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# Diversity in Everyday Discourse: The Cultural Ambiguities and Consequences of “Happy Talk”

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*Few words in the current American lexicon are as ubiquitous and ostensibly uplifting as diversity. The actual meanings and functions of the term, however, are difficult to pinpoint. In this article we use in-depth interviews conducted in four major metropolitan areas to explore popular conceptions of diversity. Although most Americans respond positively at first, our interviews reveal that their actual understandings are undeveloped and often contradictory. We highlight tensions between idealized conceptions and complicated realities of difference in social life, as well as the challenge of balancing group-based commitments against traditional individualist values. Respondents, we find, define diversity in abstract, universal terms even though most of their concrete references and experiences involve interactions with racial others. Even the most articulate and politically engaged respondents find it difficult to talk about inequality in the context of a conversation focused on diversity. Informed by critical theory, we situate these findings in the context of unseen privileges and normative presumptions of whiteness in mainstream U.S. culture. We use these findings and interpretations to elaborate on theories of the intersection of racism and colorblindness in the new millennium.*

Everyone in America—school administrators and business leaders, political activists,

marketing gurus, and Supreme Court Justices—seems to be using the language of diversity these days. It is not just *that* Americans are talking about diversity that is extraordinary; it is *how* they are talking about it: extolling the virtues of difference, celebrating diversity as a value in itself, and describing diversity as the new cornerstone of American democratic idealism. A recent nationally representative telephone survey conducted in conjunction with this project found that nearly half of Americans believe that diversity is “mostly a strength” for the country. While some respondents are not quite so positive (just over half characterized diversity as “both a weakness and a strength”), less than five percent see diversity as an unqualified weakness. With some relatively minor variations, these findings hold across racial, religious, class, and gender lines (Gerteis, Hartmann, and Edgell 2007). Indeed, the pervasiveness of the term “diversity” is strong evidence for Glazer’s (1997) famous if somewhat

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cynical pronouncement that “we are all multiculturalists now.”

Informed by critical studies of race and multiculturalism, and based on a close textual analysis of interview transcripts, we argue in this article that the tensions and contradictions surrounding diversity result from assumptions—held by both respondents of color and white respondents—about American culture, especially with respect to whiteness and white privilege in the United States. Particularly noteworthy are the ways in which unspoken norms about racial difference, cultural assimilation, and the core values of U.S. society create cultural blind-spots to the ways in which race—the primary social referent for discussions of diversity—structures social life. In addition, we suggest that by appearing to recognize difference, yet failing to appreciate white normativity and systemic inequality, current diversity discourse makes it difficult to construct a meaningful multiculturalism or genuinely progressive politics of race. We conclude by discussing the implications of these findings and analyses for theories of racism, liberal colorblindness, and multiculturalism in the new millennium.

### DIVERSITY, CULTURE, AND DISCOURSE

What are Americans really saying about diversity? How do they understand and experience it? And what exactly does this discourse and these meanings imply about the broader challenges of multiculturalism, solidarity, social conditions, and inequality in the United States? Social scientists, cultural critics, and political analysts have generated a great deal of commentary on these questions while, at the same time, defining diversity in multiple ways (Ollivier and Pietrantonio 2006). Peterson (1992), a sociologist, uses diversity to refer to audience segmentation; ethnic studies scholars associate diversity with normative pluralism (Juteau 2003); anthropologists discuss diversity with an emphasis on hybridity (Young 1994); and political theorists emphasize cosmopolitanism (Beck 2001; Hollinger 1995). All of these variations are tied to the emergence and evolution of multiculturalism as both a movement and a concept (Melzer et al. 1998; Skrentny 2002). Indeed, Bryson (2005:43) reports that 20 per-

cent of the U.S. English professors she studied equate multiculturalism directly with diversity.

However defined, the concept of diversity has come under heavy scrutiny from public intellectuals. Critics on the right have suggested that the valorization of group-based rights, identities, and cultural practices under the label of diversity undermines national unity and stands in opposition to core American ideals of individual freedom and equality (Miller 1998; Schlesinger 1991; Wood 2003). Critics on the left argue that attention to cultural diversity obscures deep structural inequalities in the United States and undercuts the broader political unity required for more progressive social movements (Gitlin 1995; Glazer 1997; Michaels 2006; Rorty 1989).

An even more radical challenge comes from those who might be called critical multiculturalists (Andersen 2001; Duggan 2003; Fraser 1997; Giroux 1992; Hamilton 1996; McLaren 1997). These scholars agree with the Left about the need for a theoretical frame that situates diversity within the context of contemporary society's systemic inequalities. They also insist, though, that differences of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and even religion cannot be relegated to secondary statuses in an analysis of social structure, much less be simply set aside for a politics of equity, economic redistribution, and social restructuring. What is needed for both analytical and political reasons, it is suggested, is a simultaneous recognition of the power of difference in contemporary American life as well as an understanding of how difference is tied to deep and persistent inequalities (for more general sociological treatments, see Dunn 1998; Hall 1992; Weber 1998).

While a full history of the diversity term remains to be written (for a provocative if polemic start, see Wood [2003]), there is no doubt that these commentaries and the debates they occasion are provocative and politically consequential. Unfortunately, the alternative analyses and visions they pose are almost impossible to evaluate or adjudicate on social scientific grounds because they are based on very little empirical data about how ordinary Americans understand and experience diversity. In spite of its prominence and the aura of optimism surrounding the public discourse on diversity—or perhaps precisely because of these characteristics—empirical answers to questions

of diversity's meaning and function are difficult to find. This study is a step toward rectifying that problem.<sup>1</sup>

In the analyses that follow we use in-depth interviews conducted in four major metropolitan areas to explore popular conceptions of diversity in the United States. Our findings complicate the conventional thinking on the structure and function of diversity discourse in contemporary American culture. On one hand, most interviewees responded positively to initial questions about diversity. Further questioning and deeper probing, on the other hand, reveal that their actual understandings and discussions are undeveloped and fraught with tensions and contradictions. A number of these complications result simply from the fact that many idealized conceptions simply don't square with the deeply problematic realities of difference as they are experienced in the concrete contexts of everyday social life. Other complications stem from ambiguities in ostensibly positive, optimistic responses. Respondents often blurred crucial distinctions—between individual choice and group boundaries, for example, and between the way things are versus how they could or should be—in ways that obscure the challenges of living with diversity. In addition, we find that respondents defined diversity in abstract, universal terms even though most of their concrete references and experiences involve interactions with racial others. Finally, even the most articulate and politically engaged respondents—our interview pool was constructed so as to maximize such respondents—had tremendous difficulty talking coher-

ently and simultaneously about social inequality and diversity.

## DATA AND METHODS

Data are drawn from 166 in-depth interviews collected as part of the American Mosaic Project, a multiyear, multimethod study of race, religion, and multiculturalism in the contemporary United States (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). The first phase of the project was a nationally representative telephone survey of American attitudes and understandings of race, religion, and diversity. The second phase involved fieldwork and intensive interviewing by teams of graduate student researchers in four major metropolitan areas: Atlanta, Boston, Los Angeles, and the Twin Cities of Minnesota. The present analysis is primarily based on these interviews.

