example, popularized the very important analytic categories, bourgeoisie and proletariat. These categories were useful in explaining many class based conflicts, especially in Europe, and were also applied to race relations in the United States, but they were always inadequate in capturing the complexity of racism in this country. Focusing on the categories of workers and owners made it difficult to understand how the White working class benefited from their White privilege (Roediger, 1991). Similarly, scholars have debated for decades the appropriate class designation for women. Whether or not women should be considered to be in the same class as their husbands, or if their class designation should be separate, is a long standing debate among sociology scholars of gender (Sargent, 1981). But neither of the categories bourgeoisie nor proletariat adequately captures the classed
experiences of women. Analytic categories generated from the lived experiences of the ruled, or the subaltern, will provide more robust theories of social life for those groups (Spivak, 1988).

Academic positivism has effectively shut out many people of color and women from being heard in the academy. Theory and research from scholars of color on race and ethnicity is often unfairly viewed as subjective or biased by neo-liberal positivists (Twine, 2000). With few theories from scholars of color, researchers are left to rely on the analytic concepts of the rulers to explain the sociological worlds of the ruled, a practice Smith calls “conceptual imperialism” (1987, p. 88). “The procedure operates as a sort of conceptual imperialism. When we write a thesis or a paper, we learn that the first thing to do is to latch it on to the discipline at some point. This may be by showing how it is a problem within an existing theoretical or conceptual framework. The boundaries of inquiry are thus set within the framework of what is already established” (Smith, 1987, p. 88). Smith highlights the problem of dominant epistemologies: they set the parameters for the way social life may be understood and made sense of. Experiences or knowledge that may not fit within the existing conceptual schema must be fit into them in some way to become legitimate pieces of social knowledge, or risk being excluded altogether. Clearly, neo-liberal positivism, limits the kinds of knowledge scholars can produce about race and racism.

Many feminist scholars have critiqued male dominated social science methods for treating analytic categories created from the experiences of White men as if they are universal categories (Fonow & Cook, 1991). The public/private distinction is one example of those categories. Sprague (1997) critiques taken-for-granted distinctions, such as public and private, as problematic for women of color. Many women of color have in the past, and currently continue to work in the private homes of White families, taking care of children, cleaning, and cooking. For White men, the workplace has traditionally been a public space, but for women of color working as domestics it is still often a private one. By thinking of racism through the critical intersectional epistemology, we learn that seeing women’s liberation as tied to employment in the public sphere (as many Liberal feminists do) breaks down when applied to women of color. First, for many women of color employment is not in the public sector and second, much employment for women of color is not liberating but exploitative. This is one enduring example of how analytic categories, generated from a particular racial, gender, and class position, are universalized and often applied inappropriately to different social groups.

The solution to this conundrum is twofold. First, the academy should encourage research from as many different epistemologies as possible. This will broaden the types of research being conducted, the questions being asked, and the claims being made. Scholars must engage in critical reflexivity in the research and knowledge production process and should address the epistemological and discursive limitations in their work. This entails addressing issues of positionality, identity, and confronting the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched. Reflexivity, although crucial to many feminist methodologists, critical ethnographers, and even critical demographers has not been widely adopted in sociology at large because it requires a break from the neo-liberal positivist epistemology.

Second, the neo-liberal positivist epistemology can no longer be the only legitimate form of knowledge production. Dominant groups have never given up power voluntarily in the past, and it will take a prolonged effort to continually challenge the assumed universality of
neo-liberal positivism. Moreover, less powerful epistemologies (and less powerful groups like people of color and feminists) will never be given equal status in the academy until a larger structural change in power relations happens within the U.S. as a whole. As I stated earlier, these epistemologies do not exist outside of current social and political contexts and consequently, only changes in the "relations of ruling" will lead to ultimate and significant changes in the authority of competing epistemologies (Smith, 1987).

