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Formulating a theory in anti-racism activism

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Canadian comedian and political commentator, Samantha Bee, did a special focusing on racial euphemisms. She noted the lengths to which the media will go to not call a racist act as racism. When racist events happen, the media will often label the incidents as “racially charged” or “racially insensitive.” Bee pushed back against these euphemisms and instead suggested that when racialized events happen the media should say, “The racist did racism which was racist.” Bee’s segment raises an interesting quandary about how to properly tackle racism. This chapter aims to provide some theoretical and practical ways to make engaging in anti-racist activism normative. Drawing upon critical race theory (CRT) and the public health critical race praxis (PHCRP), we establish a racially-inclusive sociological imagination framework to better formulate a typology for addressing structural racism. We use policing in the United States as a case to illuminate the pervasive ways that structural racism permeates a social institution such as the criminal justice system.

The pervasiveness of structural racism: the case of policing

In 2015, Dylann Roof, a self-proclaimed White supremacist, walked into an African American church in South Carolina and murdered nine people. Apprehended days later as an armed and dangerous fugitive of the law, police officers took Roof to eat at Burger King on his way to jail. Many people wondered whether a non-White mass murderer would have been given this type of preferential treatment. Accordingly, some noted the Burger King incident as a lack of respect for Black bodies and a direct affront to racial progress. Furthermore, the presiding judge over Roof’s initial hearing was removed due to information indicating that he may hold stereotypical views about Blacks and Whites (McKay, 2015). The judge was previously heard using racial slurs and making derogatory comments about Blacks. Despite these incidents, Roof was ultimately convicted of a slew of hate crime and murder charges, and sentenced to death. The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church Massacre was paralleled by another act of domestic terrorism on the campus of the University of Maryland. On May 20, 2017, Army 2nd Lt. Richard Collins III, a graduating Black Bowie State University student, was stabbed to death by Sean Urbanski, a White University of Maryland (UMD) student, on UMD’s campus. Urbanski was convicted of...
first-degree murder in 2019. However, to Bee’s point, the judge threw out the hate crime charge before the jury had the chance to render a verdict on that count. This decision highlights the normalcy of racism. Authorities discovered Urbanski’s ties to White supremacy groups on social media. Over two years later and four stalled motion hearings, Urbanski still has not gone to trial.

When we look at these two events, we see two horrific incidents and how they speak to the prevalence of domestic terrorism and structural racism. Domestic terrorism is when U.S. citizens engage in incidents that use violence or force to intimidate a large segment of U.S. citizens. Just as foreign attacks of terrorism, such as 9/11, were used to create fear in American lives, domestic terrorist acts are meant to instill fear and terror within the nation-state—in this case Black Americans. Besides demonstrating acts of domestic terrorism, the locations of both of these horrific acts prove to be significant—one was at a church and the other on a university campus. Churches and universities are some of the few places where Blacks have found refuge and the space to learn how to engage in racial uplift activism in order to progress the United States to a more equitable place. Just as the Black community has found solace in these social institutions, both Roof’s and Urbanski’s behavior were created, supported, and maintained by these same social institutions through their connections to White supremacy.

What is important to understand is that the increase in violence toward Black and Brown communities are not limited to just hate crimes; violence has also increased at the hands of those who are sworn to protect minority communities against White supremacists—police officers. Moreover, structural racism is not only seen through the socialization and domestic terrorist acts of White supremacists, but it is also defined by the racialized acts of police officers. Officer-involved shootings in the United States have increased over the past two decades. After reaching an all-time low in the 1990s and early 2000s, officer-involved shootings have substantially increased. In general, the rate of police involved killings in America is about four times the rate in Canada, 22 times the rate in Australia, and 125 times the rate in England (Zimring, 2017). Race, then, exacerbates the experiences that Whites versus racial minorities have with police. High profile officer-involved killings of Blacks such as Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Philando Castille, Koryn Gaines, Eric Garner, John Crawford III, and Laquan McDonald have captured global attention. Among youth, Blacks are 21 times more likely than Whites to be killed by police (Gabrielson, Jones, and Sagara, 2015). Even when exclusively focusing on people who police officers report are not attacking nor have a weapon, we still see huge racial disparities, with Blacks being 3.5 times more likely than Whites to be killed by police.