The interviews were designed to follow up, probe, and provide context for key issues that emerged from the telephone survey. The interview schedule for the project was the result of an extensive collaborative process involving project principle investigators and graduate researchers in each site. The initial framework for the interviews was conceived and sketched out by the investigators who produced and fielded the telephone survey. This preliminary outline was then revised through interactive workshops, training sessions, and trial runs until it met the research goals of the faculty and graduate students involved with the project. In the end, the interview schedule consisted of a set of open-ended questions (along with a series of suggested probes) in four main topic areas: (1) general opinions about diversity, (2) actual experiences with diversity, (3) conceptions of American identity and solidarity, and (4) reflections on how the respondents' own identities—racial, religious, and otherwise—affected their views on these matters and on American society more generally.

Researchers conducted an average of 36 interviews, each lasting between one and a half and three hours, in each metropolitan area. Interviewees were recruited from three specific institutional locations in each city: neighborhood organizations, interfaith religious initiatives, and ethnic cultural festivals. These arenas were selected to maximize settings where experiences with difference would be regular

<sup>1</sup> Feminist analyses of public policy and the welfare state provide some important exceptions. Ferree (2007), for example, argues that diversity takes on very different meanings and implications in social democratic contexts (e.g., Germany) compared to liberal American culture. In addition, Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita (2001) find that corporate diversity management programs in the United States often water down equity claims and naturalize racial differences. Similarly, Ahmed's (2007) interviews with "diversity practitioners" in Australian higher education suggest that talk of diversity is used to meet organizational ideals and build collective morale, though in the process diversity often gets detached from struggles for equality and justice. See also Andersen (1999).

and diversity concerns would be prominent, and to afford organizational continuity and comparability across the four regions. Once researchers gained access to a particular organization, they recruited respondents by approaching individual members at meetings or events. Researchers interviewed both rank-and-file members and people in positions of leadership. In the case of festivals, they also included some attendees. About a third of our sample is drawn from each setting.

Two-thirds of our respondents are white, and the sample is gender balanced, with respondents' ages ranging from 20 to 75. It is important to emphasize that the interview population was not intended to be a random sample of Americans (as was the telephone survey) but rather a purposive one, targeted to respondents who are actively and self-consciously grappling with issues of difference in their lives and who are thus both well-informed and articulate about diversity. Our goal is to capture the discourse on diversity as it is best understood, enacted, and articulated in the American civic sphere.

The use of in-depth interviews was essential. Open-ended questions and strategic probing allowed us to explore *why* people held certain beliefs or *how* certain experiences affected them. These techniques enabled story-telling, extended illustrations, and elaborated arguments through which we saw ambivalences and complexities that are inherent in American conceptions of diversity. In short, in-depth interviewing allowed us to delve beneath the surface of initial answers to reach the deep structure and cultural commonsense implicit in diversity discourse.

Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and archived by a separate team of research assistants. After reading through whole transcripts of a large number of these interviews (including all of those quoted directly below), we decided to base this article on a close reading and analysis of two main blocks of questions in the transcripts. The first and most important block involved initial questions about diversity broadly and generally conceived. This section asked interviewees to define diversity, talk about what they found both positive and challenging about it, and discuss their experiences with people who are different from themselves.

We analyzed this first block of questions, the empirical core of this article, in two distinct stages. First, we carefully read through the interview transcripts to identify central themes, patterns, and tensions, noting the frequency and coherence with which respondents expressed certain ideas. This process yielded a basic, descriptive picture of both definitions of diversity and attitudes about positive and problematic social aspects of diversity. After establishing these basic patterns, we went back through the transcripts and blocks of quotes to: (1) identify assumptions and presuppositions built into the discourse and (2) unpack underlying tensions and ambiguities. This second stage of analysis was guided by recent scholarly writing and critical theory on solidarity and incorporation (Alexander 2001; Hartmann and Gerteis 2005), colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2003; Carr 1997; Crenshaw 1997; Eliasoph 1999; Gallagher 2003), and multiculturalism (previously cited). These bodies of work highlight the tensions between individual ideals and group-based commitments, assumptions about the social bases of unity and order, and the relationship of cultural difference to social inequality.

The second block of questions involved views on the relationships between diversity and inequality. We used this block of questions to support and develop our interpretive claims about the structure and consequence of the diversity discourse with respect to issues of inequality, assimilation, and white privilege. To supplement these answers (which were often more abbreviated than we initially anticipated), we looked at the questions that asked respondents to discuss their views on inequality and politics: What kinds of inequality did they see as important? What should be done about inequality? As appropriate, we also looked at questions that asked people to reflect on how their racial and religious identities shape their views on diversity. When necessary, we also used fieldwork conducted in conjunction with these interviews to contextualize and confirm our interpretation and analysis.

## THE STRUCTURE OF DIVERSITY DISCOURSE

We began our conversations about diversity with a very simple question: "What does diver-

sity mean to you?" Responses to this open-ended query were surprisingly consistent and evenly divided into two types. About half of our interviewees responded by offering basic descriptions or very general definitions of the term. Lucy, a 55-year-old white woman from Boston, took this tact: "Diversity to me is being exposed to many different people from many different cultures." After a brief pause, Lucy continued:

And by cultures I don't necessarily define that as ethnic or racial background. I think about how a person was raised. It includes religion, parenting style. It includes economics. It includes who their friends were, where they went to school, how they went to school. Things like that. I really define culture in a much broader way than most people do.

Like Lucy, many of the respondents who took this definitional approach generated lists, sometimes quite extensive, of the social differences they believe fall under the diversity heading. "For me," a white man in Los Angeles explained, "[diversity] includes ethnical [sic] differences, political differences, theological differences, sociological differences, and attitudinal differences" as well as "categories like politics, sex, and race." In these responses, diversity is essentially a descriptive term reflecting that the United States is a collective of many different people and cultures, not a singular, homogenous society. "It's like living in the Sears catalogue instead of the Sunday circular from the newspaper," as one white, middle-aged Midwesterner put it.

Interestingly, a large number of respondents who offered these general definitional responses also said (when asked) that *other* Americans use diversity mainly as a euphemism or "buzz word" for talking about race. "It's all about race for most folks," or "it's mostly black and white," or other people use diversity to refer to "racial kind of stuff . . . people of color or new immigrants." In sum, while very few (under a dozen) of our definitional respondents restricted their definitions of diversity to racial differences, an overwhelming majority insisted that this is precisely how other Americans use the term.

The other half of our sample responded to these initial questions by describing diversity as more of a social project or initiative, a moral imperative dictating both the recognition and acceptance of differences in the modern world. For many, diversity implies that "you need to

accept everyone for who they are regardless of how they might be different from you." Others simply spoke of the need to "include everyone" or "embrace our differences." Similarly, Dan, a 52-year-old white Southerner, said diversity means being able to "accept all people for who they are, their value, their contributions to society." Unprompted, more than a few of these respondents talked about seminars or training programs on inclusiveness or intercultural communication that they had gone through at work or in civic organizations.