3. Reflexivity and learning from the margins of race

Reflexivity or self-reflexivity in research is increasingly used as a tool to reduce bias in studies and to help researchers become more aware of their assumptions. Wasserfall (1997) describes this reading of reflexivity as, “a continued self-awareness about the ongoing relationship between a researcher and informants, which is certainly epistemologically useful: the researcher becomes more aware of constructing knowledge and of the influences of her beliefs, backgrounds, and feelings in the process of researching” (p. 151). Reflexivity has also been used as a tool for addressing the power differences between the researcher and the participant, especially when there are additional differences of race, class, and other axes of power (Beoku-Betts, 1994; Riessman, 1987). Edwards (1990) discussed the need to acknowledge the status differences between herself as a White researcher and the Black women she interviewed in her study. “I realized that rapport was easier after I had signaled not a nonhierarchical, nonexploitative, shared-sex relationship, but rather an acknowledgment that I was in a different structural position to them with regard to race and did not hold shared assumptions on that basis” (Edwards, 1990, p. 486). Reflexivity allows the researcher to think critically about her own power relationship to the people or institutions she is studying (Awkward, 1995).

Epistemologies, by their nature, are hard to see beyond. Researchers then must redouble their efforts to illuminate the spaces they may inadvertently occlude. This will allow them to see what questions they are not asking, what categories they are not using, and what interpretations they have overlooked. The following discussion of Asian and Latino immigrant assimilation patterns in the U.S. provides a fruitful example of the reflexive method.

Studies of immigration and assimilation have always been central to the American sociological project. As the U.S. undergoes its third significant wave of immigration, sociologists are already researching and theorizing its effects. The third wave of immigration is characterized by unprecedented numbers of people from Third World nations, especially from Mexico, Central America, and Asia. Latino and Asian immigrants have demonstrated different rates of structural and cultural assimilation in their new U.S. context. Generally, Asian immigrants are culturally and structurally assimilating toward the dominant group more quickly than are Latino immigrants. These differences have spurred a host of theories and predictions by sociologists about ultimate patterns and socioeconomic destinations for the two groups. The dominant sociological question of the day seems to be, ‘Will the Asians or Latinos’ patterns of assimilation follow the model of European immigrants a century ago, or will they more closely resemble the caste-like minority status of African Americans?’ It already seems clear that, whether or not Asian immigrants ultimately assimilate in the way that Whites did, they are certainly not destined to the social position of African Americans. Their
annual incomes and educational attainment already outpace that of many White families (Cheng & Yang, 1996). The situation for Latino immigrants, however, is less clear. There are indicators pointing to the steady cultural and structural assimilation of Latinos, but because of the slow pace of assimilation, and their proximity to African Americans on socioeconomic indicators, it is still unclear if they will fully assimilate/amalgamate, or if they will become a racially oppressed group (Ortiz, 1996).

The questions outlined above are a general characterization of much contemporary sociological research on immigration. I now want to describe how the process of reflexivity can expose some of the taken for granted assumptions in this research model. Careful consideration of the analytic categories above reveals that both Asian and Latino immigrants are being compared to Whites and Blacks. Scholars are asking whether the new immigrants’ experiences will more closely mimic that of White ethnics, total assimilation within a few generations, or that of African Americans, perpetual discrimination and marginalization. Under closer scrutiny it becomes clear that aspects of the Black/White racial epistemology, as well as the assimilationist epistemology, are at work here. By viewing new immigrants in a Black/White either/or way, vestiges of the Black/White racial epistemology are evident. Further, an assumption exists in this literature that if Latinos become a racialized minority, their experience with racism will be similar to the African American experience with racism. It is likely that Latinos will continue to suffer from discrimination, but that their experience will differ significantly from that of African Americans. One of the ways this is most obvious is in discourses of American identity. Despite the fact that African Americans are still racially oppressed, their identity as U.S. citizens is questioned far less frequently than Latinos’ claims to an American identity or citizenship.