The rate of police killings in the United States compared to other countries is unfathomable on its own, but when including racial disparities in the understanding of these killings, it is a troubling trend. The criminal justice system has allowed officers to evade punishment and accountability for their actions (Alexander, 2010). In these incidents, there are rarely charges for and even fewer convictions of police officers. Civil lawsuits for unjustified and unlawful deaths fall onto taxpayer dollars. The criminal justice and judicial systems are allowing police officers to kill Blacks at a higher rate, while someone else pays the bill. Some cities like Chicago and Illinois have allocated funds for civil payouts for police brutality settlements. The people who pay the consequences for the actions of the police are the residents of cities and municipalities who end up pay millions of dollars in civil settlements to the families of people killed by police. For example, in 2018, the courts ruled that the first shots fired by a police officer, which killed Korryn Gaines, were unreasonable and violated her civil rights. After the verdict, the City of Baltimore originally settled with the Gaines family for $37 million, which included a large sum of money for Gaines’ son who was also shot during the incident. No amount of money can ever replace a person’s life, or give back
the mother a child lost, but $37 million would go a long way in Baltimore, Maryland to redevelop low-income Black neighborhoods and invest in schools and social programs to improve employment opportunities and health outcomes. Instead, these taxpayer funds are allocated for a settlement for a wrongful killing committed by a police officer.

Structural racism within the criminal justice system does not begin or end with wrongful killings. Officer-involved shootings are just the tip of the iceberg as policies such as ‘stop and frisk’ disproportionately discriminate and marginalize racial minorities. A study of New York City police stops showed that Blacks and Latinos represented roughly 85% of stops despite making up less than 30% of the city’s population. Of these stops, nearly 60% involved frisking and a large percentage involved criminal force. However, only 8% were arrested (with a majority for resisting arrest) with 2% of stops resulted in contraband discovery (see Gilbert and Ray 2016). This means that an overwhelming percentage of people who were stopped were not committing any crimes.

Once in the criminal justice system, Blacks are also more likely than Whites to get convicted and receive longer prison sentences for similar crimes (Alexander, 2010). The enforcement of ‘stand your ground’ laws also shows racial disparities. Whites are significantly more likely than Blacks to be found not guilty when using stand your ground as a defense. Studies on felony trials for similar crimes also shows similar racial disparities. A study of 700 felony trials in Florida showed that a lack of racial diversity in the jury pool leads to Blacks being significantly more likely to be convicted relative to Whites. Jury selection and how prosecutors, defense attorneys, and judges might corroborate to suppress evidence and maintain the police “blue wall of silence” can be extensive (Gonzalez Van Cleve, 2016).

When people are released from prison, racial disparities continue. Studies show that Blacks with a criminal record face a much more difficult time finding a job relative to Whites with a criminal record. In fact, Pager’s (2007) groundbreaking research showed that Whites with a criminal record were more likely to get called back for jobs than Blacks without a criminal record. Well known cities, such as New York City and Baltimore, are not the only places plagued with policing issues. The Department of Justice had to intervene in the Ferguson, Missouri police department for stopping, fining, and arresting Black motorists with the purposes of generating financial revenue for the city government.

So, while Michael Brown became the apex for the Black Lives Matter movement, the structural racism embedded within the Ferguson Police Department and the city was the impetus. These issues are why nearly 85% of Blacks and slightly over 50% of Whites believe there is a difference in the way that police treat Blacks relative to Whites (Pew Research Center 2016). Despite this high percentage of Americans believing there to be racial issues in policing, many people do not actively engage in anti-racist activities to change the system. CRT and PHCRP provide some conceptual insights into these structural and psychological processes.