Many of the respondents who see diversity in these moralistic terms rely on the social or demographic realities of difference encapsulated in our more definitional responses. In other words, they see diversity as both a description of the social reality and a moral commitment. Michael, a white Californian, fell into this category: "Diversity means a society that recognizes it's made up of people of different races, ethnicities, religions, cultural backgrounds, ages, education levels—those categories. And generally diversity—if it is framed as a goal in whatever institution or activity or program or benefit we're talking about—should recognize and be inclusive of all these groups." But the relationship does not necessarily go the other way. As another white Westerner put it: "Diversity? That's just a description of the society in general. One doesn't need to promote diversity in Los Angeles. It's already there. You see it walking down the street, on the bus, in the restaurants. It's like promoting oxygen."

Whether definitional or programmatic, these initial responses to questions about diversity all share one important characteristic: they are generally upbeat, even optimistic about the term itself. Most people offered responses similar to Len, a 46-year-old white Bostonian, who said that diversity "makes life more fun," or Louis, a white Californian, who believes diversity "adds beauty to life." Many respondents said that diversity makes life "more interesting" or "more exciting." Others went a bit further. Joe, a white Westerner, defined diversity as "a positive value for the individual and . . . a positive value for the community at large in ensuring that one's exposed to different experiences, different viewpoints, and different backgrounds." Along these lines, Reverend Sharper, a white Southern Baptist minister, said that "it is a very positive word. I like diversity. It means variety."

Sophie, a middle-aged African American from Los Angeles, agreed: "It's a big word, it's very wide and it's very inclusive." Some respondents were even more pragmatic. For example, Elaine, an older white Bostonian, argued that diversity is "good for growth," and Jeanine, a 40-year-old white Minnesotan, claimed that it "prepare[s] the next generation of Americans to be more globally conscious, to be more globally concerned." Most respondents not only feel comfortable with the language of diversity, they are open and optimistic about the term, much as the findings from our initial telephone survey suggested.

A closer look at more detailed responses, however, reveals that these seemingly positive attitudes about diversity are often very thin, vague, and undeveloped. When pushed to explain their answers, or give examples or evidence to support their views, many respondents struggled for words or offered only generic platitudes. For example, Jill, a white Californian, expanded on her initial optimism as follows:

I, I think it's a wonderful thing because I think it enriches our lives. That ah, that ah, not everybody looks the same or acts the same or thinks the same and I think it, it's ah, maybe for a later question but I that, that it is a very value in being aware of differences and appreciating those differences not as wrong but simply as different, and, ah, and then also at the same time, this warning of commonality among these differences.

Such awkward responses were in stark contrast to expansive, substantive answers respondents gave on other topics including race and religion. The only clear, concrete explanations of the benefits of diversity we heard involved popular culture. Al, another white Californian, was typical: "Well, variety is the spice of life, and I like to be open to other kinds of music other than my particularly narrow field of interest." Whether pegged to music, food, clothes, or some other aspect of consumption, an expanded range of choice is not only the most concrete but also the most common benefit of diversity our respondents had to offer.

It is not just that our respondents had a difficult time explaining what is valuable about diversity. In trying to specify diversity's benefits (and before they were even asked about its challenges) a large number of interviewees found it necessary to qualify and condition their responses. Others, often unexpectedly, began

talking about the problems of diversity even as they were trying to uplift its strengths. We came to think of these as "yes, but . . ." responses.<sup>2</sup> For example, Max, a white Bostonian, answered the question about benefits by saying that diversity makes life "much more fun, that's for sure." But one sentence later, Max referenced his racially-mixed neighborhood organization and said "*and yet*, and sometimes you get frustrated by that too. You say to yourself, 'are we ever going to get through this and how are we going to get through this and how are we ever going to reach a decision or consensus on this?'" For Max, the "fun" of diversity is difficult to specify because it is undercut by the frustrations of actually dealing with differences. Melissa, a white Californian, elaborated:

I think it's overall, I think it's a good thing *but* it's a kind of delicate balance because now, you know, we're also at a place in this country where . . . [we] still need to keep our American identity and nationalism. . . . We as Americans, you know, as a whole need to respect one another's differences and backgrounds and all of that, and be tolerant of one another. *But by the same token*, you know, there has to be a defining thread somewhere.

Clearly, respondents like Melissa and Max believe they should say something positive about diversity but find it much easier to delve into its challenges and difficulties.

The nationally representative telephone survey that preceded our interviews included an open-ended question about the "drawbacks" of diversity. Three main concerns appeared, with the most typical having to do with cultural disunity and fragmentation. A third of the respondents who answered this question expressed such concern. Misunderstanding and intolerance was the second most typical worry, variations of which were given by 24 percent of telephone respondents. Another 13 percent gave answers that related to issues of equality, equal opportunity, and fairness. (For further treatment, see Gerteis and colleagues 2007). Our interviews help us clarify the context and complexity of the perceived problems revealed by the survey.

When asked to describe the problems of diversity, most interviewees talked about the

<sup>2</sup> For a related finding and analysis, see Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000).

misunderstandings that often occur between people of different backgrounds and lifestyles. For instance, Phyllis, a 54-year-old white Minnesotan, noted the difficulty of making decisions in diverse groups:

A challenge [is] getting people to really hear each other, when you're making a community decisions. Um, and then on an individual level it's, it's very easy to be irritated and offended by an action without realizing that, you know the background of the person taking it is, is so different that they don't mean for it to be offensive, it's just the norm for them.

Others talked quite openly about prejudice and fear. Adam, a middle-aged white Easterner, said:

A drawback is that there are usually misunderstandings or fear, that sort of thing that happens, and probably what's unfortunate is that many people will not try to go beyond that. . . . I don't know, there are so many things that we assume, so much of our behavior is, just even in terms of what a certain gesture means or saying something that means something horrible for another culture. So those things come up.

Mark, a white Minnesotan, concurred: "You have to keep challenging all of your own prejudices everyday. I mean they are just there; you have to learn something new." In these responses, we see that misunderstandings, as well as prejudices and outright fear, are often associated with diversity.

Respondents in our face-to-face interviews elaborated on the concerns about excessive diversity that were so prominent in our initial telephone survey. The response from Claire, a 58-year-old African American from Boston, was illustrative and memorable:

If you have too much diversity then you have to change the Constitution, you have to take down the Statue of Liberty, you have to take down those things that set this country up as it is. This is the only country in the world where if you're born here you're a citizen, so you have to change that. So we—this is our principles.

For Claire, "too much" diversity threatens the foundational principles of American democracy, so much so that it places the iconic Statue of Liberty at risk. Cheryl, a 36-year-old white Bostonian, focused on traditional ways of doing things:

I think kind of the way I was at first afraid of diversity, was that a group could be eradicated, just,

well not really eradicated, but just "we've done it your way so long that we're just totally not going to give you credit anymore" and I've seen that a lot like with—well, I don't know if it's so bad—it's painful.

These quotes show that in spite of the efforts of multicultural activists and theorists (who argue that diversity need not be set in opposition to social solidarity), diversity is still perceived as posing a real threat to national unity. In addition, those with concerns about excessive differentiation do not all share the same assumptions about the basis or foundations of social solidarity. Claire's vision is fairly abstract and idealized, while Cheryl's appears to be more culturally specific. That said, our respondents rarely acknowledged these tensions and alternatives. Rather than being drawn into discussions about these tensions, they preferred to focus on the general problems of unity and order they believe excessive diversity presents. A fairly typical evasion came from Jeff, a white Westerner, who wished diversity would simply "go away," adding (with laughter), "yeah and then you are an American or you're a visitor you know."