A similar case may be made for Asian Americans. Asian Americans have much higher out-marriage rates to Whites than do African Americans. This has been interpreted as evidence that Asian American amalgamation into the White mainstream is imminent. However, Asian Americans are still plagued by an "alien" identity that discursively limits their citizenship rights (Lee, 1999). Political campaigns provide an excellent example of this. Although neither scenario is likely to happen immediately, the United States electorate is probably much closer to electing an African American president than an Asian American one. This is because Asian Americans are largely still defined as foreign and un-American. The Asian, symbolized as “alien,” seems incompatible with the American presidency. This is just one example of how the racial experiences of the new immigrants are unlike the previous assimilation patterns of either Whites or Blacks. Scholars will need to develop a new racial paradigm for understanding their unique experiences.

The assimilationist model is also at play in this example. Many immigration studies focus on rates of assimilation with the built in assumption that assimilation toward the dominant group is desirable. In fact, even when scholars recognize that sometimes assimilation is toward a minority group, as Portes and Zhou (1993) do in their theory of “segmented assimilation,” it is still assumed that this so-called downward assimilation is undesirable and that assimilation toward the dominant group is best. Researchers rarely question the value of socializing our newest citizens to be more like Whites, both culturally and structurally. White Americans’ patterns of cultural imperialism and over-consumption, for instance are never problematized in this epistemology. When scholars actively engage in critical reflexivity they will be able to reveal these kinds of hidden assumptions and blind spots.
4. Conclusion

My brief, critical investigation of the assumptions and blind spots in the current debate on discrimination and immigration provides only one example of the scholarly benefit to engaging in critical reflexivity. All researchers should allow themselves to question academic positivism and acknowledge how their epistemologies, identities, ideologies, discourses, and power affect the knowledge they create about the world (Blauner & Wellman, 1973). This is particularly important for sociologists because we provide so much of the data and interpretation that shape public opinion and government policy on many social issues, although admittedly we never influence the public as much as we would like to.

In order to eradicate racist knowledge production, we must deal with both the ideological and material aspects of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Omi & Winant, 1994; Smedley, 1993). Because racism is a praxis, it is a totalizing system that requires a radical change in power relations before any progress toward an anti-racist society can be achieved. Although this problem must be addressed at many levels (i.e., economy, education, discourse, etc.) social science researchers have an important role to play. We can continue to (or begin to) resist racist knowledge production and to critically examine our own research methods as supporting or challenging the existing system of inequality.

Epistemological diversity in the academy is desirable, and imperative, because it broadens the kind of research being done, and therefore the kind of knowledge being produced. However, this is impossible without a change in racial power relations in our society as a whole. There is neither one way to investigate racism, nor is there one truth about the reality of racism. As researchers move away from dominant positivist ways of understanding racism, they will be able to make room for more diverse research projects that contribute to this ongoing conversation that was first broadly publicized by Ladner and her colleagues in *The Death of White Sociology*. Positivism not only creates a false sense of truth and objectivity, but researchers have greatly harmed many communities, especially communities of color by “researching” them and then publishing the results of their value-free, objective accounts of pathology and degradation (Smith, 1999). We need look no further than the infamous “Moynihan Report”2 for evidence of this behavior. Plural perspectives that are equally regarded as legitimate scholarship are desperately needed in the dialogue on racial and ethnic discrimination. Larger structural changes in race relations are necessary in order for the racial epistemologies of people of color to be more highly valued.

Coupled with a diversity of epistemological positions must be critical reflexivity. Reflexivity can help all researchers see their work from new angles and gain insight on the limitations of their perspectives. As researchers become increasingly self critical of their assumptions and paradigms and the power structures that do or do not support them, they will create space for new ways of understanding and combating racism that we have yet to imagine.

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2 The “Moynihan Report” was written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan for President Nixon in 1965. In this report Moynihan used data about the predominance of female-headed households in the African American community to shift “blame” for persistent Black poverty from White institutional racism to the pathology of the Black family and of Black women in particular (Neubeck & Caznave, 2001, pp. 152–153).
References


