Eduardo Bonilla-Silva states: “Jim Crow’s racial structure has been replaced by a ‘new racism.’” What does Bonilla-Silva mean when he uses the phrase “new racism”? He means that, unlike Jim’s Crow’s system of racial apartheid—the separation of “races” by law and blatant use of racial epithets—largely market-based racial discrimination and inequality in the post-1965 era is defended in a manner that is more subtle and slippery. Significantly, this new racism is legitimated by “a new powerful ideology” (2010: 25). Insofar as Bonilla-Silva characterizes ideology as “meaning in the service of power” (2010: 25), it follows that the new “color-blind” racial ideology is a system of ideas that serves to either conceal or justify continuing white dominance and nonwhite subordination. It does so by filtering and interpreting information through four central frames: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism.

I. The Central Frames of Color-Blind Racism

**Video 1**


*Equal opportunity and individual choice (not seen concretely):* The frame of abstract liberalism involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., “equal opportunity,” the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g. choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters. By framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism, whites can appear “reasonable” and even “moral,” while opposing almost all practical approaches to deal with de facto racial inequality. [For example, the “claim” that affirmative action policies are biased or forced because they represent “preferential treatment”] . . . necessitates ignoring the fact that people of color are severely underrepresented in most good jobs, schools, and universities, and hence, it is an abstract utilization of the idea of “equal opportunity.”


*That is just how things are:* Naturalization is a frame that allows whites to explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences. For example, whites can claim “segregation” is natural because people from different backgrounds “gravitate toward likeness.”


*Blame the victim’s culture:* Cultural racism is a frame that relies on culturally based arguments such as “Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education” or “blacks have too many babies” to explain the standing of minorities in society.”


*Minimization of racism* is a frame that suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances (“It’s better now than in the past” or “There is discrimination, but there are plenty of jobs out there”).

Germane to the latter frame, in a survey given to Detroit residents in 1998, respondents were asked to respond to the following statement:

“Blacks are in the position that they are today as a group because of present day discrimination.”

Notably, only 33 percent of whites agreed compared to 60 percent of blacks.

Bonilla-Silva (2010: 48) concludes:

. . . if someone pokes holes in whites’ color-blind story by pointing out that whites live mostly in white neighborhoods, marry and befriend mostly whites, interact mostly with whites in their jobs, and send their children to white schools. . . .
They can resort to the abstract liberalism frame and say something like “I support integration, but I do not believe in forcing people to do anything that they do not want to do. . . Alternatively, they can naturalize the whiteness in which they live (“Blacks like living with blacks, and whites like living with whites. . . it’s a natural thing” . . .). These frames then form a formidable wall because they provide whites a seemingly nonracial way of stating their racial views without appearing irrational or rabidly racist.

Significantly, Bonilla-Silva’s frames brilliantly analyze modern ideology in general. That is, to legitimate inequality in power and privilege in market-based societies, key components of the justification are (1) seeing inequality as a result of meritocracy or individual choice, (2) treating inequality as “natural” or “how things are” rather than a socially structured outcome based on unequal power of vested interests, (3) disparaging subordinate groups on cultural grounds (they are not deserving of privilege), and (4) minimizing the significance of privileges and power concentrated in the dominant group.

II. The Style of Color Blindness: How to Talk Nasty about Minorities without Sounding Racist

Video 2

Pliability: Bonilla-Silva (2010: 48-49) hypothesizes that the “ideological wall of colorblindness” would crumble if it were not “pliable” when repeatedly hammered by the disclosure by whites of “a personal taste for whiteness or a dislike for blackness.” One significant source of pliability in the color-blind “toolbox” are various “stylistic elements” that permit whites to “tiptoe around the most dangerous minefields” and “get in and out of almost any discussion.”