While inequality and fairness are among the most common problems mentioned in our initial telephone surveys, our interviewees were unlikely to talk about them even when asked directly. This is an important finding, and we discuss it in further detail shortly. But first we need to explore another problematic aspect of diversity that the interviews revealed: the failure of Americans to live up to their own optimistic ideals.

In spite of what people might first say, Sara, a Korean American from Minneapolis, saw diversity as a challenge "because people resist change and resist things that make them uncomfortable." Sara gave her work as an example:

It's a challenge institutionally in some of the schools that I've worked in or some of the organizations because there's the lip service that people give to diversity versus the true understanding of what needs to happen to make it a reality in the institution. So people can talk about how much diversity's important but you know when it comes down to action and understanding that you have to change yourself or change aspects of the organization. People, you know, struggle against that.

Similarly, Adele, a 49-year-old African American from Atlanta, said: "I would think



[diversity] meant, you know, being willing to take a moment to get to understand other people, maybe their culture, . . . maybe their religion, or whatever makes them different." Adele believed this conception of diversity, though, is "almost an illusion, it doesn't seem like something that's really solid to me." Another example came from Miles, a middle-aged African American from Atlanta. At the beginning of his interview, Miles talked about "practicing diversity," by which he meant "that you would embrace everybody and treat them equally, treat them fairly, and make the effort to go into other people's communities, shop in different areas, invite them, and just make a connection." But Miles grew cautious when asked about the drawbacks to diversity:

If the people that are teaching it have not learned it or, some of the drawback is people get confused by it and they don't know exactly what the purpose of it is. That's when I get a little uncomfortable. When people use it for their own personal gain, or they use it just to say we have diversity basically.

Diversity is a challenge, Miles concluded, "when people don't practice it."

Respondents of color were somewhat more cognizant of this contradiction than whites, though this was far from universal. Dan, a 52-year-old white Southerner, for example, started by defining diversity as the ability to "accept all people for who they are, their value, their contributions to society. Not this, you know, stereotype." But then Dan went on to say:

Unfortunately, say in our neighborhood, walking down the street, I see a 35-year-old black man walking down the street looking a little tattered, homeless, or whatever you want to call—street person, and you know automatically you think of the stereotype—I better watch this guy, he's getting ready to break into my car.

While Dan's ideal is that Americans should accept individuals without regard to their social characteristics, he also realizes that many people—including himself—have a great deal of trouble actually doing this.

Social scientists often encounter tensions between descriptions of how things are versus prescriptions for how things ought to be. In the case of the diversity discourse, this kind of tension is both connected with and reproduced by a deep, if often unstated, set of ambivalences about the concept itself and experiences with difference in particular. We turn to some of

those more specific and consequential tensions, ambiguities, and ambivalences in the following section.

### SPECIFIC TENSIONS AND AMBIGUITIES

The tension, or outright contradiction, between descriptive and prescriptive visions of diversity is threaded throughout many of our conversations. Further analysis of the interview transcripts revealed three distinct sources of confusion and ambiguity: (1) respondents often conflated group-based commitments with traditional individualist values, (2) respondents typically defined diversity in very general terms yet recounted experiences with and references to diversity that were far more specific and racially-inflected, and (3) respondents had a very difficult time talking about structural inequality in the context of diversity conversations.

#### INDIVIDUALIST IDEALS, GROUP-BASED COMMITMENTS

Always lurking in American culture, the tension between individual ideals and group-based commitments is pervasive and heightened in the diversity discourse. Wikipedia offers a basic two-sentence definition of diversity that unintentionally illustrates the problem: in a "human context" diversity is "a form of individualism, unique characteristics, beliefs and values." So far so good, however, the next sentence emphasizes a very different meaning of diversity. "In a social context," diversity is defined as "a presence in one population of a (wide) variety of cultures, ethnic groups, languages, physical features, . . . socio-economic backgrounds, opinions, religious beliefs, sexuality, gender identity, and neurology" (*Wikipedia*, Diversity, 2006). The point here is not so much the long list of differences that fall under the diversity umbrella; our interviews have already highlighted those. Rather, it is the tension—so apparent to the sociological eye, yet so little recognized or problematized in the culture—between the unique, individualistic qualities or values endorsed in the first sentence and the broader collective categories appealed to in the second. For some respondents, an appropriately diverse society is one in which all individuals are treated the same

regardless of their social differences. For others, it refers to a society in which group differences themselves are consciously valued, celebrated, and sustained. It is difficult, if not impossible, to endorse both ideals at the same time because they represent two fundamentally different conceptions of the proper role of the individual and the group in social life.

This tension is often revealed in and perpetuated through the language interviewees used. For example, Joe said, "Diversity is a positive value for the individual and then I believe it is a positive value for the community at large in ensuring that one is exposed to different experiences, different view points, and different backgrounds." Emily offered that "diversity . . . is being exposed to many different people from many different cultures. And by cultures I don't necessarily define that as an ethnic or racial background—I think about how a person was raised." In these responses we see appeals to both individual values and community or group commitments, despite the fact that the two are not always compatible. This confusion is often difficult to recognize because many respondents use plural pronouns when they are actually referring to single individuals, or they talk about "people" in ambiguous general terms. Either way, group-based social phenomenon and commitments conflate individual differentiation, which blurs distinctions that are often not easily reconciled in theory or in social practice. Indeed, when Dan from Atlanta said that diversity means "to be able to accept all people for who they are," he is explaining away as much as he is explaining.

Perhaps the clearest and most common illustration of this tension came when respondents expressed an individualistic vision of diversity as a positive achievement of personal acceptance but would then go on to talk about the structural and collectivist problems of social difference. This pattern was most often exhibited by people of color who talked about the structural barriers faced by individuals from certain groups, but white respondents sometimes displayed this pattern as well. For example, Alice, a white Midwesterner in her fifties, characterized diversity as positive because it "reflects the values, and traditions, and ethnicity, and religious backgrounds, skin color of everybody and it welcomes them, makes them feel that they're part of the group, that they're welcome, that their

background is going to be reflected and affirmed." (Note Alice's use of plural pronouns.) When talking about the drawbacks, however, Alice's language switched to group level differences:

You have to constantly be thinking about if you're, I see it mostly I think when you're doing, like if you want to do the best summer reading for 2004, your instinct is to list all the top authors, and they're surprise, all white! And oh my goodness, we didn't pick up any minorities, or any nonwhite people, we have to go back and do this and make sure we include them. And I think it's unfortunate that they are just right there to begin with, that we have to target out, we have to categorize our brains that way.

Ideally, for Alice, a commitment to diversity would make individuals feel welcome regardless of their various differences. In her experience, though, diversity is problematic because group-level differences are not something she usually pays attention to, even when she thinks they might be important to notice.