Critical race theory

We aimed to document above—via policing and the criminal justice system—how pervasive structural racism is in the United States and how it continues to shape life chances and social and economic outcomes. We believe that talking about structural racism is important, but what is more important is discussing how we conceptualize the processes and mechanism that undergird structural racism. Structural racism must be understood on institutional, contextual, and individual levels. To begin the conversation, Whites must be challenged to end structural racism as we know it. Many women’s rights activists believe that if sexual
harassment, sexual assault, and rape are to decrease, men must take it upon themselves to hold other men accountable for the ways that toxic masculine culture seeps into social institutions to marginalize women. The same logic applies to racism. If structural racism is really going to becoming a thing of the past, Whites must take the onus to ratify a procedural justice perspective.

Critical race theory recognizes that racism is ingrained in the fabric and system of American society (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Now, what is important to understand is that structural racism can be dominant without an individual racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). This means we have a racialized society to begin with, creating structurally racist institutions where Whites frequently benefit from social, economic, and cultural privileges not bestowed onto racial minorities. Critical race theory identifies that these racialized power structures are based on White privilege and White supremacy, which perpetuates the marginalization of people of color.

Most people conceptualize racism as static and operating in individuals; however, racism is fluid. It flows through structures that facilitate or inhibit mobility through social institutions (like from a neighborhood to a school to a college to a job). For example, in 2015, a group of Black and Latino teenagers in McKinney, Texas were accosted by police after a group of mostly White adults called about a disturbance. During the encounter, now former McKinney police officer Eric Casebolt was recorded throwing down a 15-year-old girl in a bathing suit. Using its self-insurance risk pool, the city of McKinney settled the case for $184,850 (Uhler, 2018). Former McKinney elementary school teacher Karen Fitzgibbons was fired after stating the following about the incident:

This officer should not have to resign. I’m going to just go ahead and say it … the Blacks are the ones causing the problems and this ‘racial tension.’ I guess that’s what happens when you flunk out of school and have no education.

(Klein, 2015)

If a Black child were sitting in Karen Fitzgibbons’ classroom would they be taught equally? As it relates to anti-racism, imagine how many teachers, administrators, and family members knew about Fitzgibbons’ racist views and did nothing. These bystanders are complicit in allowing racism to proliferate. As in McKinney, neighborhoods and schools are linked together. Some of the same people who work at the schools live in the local neighborhoods. When incidents with racist intent occur in these two social institutions, they are not isolated or coincidental. They are highly interconnected.

Racism on a structural level is rooted in policies, laws, and legislation that allow differential treatment of individuals based on socially-ascribed racial categories. Unfortunately, policies lead to other teachers, just like some cops, committing one of the ultimate acts of solidarity with racists—silence as acceptance. Instead of calling out the racism, racism is dressed up with pretty words through euphemisms and ignored.

**Public health critical race praxis**

Understanding the importance of how race and racism operate within the broader societal structure is important to understand how the racially violent events discussed above affect minority groups on an individual level. PHCRP is a framework which combines critical race theory and public health theory as a means to best express how to understand and address social and health issues, with the ultimate goal to achieve social justice for marginalized groups (Gilbert and Ray, 2016). The inclusion of PHCRP is important because one
cannot talk about the structural racism of our society without also discussing how it is impacting the health of marginalized groups (Ford and Airhienbuwa, 2010a; 2010b). Violent crimes, such as domestic terrorism, take a significant toll on marginalized groups. By using the PHCRP framework, we aim to move the conversation forward to provide theoretical and policy recommendations.