Rhetorical strategies for “race talk”: prominent in the stylistic toolbox of color blindness is a “maze of confusing, ambivalent answers to straight questions; of answers speckled with disclaimers such as “I don’t know but. . .” or “Yes and no”; of answers almost unintelligible because of their higher than usual level of incoherence.” These “linguistic manners” have been developed collectively (trial-and-error) among whites in response to a shift in the “normative climate” when Jim Crow gave way to the post-Civil Rights era. This post-1965 era ushered in the “language of color blindness,” which is “slippery, apparently contradictory, and often subtle.” (pp. 53-58)

Five key elements in the style of color blindness:

1. Indirectness: not using “direct racial language” when talking about racial issues (p. 54)

2. Semantic moves: “verbal parachutes” to pass over minefields or to “save face”; phrases such as “I am not a racist, but” or “Some of my best friends are black” or “I am not black, so I don’t know” serve as “discursive buffers” when coming before or after making statements that are either racist or could be interpreted as racist (p. 57). This is much like a “sandwich” with buffers for bread. For example, in response to questions about racial matters (“Do you agree with interracial marriage?"), whites will use the phrase “yes and no” to project the image of taking or examining all sides (p. 60). After uttering this phrase, a stance that could be interpreted as racist is more safely taken. Another rhetorical or semantic move is the “anything-but-race” stance (“I think it doesn’t have anything to do with racism”). This stance includes saying that it “is not a prejudice thing” (e.g., to explain no black friends), thereby denying that race is an influence in the respondent’s life or to “explain away racial fractures in [the respondent’s] . . . color-blind story” (p. 62). The objective is to recast “all-white networks,” in violation of whites “color-blind view of themselves,” as “nonracial outcomes” (p. 63).

3. Projection (“they are the racist ones”): Projecting racism or “racial motivations” onto blacks is a means of escaping responsibility and feeling better about oneself. This is because projection is a common psychological device for shifting a problem from oneself to the “other.” For example, by projecting selfishness onto interracial couples, opponents of interracial marriage can safely state their “racially problematic” views (e.g. by saying interracial couples are only thinking of themselves and not really thinking about their children, who may be picked on). Other examples would be whites saying that blacks are prejudiced in thinking that the criminal justice system is “out to get them” or whites saying that blacks like to “play the race card.”

4. Diminutives (“it makes me a little angry”): In the post-1965 era, whites use diminutives to dilute racially motivated statements to render them more palatable. For example, saying that blacks are “a little more aggressive” (p. 67). Instead of stating outright opposition to interracial marriage, saying that there is “a little bit” of concern about the problems of biracial children. These diminutives act as “racial shock absorbers” (p. 71)
5. **Incoherence (“I, I, I, I don’t mean, you know, but”):** Rhetorical incoherence includes grammatical mistakes, lengthy pauses, repetition, self-corrections and digressions. This incoherence increases substantially when discussing “sensitive subjects”—for example, “racially based” feelings or views that violate social norms regarding color blindness. Although this is not a face-saving “tool,” discussing issues that make the speaker uncomfortable can lead to incoherence. For example, this was evident when largely articulate respondents suddenly becoming incomprehensible when explaining their opposition to interracial marriage. Notably, nearly all white college students displayed incoherence at some point when asked about racial issues such as their personal interaction with blacks (p. 68).

III. “I Didn’t Get That Job Because of a Black Man”: Color-Blind Racism’s Racial Stories

**Power of Storytelling:** *“matter-of-fact” world in a story serves particular interests without appearing to do so:* When whites tell “stories” to make a point regarding a racial issue, they harness the power of storytelling: “stories seem to lie in the realm of the given, in the matter-of-fact world” (p. 75). In this way, stories conceal their underlying framework, of which we may not be aware. That is, stories are commonly told “as if there was only one way of telling them” (p. 75). However, because stories inject interpretation or meaning (a function of stories), there are innumerable possible accounts. Stories do not typically restrict themselves to concrete description of what actually happened. Because of their widespread use and interpretive power, stories play a significant role in conveying color-blind racism.

**Story lines:** According to Bonilla-Silva (2010: 6), these are widespread, “fable-like” stories with a shared scheme and wording [note: fables convey morals]. They typically offer “impersonal generic arguments” with “underdeveloped” characters who are often “social types” such as “the black man” (e.g., “My best friend lost a job to a black man”). They are “ideological [that is, legitimating or self-serving] racial narratives” because the audience and the story tellers share underlying assumptions that make these stories believable, regardless of factual accuracy. It is possible for these stories to either challenge or support the “racial status quo” [white dominance, all-white social networks, etc.], depending whether the stories are percolated in a subordinate group or a dominant group.

**Testimonies:** Because the storyteller is either a key participant in the story or is close to its characters, testimonies bestow the appearance of authenticity and convey emotional intensity, unique to “firsthand” accounts (e.g., “I know this for a fact since I have worked all my life with blacks”—p. 76). The detail and “personal investment” in these accounts, however, may be more apparent than real. These stories may function to save face, convey race neutrality, or prop up controversial, racially motivated arguments. Accordingly, there is a central ideological component.