Ryan, a white Californian involved in a local community group, provided another example of this kind of talk. When asked how diversity is positive, Ryan hailed the importance of each individual in creating a harmonious whole. "It's, it's almost like a choir having different voices. I mean, everybody has a different opinion or they come from a different background so they have different ideas that like they can bring to an issue or problem." In discussing the problems with diversity, however, Ryan said:

Well we, we see that in [my neighborhood] with you know like there, we have a big Armenian and a big Thai, and then Hispanic, and you know there, the communication is hard. In fact, in our neighborhood council, we've had a hard time trying to reach out to a lot of the immigrant population, and it's been hard, they haven't responded real well.

Like many respondents, Ryan has positive feelings about diverse individuals coming together as a group, and yet he experiences difficulty with group-level communication in settings where diverse individuals actually meet.

#### **BROAD DEFINITION VERSUS RACIAL EXPERIENCE**

In his postcolonial reflections on racism, Albert Memmi ([1982] 2000), Frantz Fanon's con-

temporary and counterpart, argued that race is the master trope for cultural difference in the modern world. This is a powerful and persuasive claim, one that could apply not only in the American context but all over the world. One might think, for example, of gay and lesbian groups in Great Britain in the 1990s who described themselves explicitly as a racial minority. But this is not exactly what our interviews reveal. In contrast to Memmi's theory, our interviews suggest that in the United States today, individuals tend to discuss cultural difference under the rhetorical or linguistic umbrella of diversity. This is not to suggest that race is absent from American conceptions of diversity. Race appeared frequently in our interviews—not as the linguistic trope for difference, but in the actual experiences and cultural categories that most people, regardless of race, have in mind when they talk about diversity.

An excerpt from the interview with Reverend Mayler, a 68-year-old black minister from Atlanta, reveals a broad, inclusive conception of diversity:

*Interviewer:* Today you hear a lot about diversity, what does that mean to you?

*Rev. Mayler:* A situation where there are multiple of whatever it is.

*Interviewer:* Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

*Rev. Mayler:* Well, I'm using diversity in a broad sense because it can include people, ideas, and situations. Most often we use it in reference to people, but I think of diversity as situations, or opinions, or attitudes.

Clearly, the Reverend is committed to a very general, open-ended definition of diversity. Not only did he refuse to restrict his definition to racial difference, he wanted to broaden it from the realm of human differences to include situations. When asked where he personally had experienced diversity, however, the Reverend shifted from this general understanding of difference to one based almost exclusively on race.

Well, all of my life I have been in a diverse situation. I was raised in Pennsylvania in a multiethnic community with first and second generation Europeans, with a mixture of African Americans. We had the north, south, and European connection. And that began my childhood and then for college I was in a diverse situation, University of Louisville. And then in seminary and most of my life ministry has been at the Southern Baptist Convention where I was responsible for helping

blacks and whites work together. So all of my life has been a diverse situation.

Jill, a white Californian, provides another example of how race operates in the diversity discourse. After she haltingly defined diversity ("Diversity is, ah, recognizing and celebrating, value and making place for ah, the many differences within the human race") and offered a list of differences that included virtual identities, we asked Jill about the social spaces where she had experienced diversity.

Um, that is a good question—certainly in this place, to begin with, in our church and the center where we serve people. The neighborhood where I live is very diverse, well diverse, at least for me. It's 85 percent Latino and then the remaining 15 percent is very diverse. Ah, in urban areas where I've served and worked, I experienced a lot of diversity.

Similarly, George, a Californian who described himself as Latino and defined diversity broadly as "race, creed, and religion," offered this jolting and explicitly racial narrative of "basically my whole life":

Growing up, I grew up in a Latin neighborhood. And I'm mixed; I'm half Greek and half Puerto Rican. When I was younger, I had a big old Afro and I would see, I guess my first experience with diversity was with the police, the way they would treat us. You know they would beat us up and subject us and when I was younger I was placed in a foster home in an all Caucasian area and when I was in my own neighborhood I wasn't really aware of it. And I became aware of the differences and the prejudice that people had, the fear I guess. And when I went . . . to college I was able to get involved in educating myself and learning about psychology. And I understood people's prejudice and people's bias and, you know, sociology issues. . . . I understood why I was, me and my friends were treated different than other people.

And then there is Maggie, a white fifty-year-old from Boston, who defined diversity so broadly as to encompass everyone: "[it] includes religion, it includes parenting style, includes economics, it includes who their friends were, where they went to school, how they went to school, things like that." When asked where she personally experiences diversity, however, Maggie admitted it was "mostly through the Head Start Program" where she worked. She went on to say that she was raised in a small city "and there were [sic] very little cultural diver-

sity there or ethnic there.” Maggie then explained that “most of [her] classmates in school were white,” that “most of the people [her] family had interaction with were white and French Canadian and Irish,” and that she and her classmates were “discouraged from having any exposure outside of that group.”

In each of these quotes, and many others throughout the interviews, we see that respondents typically define diversity in broad and inclusive terms, but when asked to describe personal experiences with difference, their responses are almost exclusively tied to race. Contra Memmi, it appears that race does not provide the language through which Americans talk about difference. Instead, race is the primary experiential lens through which difference in all its forms is experienced and understood. Therefore, although “diversity” may sound race-neutral or appear to transcend race altogether, the discourse of diversity is deeply racialized. Americans’ most poignant and life-shaping experiences with and understandings of diversity involve race and especially *racial others*. Why has this happened, and what are the consequences of this way of talking and thinking?

Bonilla-Silva (2003) argues that post-civil rights era Americans have adopted colorblind ways of talking about race because colorblindness fits comfortably within core liberal-individualist ideals. This allows Americans to downplay the existence of fundamental racial differences and persistent racial inequalities (Carr 1997; Crenshaw 1997). Similarly, Eliasoph (1999) finds that the avoidance of “race-talk” is used to maintain bonds and decorum in civil society (Bush 2004; McKinney 2004; Myers 2005). It is not difficult to see why there is such deep ambivalence and contradiction in the diversity discourse: the controversial nature of race underlying and informing American conceptions of difference runs directly against their general and optimistic aspirations for diversity. Moreover, both kinds of discourse have the ironic, if by now familiar, effect of reinforcing and legitimating the racial status quo and its associated inequalities (Gallagher 2003). The way in which the diversity discourse peculiarly implicates race, both by its absence and its presence, reveals the strong influence of colorblindness and race-talk in American society.

The reproduction of social hierarchies through mystification and obfuscation is perhaps the most obvious and important function of the diversity discourse. Before exploring this in more depth, though, we must first clarify how the diversity discourse operates on its own semantic terms. Like colorblindness and related rhetorical strategies, the actual language of diversity deals with race by downplaying or diluting it, lumping it together with a host of social differences. At the same time, and in contrast to ostensibly race-neutral approaches, the core assumptions and understandings underlying diversity talk are anything but colorblind. Diversity talk is dominated by race, infused with racial knowledge or the lack thereof. At the discursive level, then, diversity talk simultaneously acknowledges racial (and other) differences while downplaying and disavowing related social problems. Race is always both present and absent in the diversity discourse. This paradox is key to the historical distinctiveness, cultural power, and social problems of the current American way of talking about diversity.