Looking at the rates of justifiable homicides through the PHCRP lens gives a better understanding of police behavior and how justifiable homicides have increased (Gilbert and Ray, 2016). The PHCRP framework provides principles of: first, utilizing the primacy of racialization principle to illuminate how racial stratification leads to unequal life chances; second, utilizing the race as a social construct and gender as a social construct principles in order to provide researchers with a lens to consider how criminalizing Blacks limits healthy lifestyles; and third, utilizing the race consciousness and interdisciplinary self-critique principles in order to push for policies to better understand five key components that lead to officer-involved shootings:

1. racial biases
2. racial and gender consciousness
3. ways to provide more equitable policing practices
4. the enforcement of legal remedies for those who abuse power
5. the prevention of acts of discrimination by holding individuals culpable who informally police Blacks.

Following the structural determinism principle of PHCRP, Gilbert and Ray (2016) state that policy makers have clear guidelines they should follow to help the growth of anti-racism ideologies and practices surrounding law enforcement behavior. In particular, they note the importance of policy makers relying on valid and reliable research. The next section discusses more direct ways to address “racially charged” incidents such as the ones previously discussed and become more aware of anti-racism ideologies.

Racially inclusive sociological imagination framework

What do we as individuals do to obliterate structural racism and deal with individuals who have the power and influence to make decisions with racist intent that have institutional ramifications?

We suggest employing a “racially inclusive sociological imagination framework.” Accordingly, we have three specific suggestions for people aiming to engage in anti-racism activism in their daily lives. First, people can become “racial equity learners” by educating themselves about the reality that racial inequality still exists and permeates every facet of the social world. This is what we aimed to do with policing and criminal justice, above. The unfortunate truth is that even if people think they do not experience race, they live it and may benefit from it. Race affects everyone to such an extent that people who believe they do not experience race maintain it even if they do not feel its tormented wrath directly.

Second, people should not only learn about race and racism, but they should also aim to be a “racial equity advocate” by holding friends, family, and co-workers accountable for what they think, say, and do about inequality. The fact is that in today’s society people live highly segregated lives, which means they may never come into contact with marginalized groups, ultimately leading to inequality being fostered because marginalized groups are not present. Speak up for them. Accordingly, being an advocate is much deeper than simply...
being an ally. Allies can at times populate in silence. Advocacy requires direct action to intervene in racist encounters, frequently by disrupting the normative interaction patterns of the people that we care the most about.

Third, instead of simply asking for quota-type diversity, people can be a “racial equity broker” with their employers, children’s schools, churches, and homeowners’ associations by aiming to institute more policies and practices that allow for accountability, objective evaluation, and transparency. We must be willing to look at our own institutions to ensure equitable policies and practices within our own neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools. Evaluating and demanding transparency will highlight embedded forms of racial discrimination and their sources that would otherwise not be as overt. When the problem is identified, it makes it easier to rectify by implementing new practices and policies to vehemently attack those sources with solutions to remove racism.

In order to be a racial equity learner, racial equity advocate, and racial equity broker, it is important to implement a “racially-inclusive sociological imagination framework.” The racially inclusive sociological imagination framework builds on the work of others who push for the importance of centering racial justice (Meehan, Reinelt, and Perry, 2009; Potapchuk, 2004). We add to this body of knowledge by starting with the fundamental premise that in order to center and engage in racial justice work, procedural justice must be at the forefront of the theoretical model and implementation plan. It is very important for people to begin by understanding and embracing the fact that social justice is “the premise that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities” (Jiminez et al., 2014: 1). Justice is typically broken down into two main categories—distributive and procedural. On one hand, distributive justice is the belief in equity and fairness; which of course, most people believe in. Procedural justice, on the other hand, is the belief in an equitable procedure to create equitable distributions.

The racially-inclusive sociological imagination framework includes five components: (1) developing a diversity achievement ideology; (2) identifying trust points; (3) reducing implicit bias; (4) creating brave spaces; and (5) engaging in racial uplift activism. These steps help to change our everyday social interactions as well as the policies and practices that augment hate speech and racial discrimination.