**The Major Story Lines of Color-Blind Racism:** These have shifted from the myth of the black rapist in the pre-1965 Jim Crow era (e.g., the central theme of the riot-producing, block-buster film, “Birth of a Nation,” produced in 1915) to new themes to keep blacks “in their place”:

1. **“The Past is the Past”:** This story line was used by half or more of Bonilla-Silva’s survey respondents, mostly when opposing institutional intervention to specifically help blacks (e.g., affirmative action). Compensatory or remedial policies targeting blacks are seen as divisive by most whites so they are fervent in wanting to forget the past. Oftentimes, this storyline makes reference to slavery in the distant past. This timeline overlooks the reality that Jim Crow lasted until 1965, that history has bequeathed to blacks various enduring and cumulative social disadvantages, and that contemporary discrimination is not in the past (pp. 77-79).

2. **“I Didn’t Own Any Slaves”:** Usually served up when opposing affirmative action or compensatory policies, this story line serves the function of freeing the current generation (and the storyteller) from any responsibility for the harm caused by slavery (e.g., “I didn’t own any slaves and I do not understand why they keep asking for things when slavery ended 200 God-damned years ago”). However, Bonilla-Silva (p. 81) notes that this story line conveniently overlooks continuing “pro-white policies (“preferential treatment”) in jobs, housing, elections, and access to social space (‘No blacks and Mexicans allowed here!’). . . .” These policies continue to have a “positive multiplier effect” for all who are identified as “white.” In sum, the “It wasn’t me” story line ignores how racial privilege functions today to bestow “unearned” benefits on those regarded as “white” regardless of whether they personally engaged in discriminatory behavior.

3. **“If Jews, Italians, and Irish Have Made It, How Come Blacks Have Not”:** Despite these groups all “starting from the bottom,” this story line ignores that the bottom is deeper for some than others. In particular, post-slavery
structures trapped blacks in pre-industrial sectors (rent tenancy) until WWI, blocking access to industrial jobs that were drawing European immigrants. Moreover, Jim Crow institutions and post-WWI ghettoization cut blacks off from cultural capital (education, contacts, skills) and economic assets in general (credit, loans, equity, real estate, business, etc.) to a greater degree than for Jews, Italians, or Irish. This story line serves as a “blame-the-victim” ideology that absolves whites (and the story teller) of any responsibility (pp. 82-83).

4. “I Did Not Get a Job (or a Promotion), or Was Not Admitted to a College, Because of a Minority”: Although variants of this story line often reveal little credible evidence, the absence of details (fuzziness) does not derail the function of this “personal moral tale” in expressing frustrations or racially targeted resentments and relieving the storyteller of responsibility for failure (p. 83). It is noteworthy that there are very few cases of reverse discrimination filed for a hearing before the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and most of these cases are dismissed.

Video 3

Testimonies and Color Blindness: In Bonilla-Silva’s examination of two surveys, virtually everyone used testimonies to save face, convey race-neutrality, or to augment persuasiveness. It is noteworthy that the surveys did not actually solicit stories—these were offered spontaneously.

1. Stories of interactions with blacks: (a) stories of negative incidents customarily support negative views toward blacks (e.g., “Blacks are aggressive. A year ago I was called a racist by. . .”); (b) stories of a positive interaction with blacks typically have “a positive self-presentation rhetorical goal” [showing oneself in a favorable light]. For example, testimonies such as “I used to have very good black friends” serve to resuscitate the aura of color blindness for people who have all-white social networks.

2. Stories of Disclosure of Knowledge of Someone Close Who Is Racist: Because these testimonies seek self-absolution—that is, convincing the listener that the storyteller is not racist—Bonilla-Silva cleverly analyzes how these stories follow what he calls the “trinity formula”: confession (“my dad is a racist”), example (“he uses the n-word”), and self-absolution (“I don’t like it when he does that”). The self-presentational objective of these stories is “I am not a racist like my dad, uncle, or friend” (p. 98).

Testimonies are not “just random stories that people tell without ideological content”: otherwise, these stories would not have a common, identifiable structure that allows them to function as “defensive beliefs” (see John Dollard, 1957). It is notable that white progressives (whose beliefs are not centered around color-blind racial ideology) did not use the trinity formula when discussing racist acquaintances or backgrounds.