#### ABSENCE OF INEQUALITY

In his study of race, ethnicity, and class in America, Steinberg (1981) insists that to the extent that genuine ethnoracial pluralism has been achieved, it has invariably been at the cost of tremendous social inequities. The role of race in diversity discourses, as uncovered in our interviews, builds on Steinberg’s classic argument. Diversity talk is the small talk that avoids the “elephant in the room” of American pluralism (Zerubavel 2006). Racial inequalities, not to mention racism itself, are big structural elephants. This creates a real, albeit seemingly comfortable, tension in the diversity discourse: people have the ability to explicitly talk about race without ever acknowledging the unequal realities and experiences of racial differences in American society—a phenomenon Andersen (1999) calls “diversity without oppression.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Johnson (2006) offers a related analysis about the disjuncture between democratic ideals and persistent racial inequalities in her recent study of schools. We note it here because she argues that open-ended ques-

In the language of diversity, every American, regardless of background or social standing, is believed to have a place and perhaps even be welcomed. This defining element of the diversity discourse separates discussions about diversity, difference, and multiculturalism from more uncomfortable conversations about inequality, power, and privilege. The vast majority of our respondents engage in this linguistic separation. They talk extensively about diversity without ever acknowledging or engaging the social inequalities that so often accompany social differences. This was the case even when we asked directly about the connection between diversity and inequality.

The relationship between diversity and inequality proved to be one of the most awkward and uncomfortable portions of these interviews. Some respondents were simply confused by the question, while others became frustrated and incommunicative. For example, Bill, a white Atlantan, said: "I've never really looked at it from that term. Umm [pause] it's a challenging question to think about." After a few prompts and a few awkward exchanges, Bill grew anxious: "I don't really, that's a tough question if you really want to know." An Asian woman from Atlanta, Rajne, said, "I think, I don't know, I'm not exactly sure what you're talking about, but I think you're maybe referring to some victimization processes that occur when you're . . ." In response to Rajne's confusion, our interviewer tried (somewhat awkwardly) to reframe and clarify the question by pointing out that some inequalities may be built into cultural diversity. This prompted Rajne to charge that the question itself was creating social inequalities.

An excerpt from Mario, a self-identified "43-year-old Puerto Rican from an Italian background living in Minneapolis," further reveals the frustration that accompanied this question.

*Interviewer:* So often you hear diversity come up in discussions of inequality and injustice particularly in the U.S. context. What do you think about that when people tie inequality issues to . . .

*Mario:* I'm sorry. I didn't understand that.

*Interviewer:* You know how often diversity comes up in discussions of inequalities and injustices, particularly in the U.S. context. What do you think about that, when inequality is discussed

with diversity and is it important to kind of address these issues?

*Mario:* Well, what's happening is that people are getting more sophisticated in how they speak, they talk about it, because they're a little bit more knowledgeable. You know, again it comes to education, depending, oh yeah, we have to get going, alright . . . Why don't, how many more questions do you have? You're going to write a dissertation on me.

The awkwardness in this exchange is clear. Mario obviously didn't understand the question and our interviewer struggled to reword it.

These examples illustrate the difficulty both interviewers and interviewees experienced in talking about the relationship between diversity and inequality. This proved to be so problematic that some of our interviewers simply stopped asking the question in order to maintain rapport and keep the interview moving. Although most interviewees were asked the question, only a handful were willing or able to put together coherent thoughts about inequality after having talked extensively about diversity.

One interviewee in particular helped shape our understanding of the relationship between diversity and inequality. When asked what diversity means to him, James, a 67-year-old African American community organizer from Atlanta, offered a lengthy definition: "Diversity has to be taken on global terms," he said, explaining that "we" operate on many myths about the pilgrims and the founding of this nation but that "in the so-called diverse world—the multicultural world—the least favored of all are the Africans." When pushed to expand on what he believes the general public thinks diversity is, James replied:

Well you know, it's a word that's in vogue, it's overused. Most of them don't know what they're talking about. But other than the fact that, you know, it conjures up ideas of the workplace or the community that, where, you know, women have a place and men have a place and ethnic minorities have a place and somehow that the melting pot is working and everything's and everybody's happy ever after. And that's what the—that's happy talk, yeah.

James's definition of diversity incorporates a sense of history and draws on understandings of inequality. In general society, though, he sees a vision of diversity that relies on the illusion of a melting pot and a false sense of harmony

tions are the best methodological tool to expose and make sense of these contradictions.

among the various groups in the United States—a vision of diversity that is happily blind to the problems of race and inequality.

### FURTHER ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION: THE NORMATIVITY OF WHITENESS

We contend that one of the primary reasons why our respondents are able to live with these various tensions and contradictions is because the discourse of diversity captured in our interviews rests on a white normative perspective. This perspective starts from the dominance of white worldviews, and sees the culture, experiences, and indeed *lives*, of people of color only as they relate to or interact with the white world. White normativity is not simply an attitude held by whites in which white people are the center of the universe. Rather, white normativity is a reality of the racial structure of the United States in which whites occupy an unquestioned and unexamined place of esteem, power, and privilege. As philosopher Clevis Headly (2004:94) argues, “whiteness serves as the norm for social acceptability or what is considered to be naturally human. Since whites define acceptable standards of public behavior, normal behavior is behavior that conforms to white standards of decency, while abnormal behavior is behavior that deviates from these standards.” This reality means that white people and their ideas, experiences, and ways of being in the world are taken for granted, neutralized, and conceived of only in relation to people of color—a relationship embedded in a structure of white supremacy.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> These ideas are derived primarily from critical whiteness studies, the core works of which are now available in a number of readers and collections (e.g., Delgado and Stefania 1997; Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003; Fine et al. 1997; Frankenberg 1997; Hill 1997; Kincheloe et al. 1998). Some of the classical sociological works include Frankenberg (1993), Feagin (1994), and Doane (1997). For critiques, see Andersen (2003), Arnesen (2001), Bonnett (1996), and Kolchin (2002). Theories of the normativity of whiteness parallel, and in some cases are derived from, work on heteronormativity and the false universalization of the male experience by feminist and queer theorists (see Connell 2005; Ferguson 2003; Hill-Collins 2000).

McLaren (1997) and other critical multiculturalists (Giroux 1992) have theorized that the function of white normativity in the diversity discourse—or as they call it “conservative” or “corporate” multiculturalism—is two-fold. First, it “cover(s) up the ideology of assimilation that undergirds their position.” Second, it “reduces ethnic groups to ‘addons’ to the dominant culture.” In this view, “before you can be ‘added on’ you must first adopt a consensual view of culture and learn to accept the essentially Euro-American patriarchal norms of the host country” (Estrada and McLaren 1993:30). Our research provides empirical evidence that the diversity discourse relies on assimilationist assumptions and employs linguistic tools that privilege white cultural norms and values while simultaneously naturalizing “other” groups in racial terms as outside of (or “addons” to) the white mainstream.

### ASSIMILATIONIST ASSUMPTIONS

Many white respondents who claimed that diversity is a positive thing conditioned their statements with appeals to cultural assimilation. Melissa, a white Southerner, argued that diversity is “good overall. We as Americans, you know, as a whole need to respect one another’s differences and backgrounds, and all of that, and be tolerant of one another.” Melissa’s assimilationist assumptions then emerged in her following statements:

But by the same token, you know, there has to be a defining thread somewhere whether it be, you know, political, whether it be a language that unifies us, you know. Because, you know, without, without, even if it’s just a few strongholds of the nation, it’s like that diversity is not gonna, it’s not gonna work, you know, because then it becomes this game of well, we’re better than you [laughs], you know. And you know, then you have the people who you know, will turn around and say, you know, then why did you come here, you know?