**Develop a diversity achievement ideology**

First, people have to develop a diversity achievement ideology. The diversity achievement ideology includes four important components: (1) self-awareness; (2) social awareness; (3) global awareness; and (4) agency. Self-awareness means an individual must begin to think critically about the ways they view the world and why, and ultimately developing a holistic life perspective. No one can be forced to do this; it is a personal endeavor. People have to come in touch with what they believe morally, spiritually, mentally, emotionally, and physically. They have to confront issues that might not allow them the ability to properly develop a diversity achievement ideology. Often times, this means reflecting on major life events and being able to understand the difference between an individual’s actions and the social identities and groups they embody.

Becoming socially aware begins by learning the way that people view social identities. Then, once a person gains the empirical knowledge about how marginalization among these social identities operate, they must think critically and reflexively about how their own social identities influence how others interact with them. The learning process cannot only be knowledge gained; it must invoke a desire for critical analysis of what was learned. Next,
people become globally aware by realizing that not all people are treated the same because of their social identities. Finally, people then have to manufacture agency to enact change. Becoming a racial equity learner is really captured by going through this process. It involves much education, reading, studying, learning, and self-reflection.

**Identify trust points**

Second, people have to identify trust points in order to properly be a racial equity learner. In particular, people have to identify trusted and objective media sites. Admittedly, media is a competing curriculum. The difficulty with competing curricula mean they challenge our ability to obtain empirical data on trends and distorts our power to interpret events as generalizable, valid, and reliable. One way to potentially dilute certain agendas of media outlets is to identify at least three sources about a current event. By having different sources, it allows for the ability to compare and contrast the information being broadcasted. It also helps to relate the learned information back to social theory and empirical trends. Outlets such as *Contexts Magazine: Sociology for the Public* are important sources of information for rigor and empirical analysis.

Altogether, people should not simply trust what they hear and see from only one source. In the current media market, being first and getting ownership credit rather than being correct is premium; viewers must be careful and patient to collect enough information from multiple sources rather than just one. Then, the information gathered can be compiled and analyzed with existing trends to determine if the event is an outlier or within the norm. If this process is not thorough, people are examining events in a vacuum, which can be dangerous.

Mainstream media is not the only competing curriculum, there is also social media. Social media opened the doors of everyday people to generate and contribute to mass communication, but they also created an environment of faux expertise (Ray et al., 2017). Through social media many people believe they are an expert on a topic even when they are not. Additionally, most algorithms on social media platforms operate to give users content based on what they like, click, and read. As a result, social media often reflect people’s own belief systems rather than an objective view of social life (Ray and Gilbert, 2018).

Nonetheless, social media can be used as tools for social change to combat prejudicial narratives while also maintain existing power structures. As a result of their unique material history, social media show and tell us what people say and do in real time. They also bring voices to those who traditionally do activist work in silence (Ray et al., 2017). Present day activism has changed because social media circumvent traditional forms of publicity. Power is placed in the hands of individuals who collectively join in solidarity for a common cause or goal. Social media provide a behind-the-scenes look at how people are organizing and communicating to create narratives that survive over time and become engrained in the social consciousness of society (Ray and Gilbert, 2018).

**Reduce implicit bias**

Third, people need to aim to reduce implicit bias and become better racial equity learners and advocates. Results of implicit association tests (IATs), taken by millions of Americans, show the pervasiveness of prejudice about a host of outcomes (Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz, 1998). As it relates to race and skin tone, people are more likely to have positive preference towards Whites and people with lighter skin tones relative to Blacks and people
with darker skin tones. Research on IATs also parallels what we see play out in social interactions between police officers and Blacks with people being more likely to have a bias toward Blacks with weapons compared to Whites with weapons.

Create brave spaces

Fourth, people have to transform racist spaces into brave spaces by having candid racial conversations without racist intent. This is often difficult for people, but it is critical if anyone is to be a racial equity advocate. Talking about race is difficult because rarely do people talk about it to someone who is not of their same racial group. Brave spaces mean allowing people to create a space where they can build bridges with people who might have different views than themselves. Though universities mimic the racial segregation that people experience in schools and neighborhoods (Ray and Rosow, 2012), they are one of the rare spaces where people have the ability to (and at times are encouraged to) interact with those who think completely differently than themselves. It is most important to implement brave spaces were different ideas can be shared, especially since people’s lives are so segregated by race and class that we rarely have more than superficial conversations with individuals of different social statuses. Converting homogenous spaces into brave spaces is just as important since these are often the spaces where people may have the most impact.