While her reasoning sounds practical—she fears that lack of a “defining thread” could lead to supremacist attitudes or people questioning the presence of immigrants in the United States—she is, in fact, calling into question people’s right to maintain political or linguistic deviations from American mainstream culture, a social system and set of practices dominated and defined by whites.

Most respondents who expressed assimilationist notions were fairly vague about specifics and careful not to argue for the total elimination of difference. Some, however, were surprisingly concrete. Language was probably the most commonly mentioned arena where respondents believed conformity should be required. When asked whether diversity is a source of division, Lawrence from Boston replied:

Yeah, I think it probably is a little bit, but I, you know, I'm not against any group, but it seems like the Spanish contingent are reluctant to learn English, and to become American. I think if they will, and arming yourself against them is not the way to do it, but if they could be encouraged to become Americans, and talking about cultural diversity, I don't care how many Mariachi bands there are on the corner, or Spanish food is all over the place, they should hang on to that, I think they've gotta be Americans first or they're always going to be—this is for their own good.

For Craig, a white Minnesotan, it is not linguistic but behavioral standards that need to be adopted or changed. As an example he discussed the relationship between blacks and Caucasians. "I think that you know for Caucasians have a fear of blacks, and I think blacks play off that, I think they go out of their way to make cases, to build that up, to look tough." Craig complained about a black teenager he knew who was "not raised in the ghetto" and "had the education" and yet was "still playing this part" of the tough kid. "Caucasians are going to look at blacks as being a threat as long as blacks want them to, and blacks are going to go on blaming whites for separatism and being racist and this just goes around in a vicious circle." The point, according to Craig, is that black "toughness" is a cultural trait that African Americans have to change to assimilate "to a larger societal good."

Tellingly, Craig does not discuss the need for whites to change. Indeed, he conveniently ignores, if not excuses, white racism by placing what he sees as black cultural deficiencies at the center of the problematic black-white relationship. Such stereotypes do not make respondents of color less likely than whites to express assimilationist sentiments, but they are unlikely to adopt explicitly racialized language in articulating these views. In addition, they are more likely than whites to recognize that expectations for conformity and incorporation both put

greater demands on some groups than on others and are likely to be bound up with power and the preservation of privilege. Kamau, a 61-year-old black Atlantan, said:

"I think we call ourselves—this country is a country of a melting pot of people, but the majority of the people have a certain philosophy and they wish to impose their philosophy on those minorities that come into the country. They want to impose that and not necessarily allow openness of these people's culture and their ancestry."

### WHITE NORMATIVE CENTER

While the existence of an underlying desire to maintain white cultural norms and practices is important to recognize, it is even more important to understand the implicit adherence to a white center in most of the diversity discourse. The language of diversity rests on an assumption that few challenge: "Different from what?" This lack of definitional specificity reflects the assumed white center in most discourse on diversity (Doane 1997; Lewis 2004). Alice, for example, defined diversity as "welcoming people from all different countries, ethnic backgrounds, various labels and groups that we associate with or are a part of, welcoming everybody and making a place or our institutions comfortable for everyone." Note, however, that Alice left unspoken who is doing the welcoming and who the owners of the institutions are. This definition gives agency—the ability to welcome and create comfort in institutions—to an undefined but implied "we."

Jill, a white Californian, made this same point far more explicitly:

I don't know. I mean it's almost like out of this sense, it's going to sound terrible coming out . . . almost like a sense of because I am in this privileged state of having a white skin, ah, but in a regard I have privilege, a perceived privilege as therefore obligating me to make sure that other, to extend to others regardless of their skin color, the same benefits and privileges that I have. But it puts, I mean it's almost more like I'm in the *host or hostess position*. And that's terrible, it's terrible to think of people who are black and brown as you know, having to be guests. Because basically nobody should be, um I mean I wish it were, I wish that the reality were that it really didn't matter.

In seeing whites as the hosts and people of color as guests, Jill named the generally unnamed "we" that occupies the center of diversity dis-

course. Indeed, in a society that rests on an unequal racial structure, empty categories like an empowered “we” or other ostensibly neutral constructs like “core culture” or “American” are never really abstract. Rather, they are rooted in the racial reality of the United States, in which whites are both privileged and seen as normal, neutral, and regular, and everyone else is defined against a white normative status.

Our interviews revealed other ways in which the diversity discourse reflects the usually unspoken agent-center. “Others” are welcomed, learned from, or accepted at a table, in a fabric, or in a pot that would otherwise be bland, plain, and basically *colorless*. For example, Howard, a white Californian, said the following about the positive aspects of diversity:

Well, if you look at the contributions that different people from different races have made, people stereotypically think of rock music as a white thing, but when you look at the history of rock music, what would it be without Hendrix, Chuck Berry, the point being that people from different races influence each other's creativity and their whole way of life.

Howard's response not only recalls our earlier finding about the benefits of diversity being understood in terms of cultural consumption, it also reveals that difference often refers strictly to nonwhites. Howard's response may sound as though groups of people have a reciprocal effect on one another, but what he is actually saying—that black people enrich the lives of whites—both asserts white normativity and treats whiteness as a bland or empty category to be filled up by people of color.

This discursive turn, which allows racial others to “add flavor” or “bring fresh ideas” to a white center, is an important finding that highlights how Americans tend to view diversity in terms of cultural consumption. American understandings of diversity treat whiteness as the neutral center and everyone else as outside contributors. Indeed, the fact that the diversity discourse is based on an assumption of a white center to which color is harmoniously added reinforces the inability of diversity as a discursive project to incorporate understandings of inequality, power, and privilege. Moreover, the diversity discourse works to exoticize, criticize, trivialize, and compartmentalize the cultural objects of people of color as *contributions* to the enrichment of a presumably neutral “us.” When

we consider the power relations surrounding the center and margins in the language of diversity, the picture becomes even more problematic. In a country where a stratified racial order is foundational, the idea of a neutral, open, and national “we” is impossible. “Through dominant discourses,” as Estrada and McLaren (1993:29) explain, “those who occupy privileged positions in our society forge a universalized, sanitized and naturalized ‘we’ that prevents the ‘they’ from speaking for themselves.” In short, ideas about “different” cultures, languages, and values simply cannot be separated from a cultural context that is unequivocally and normatively white.

The white normativity embedded in the diversity discourse means that most of our respondents, regardless of race, experience similar contradictions and tensions surrounding its use. In fact, it was Claire, a black Bostonian, who offered one of the deepest critiques of diversity. In arguing that too much difference might warrant the removal of the Statue of Liberty, she revealed a staunch acceptance of and desire to preserve a neutral set of American values. However, we also found that people of color were more likely than white respondents to conceptualize diversity as a moral or civic responsibility rather than a simple demographic fact. People of color were also more likely to argue that the problem with diversity is that people do not live up to their responsibilities. This mirrors the pattern we found in our phone survey—when asked about the problems of diversity, white Americans were mostly concerned about disunity and misunderstanding, while African Americans and Hispanics, although also worried about unity, placed more of an emphasis on inequality and intolerance. Recall that Miles, Adele, Kamau, and Sara, all respondents of color, argued that diversity is about more than just the coexistence of various groups. They said that true diversity requires an “openness” or an “acceptance” that goes beyond tolerance or imposed assimilation. They view diversity as a practice that requires some sort of action—action that, in their experience, is not taking place. If it were enacted in this manner, diversity might result in greater equality, or at the very least a greater sense of “we-ness” among different groups. In these respondents' views, however, true *practitioners* of diversity are few and far between.