Engage in racial uplift activism

Finally, people have to engage in racial uplift activism. This component of the racially-inclusive sociological imagination framework highlights what it means to be a racial equity broker. There are four main practical approaches to engaging in racial uplift activism. First, people can engage in civil rights by protesting, strategizing, educating and litigating for the rights of individuals/groups. Second, people can engage in public policy by promoting the rights of individuals/groups through acts designed to influence legislative decision making. To make policy changes, people can call and email their local politicians and policy makers; advocate for racially equitable policies, and bring attention to policies that may have racialized (un)intended consequences. For example, a state may want to change the financial thresholds for students qualifying for educational funding or increase the number of months that someone is given as a mandatory minimal sentence. The racial implications for these policies may be grave considering the racial wealth gap and the role of stop and frisk policies in racial disparities in policing. As a citizen, people should express their concerns about racial implications.

Third, people can participate in community service by engaging in hands-on activities to better communities and individuals. Community service is not limited to serving at a local soup kitchen, though that is important. This type of focused community service means identifying thresholds where racial inequality exists and then using one’s skill set to help. For example, a person could start a school or community garden. These programs have community and educational benefits by increasing math, science, and reading test scores (Ray, Fisher and Fisher-Maltese, 2016).

Finally, people can engage in philanthropy by raising and giving money to better the lives of others or by raising funds for important causes. Funding can be raised to refurbish the library and recreational centers that community members use for local events. Philanthropy does not always mean giving one’s own money if resources are limited. Rather, it
may mean thinking of ways to expand how we think about philanthropy to include social and cultural capital. There are a host of potential opportunities for people to make structural differences in people’s lives to mitigate structural racism.

**Conclusion**

This chapter aimed to establish a framework to leverage theories rooted in critical race to think practically about ways to engage in anti-racism activism. By implementing a racially inclusive sociological framework, people can become racial equity learners, racial equity advocates, and racial equity brokers. As Jamelle Bouie (2014) said, “A generation that hates racism but chooses colorblindness is a generation that, through its neglect, comes to perpetuate it.” Employing a racially inclusive sociological imagination and being willing to be color brave rather than colorblind helps to embody anti-racism activism.

For people engaging in anti-racism work, it is particularly important to have a theoretical orientation to draw upon and implement. For doing activist work, the racially-inclusive sociological framework is vital. For those engaging in empirical research, critical race theory and the public health critical race praxis are important theories to utilize. All three of these theories have key components that overlap and can be specifically applied to a variety of empirical outcomes to engage in and study scholar-activism. Research on policing, the criminal justice system, and the judicial system is especially fitting. Obviously, the overlap between policing and health care is relevant, in addition to a host of other outcomes.

Potentially more pertinent to this global movement for Black Lives is for scholars to conduct research with and on actual activists. It is some sort of assumption that activists embody ever-present identities rather than people who evolve into their activist selves. Researchers can apply the theories highlighted in this chapter to learn about how people develop an activist identity, how people then pursue their activist work and what we learn from it, and how various strategies used by activists fit within the various components of the racially inclusive sociological imagination framework. Admittedly, some people are better than others at implementing effective activist strategies on the local, state, and federal levels. It is high time for scholars to utilize better theoretical frameworks to make sense of the nuanced ways that activists do their work, and are successful at making anti-racist change. The theories highlighted in this chapter help advance the scholarly and community-based participatory research that informs much of the pursuits of scholar-activists. Advanced technologies allow scholars to do this work in real time rather than waiting to comb through archives. Race scholars must leverage these innovative empirical tools to evaluate social movements as they evolve.

**References**


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