## CONCLUSION

In her 1999 Presidential Address to the Eastern Sociological Society, Margaret Andersen (2001) talked about the invisibility of racial inequalities in the economic restructuring that took place in the 1990s. She focused on the problems of race-neutral, colorblind ideologies, which critical race scholars have analyzed under the rubric of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Carr 1997; Crenshaw 1997; DiTomaso, Parks-Yancy, and Post 2003; Gallagher 2003), and offered a provocative formulation that goes beyond the inability or unwillingness to see race: "I see people wanting to acknowledge *diversity*, but avoiding any discussion of race and ethnicity that points to continuing inequality in group life chances" (2001:195). This tendency, according to Andersen, is most typical and problematic in discussions about multiculturalism that are intended to address issues of inclusion and "giving voice." Too often, these discussions ignore structural issues of power, inequity, and access because they are focused only on culture and identity. She labeled this way of talking about race "diversity without oppression" (Andersen 1999). Like James, whose quote provides the subtitle for this article, Andersen warns against "happy sociology" that is content to study diversity, culture, and identity without situating them in an appropriate structural context. "[L]ike most euphemisms," Andersen (2001:197) suggests, "terms like multiculturalism and diversity have begun to blunt the [sociological] imagination," making it more difficult to understand the inequalities and injustices associated with race.

We believe that Andersen provided an important, if speculative, intervention, one that foresaw the shift we have documented in the public rhetoric by which existing racial differences and hierarchies are reproduced and legitimated. "Racism," Malcolm X once said, "is like a Cadillac. They make a new one every year" (quoted in Lipsitz 1998). The diversity discourse, or diversity without oppression, functions to shift the focus away from an explicit disavowal of race and racial inequalities toward a rhetoric that aspires to acknowledge and even celebrate racial differences. At the same time, the diversity discourse conflates, confuses, and obscures the deeper sociostructural roots and consequences of diversity. In other words, if colorblind racism reproduces racial inequali-

ties by disavowing race, the diversity discourse allows Americans to engage race on the surface but disavow and disguise its deeper structural roots and consequences. Indeed, what makes this diversity discourse so potent and problematic is precisely the way in which it appears to engage and even celebrate differences, yet does not grasp the social inequities that accompany them. Furthermore, as Andersen (2001:198) points out, "diversity taken this way means [certain] people continue to be defined as other." The language of diversity both constructs difference as natural *and* disavows its negative impact on the lives of those who are so constructed. Race is both everywhere and nowhere, a deep cultural self-deception that is difficult to identify and counter.

Although Andersen only speculated about the proliferation and power of this racialized discourse, our findings offer some evidence for her arguments. Indeed, we believe that the diversity discourse has found its way into American culture and been institutionalized in Supreme Court decisions, college curricula, and corporate training programs. As such, it may be described as the first "racial project" (Omi and Winant 1994) of the new millennium. Such speculations about the generalizability and formal institutionalization of the diversity discourse are beyond the limits of our interview findings. We do think, however, that our data reveal the centrality and social embeddedness of diversity as a dominant racial discourse in contemporary American culture.

Andersen concluded her address by noting the difficulties of confronting dominant discourses and ideologies in actual social practice. Our analysis reinforces her point. Respondents' inability to talk about inequality in the context of a conversation about diversity reveals the failure of critical multiculturalism in mainstream American culture. The tensions and ambiguities that we identify appear less as cracks and fissures in the discourse than as the actual power by which the diversity discourse is paradoxically structured and reproduced. Yet Andersen insists that progressive scholars must aspire to more than mere analysis. At a minimum, they must try to highlight creative alternatives and possibilities. In this vein, Andersen (2001) touts Edgell's (Becker 1998) ethnographic study of two urban churches where "race is redefined, not as a problem but as a

strength, thereby allowing the congregation to develop common institutional goals, without becoming fragmented by racial and class divisions” (Anderson 2001:198). We have, as Andersen says, much to learn from Edgell’s data and analysis.

Our data come from a larger project whose goals include identifying more initiatives akin to those presented in Edgell’s study and exploring the discourses, understandings, and activities that enable them. Such a project is daunting, not only in its analytic scope but in terms of finding real-world examples of forward-looking, progressive racial engagements. Even in our interviews, though, there is hope that this kind of research is possible.

We want to conclude by highlighting the few critics of the diversity discourse that emerged among our respondents. These respondents spoke with power, conviction, and clarity on the paradoxical role of race in the discourse, the inequality that accompanies diversity, and the unspoken privilege of whiteness, all of which compose the discourse of diversity.

Maryanne, a 75-year-old white Bostonian, exemplifies this type of respondent. She defined diversity in the following distinct fashion:

Well I think diversity is kind of an unusual term in that equality is a better way of looking at it. No matter how different you are you have the same rights as anybody has. And you are certainly entitled to whatever anybody has. I think equality is almost better than diversity.

The basis of Maryanne’s critique of the standard diversity discourse is clear: the discourse deals with difference but not equality, which she clearly believes is the more important principle. While we would rather not be forced to choose between the two, Maryanne’s is an important corrective. Luke, a white pastor from Atlanta, had a similar critique:

*Interviewer:* Today you hear a lot about diversity. What does diversity mean to you?

*Pastor Luke:* I don’t like it because it’s a, what’s the word I’m trying to say, it’s a get away with it word. It’s a word that avoids the real word . . . because so much of what we call diversity is a demographic condition. Diversity is something that you write down in columns, so many of this kind, so many of that kind, so many of this kind. But it doesn’t carry with it then, the why are these in different columns.

*Interviewer:* That’s a great question, yeah.

*Pastor Luke:* And it’s to keep from having to say racism.

*Interviewer:* Mm-hmm.

*Pastor Luke:* Or feminism, sexism, whichever one it may be. “Isms” kind of scratch.

*Interviewer:* You don’t like the isms at all?

*Pastor Luke:* No. Say that I have troubles with diversity, but don’t say I’m racist.

These critics are not arguing that we just need to insert inequality into the current discourse around diversity. To take inequality seriously, they insist, we need an entirely different discussion, one that starts from a different set of assumptions and aspirations. Because it masks the more fundamental and important issues of inequality, diversity has gone too far down the “happy talk” path for these critics.

We believe that such comments and perspectives can help us understand the limitations of the current diversity discourse and the lengths to which we must go to transform it. We must both celebrate difference and recognize, for the purpose of dismantling inequalities, the unequal realities of race in the United States. As Historian Robin Kelley (2007) notes: “[Diversity] is not about harmony, but about unleashing creative dissonance, of being able to see the world in all of its complexity, of transcending tribalisms and nationalisms without leaving our pasts behind.”

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